

Letters Addressed To Lutheran Pastors By Professor Hermann Sasse (*Dr. Theol.*)

VIII¹

On the Problem of the Relation Between the Ministry and the Congregation

(Translated by E. Reim)

Dear Brethren in the Ministry:

Some weeks ago I was asked to deliver an opinion before a religious conference on the problem of the relation between the ministry of the Church and the Christian congregation. As I make my statement available to a wider circle, I feel constrained to express my heartfelt thanks to all who by their replies and their material help have made it possible to continue these letters to the present day. I must, however, disappoint those who in this or any other question look for a final and adequate solution to the problem that is mentioned in the title. I can do no more than make a contribution toward a discussion of this burning question of our day. Let me for this time make this reservation with particular emphasis.

1.

One of the most tragic events in the history of the Lutheran Church in the 19th century is the parting of the ways to which the two great churchmen, William Loehe and Ferdinand Walther, came after this great theological leader of the Missouri Synod had in 1851 still effected such a promising meeting with Loehe in Neuendettelsau. It means little that neither of the two was able to establish a relationship with the Erlangen faculty of that day. For whatever may have been the significance of this theology of the Old School of Erlangen, it had certain faults that, in spite of the stature of its exponents as men and scholars, made it impossible that there should come from it a lasting renewal of the Lutheran Church. They had not been able to keep away from the seductive poison of Schleiermacher subjectivism. In spite of all their efforts to hold fast to the objective truths of revelation, this method that took its cue from Schleiermacher inevitably led to fateful consequences. The close of the century showed clearly what keen-eyed contemporaries had detected at the time. If "I, the Christian, am for me, the theologian, the real object for systematic-theological observations," then no power on earth can preserve such a theology from the fate of becoming a Science of the Good Man, a Science of Religion.

The other weakness of the Erlangen theology was the manner in which it was limited to the narrow confines of a German territorial Lutheranism. Its horizon extended from their little Franconian city to Nuremberg and Munich in the south, to Leipzig, Dresden, Rostock, —and perhaps as far north as Dorpat. How much wider was the horizon of the unpretentious village pastor of Neuendettelsau! How differently did not he and Walther look at the problems of the Lutheran Church in a world that lay beyond the range of an ecclesiastical bureaucracy governed and guided by the German *Summi Episcopi*, the situation of the Lutheran Church in the great wide world, of a church that was not merely a department of the State.

No one could anticipate that these congregations which were so laboriously establishing themselves at the outposts of civilization would eventually become the great churches in whose hands, as far as it rests with men, lies the fate of Lutheranism today. Nor could anyone anticipate what the breach between Walther and Loehe, between Missouri and Iowa, would eventually mean. We see it today, and are faced with the question whether the mutual understanding that failed at that time is possible today, after the lapse of a century.

2.

¹ We bring this Eighth Letter of Dr. Sasse at this time instead of number Four partly because of its general timeliness, partly because it represents an essay that constituted the theological background for the recent discussions between the Saxon Free Church and the Independent Ev. Lutheran Church of Germany, which have led to mutual recognition. See News and Comments, p. 66 of this issue. — Ed. [This letter was originally published in Jan 1950 – WLS Library Staff]

What separated Loehe and Walther and brought about the subsequent breach between Missouri and Iowa was by no means merely the problem concerning the relation of Church and ministry. But it included this issue, and in a special way. Nor did this question separate these particular men only, and the churches that they represented. Lutheranism in general was divided over it. At that time, the middle third of the 19th century, our church in its own way shared in the profound discussion which deeply affected all of Christendom, from the Roman Catholics of the pre-Vatican period to some peculiar sects of the Reformed world—e.g., Irvingites and Disciples of Christ—and which in particular gave rise to the Anglican High-Church movement.

It seems strange at first thought that the Lutheran Church should also have been so deeply affected, up to the point of schism within the Prussian Free Church and its Australian daughter. For the Lutheran Church considers these questions of church polity as *adiaphora*, as *ritus aut ceremonias ab hominibus institutas*, in which the Church may and must claim freedom, since Christ is not the legislator for a human religious society, and the Gospel contains no law defining a correct church polity.

One should stop and realize just what that means. Of every other church one may say with the familiar words of Calvin that it professes an *ordo, quo Dominus ecclesiam gubernari voluit*. That is true of the Catholic churches of the East and West, as well as of the Reformed denominations. Opinions differ only as to what this *ordo* may be: the universal monarchy of the Popes, or the episcopo-synodical administration of the Eastern and Anglican churches; the governing of a Church by a Senate of Presbyters among whom there may be no difference of rank, or the autonomy of the individual Congregational or Baptist congregations; —to name but a few of the church polities for which it is claimed that they are prescribed in the New Testament. The true greatness of Luther and the boldness of his basic theological principle of strict separation of Law and Gospel becomes clear when one observes how, apart from all these other possibilities, he travels his solitary way: Christ has given His Church no law *de constituenda ecclesia*. Every form of church government is feasible which leaves room for a proper administration of the means of grace, which imposes no restrictions upon their administration.

One thing, indeed, the Lord has given His Church, something that does not pertain to its *bene esse* but to its *esse*: “*Ut hanc fidem consequamur, institutum est ministerium docendi evangelii et porrigendi sacramenta,*” as the Augustana states, Article V. In order that we may attain this justifying faith of which the preceding article speaks, the Gospel must be preached and the Sacraments must be administered, and for this purpose God has established the ministry, the service (*Dienst*) by which this is done. But wherever the means of grace are properly administered, there, according to the Divine promise that the Word shall not return to Him void, is also the *ecclesia*, the *congregatio sanctorum*, the congregation of saints, of sinners justified.

The manner in which the congregation shall organize itself is prescribed just as little as the form that is taken on by the *ministerium ecclesiasticum*. The Apostles came to realize that they would be better able to fulfill the duties of their spiritual ministry if they would be relieved of the obligation of ministering to the poor and administering financial affairs. That is how the supplementary office of deacons originated. But the Church was Church even without this office. That is how the Church of all the ages may because of the needs of the times create certain auxiliary offices—e.g., the office of the episcopate, superintendency, or whatever else one may mention. But the existence of all these “offices” is justified only in so far as they serve the one great ministry of preaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments. A bishop may have the function of administering the affairs of a large diocese. The underlying purpose, however, can only be to create opportunity for the *ministerium ecclesiasticum*. His true office is that of a pastor, even though he be *pastor pastorum*. *Iure humano* he may have the duties of a superintendency. Only the ministry of reconciliation (*das Amt, das die Versöhnung predigt*) is *iure divino*.

3.

If there is agreement on this in the entire Lutheran Church, if the Lutheran Church is therefore able to function under a consistory as well as under an episcopal administration, if, as in America, it can exist under a polity which combines Presbyterian and synodical features, and occasionally even is almost congregational, —how can one explain the difference of opinion which time and again since the break between Loehe and Walther has

divided our Church in the question of the Ministry and the Church, and thereby in matters of polity? This is not an easy question to answer. It seems certain to me that the problems of administration that confronted other churches and confessions affected Lutheranism also. No church of the 19th century could entirely escape the question which since the days of Moehler, Newman, Pusey, Vinet, and Chalmers has troubled every confession of Christendom, namely whether the day has not come when the state-church system which prevailed for so many centuries in Europe is coming to an end, and what shall then take its place. It is profitable for us Lutherans to study the intense struggle of Roman Catholicism to shake off the fetters of a progressive state (as for instance in the Cologne Controversy, which constitutes just as interesting a parallel to the confessional struggles of the Prussian Lutherans as the brave opposition of the Hessian Resistance to the *Kulturkampf* of Bismarck's day). One might add the tragedy of the Tractarian Movement in England, or the stirring account of the Disruption in Scotland, and the parallel movements on the other side of the Atlantic.

It must be admitted that in these matters Lutheranism did not remain entirely true to the glorious liberty of the Reformation. Since everyone was searching for an authentic, Biblical polity of the Church, a polity having the mandate of Christ, then there was danger that our Church would also seek to supply an answer of its own. In spite of their faithfulness to the Lutheran Confessions neither Walther nor Loehe, to mention only these names, escaped this danger.

The situation is similar to that in the Era of Orthodoxy, which frequently permitted Calvinism or Catholicism to pose the problems without observing the false formulation of the question. Thus for example the problem of the visible and the invisible church plays a troublesome role down to our day. The Fathers of this period of orthodoxy and also those of the 19th century failed to note that Luther's *ecclesia abscondita* is not simply to be equated to the *ecclesia invisibilis* of Reformed theologians, and that it would have been well not simply to take over the Reformed terminology, but rather to abide by the expressions of Luther and the Confessions. The Church is of course not something to be seen, but an "article of faith." Our eyes are not able to behold it since it is the *regnum Christi* that in this world era is *cruce tectum*, as the Apology says with Luther in its commentary on Art. VII and VIII of the Augustana. No human eye sees the Church as the Body of Christ. It is an eschatological entity (*Tatbestand*) that must be distinguished from the temporal (*irdisch*) and historical entity of the *societas externarum rerum et rituum*. In this respect one may indeed term the Church invisible.

But the term "*ecclesia invisibilis*" has by Augustine and by Reformed theology been encumbered with additional implications (*Nebenbedeutungen*) that we cannot recognize. Why did one not stay with Luther's simple teaching: "*Abscondita est ecclesia, latent sancti*"? At this point as in many others the old Lutheran Orthodoxy remained entirely too dependent upon its opponents, and this attitude the theologians of the 19th century, who possessed no better works on dogmatics than those of the Orthodoxy—where should they have gotten them? —simply took over.

Something else enters here. It is certainly true, as Luther says, that a child of seven knows what the Church is, namely the sheep that hear their Master's voice. And yet the theologians of the previous century were also right when they expressed the opinion that the tremendous political and social catastrophes which had occurred in their day or were immediately impending would, as particularly A. Vilmar stated again and again, lead Christendom into a deeper understanding of the Church. The Primitive Church knew everything that is stated in the Nicene Creed. But only the titanic struggle with the paganism of antiquity enabled the Church of that period fully to recognize the importance of the true Godhead and the true manhood of Jesus Christ, and to declare this in its doctrine of the *homoousia*. In this and no other sense should it be understood when we speak of progress in the knowledge of faith.

The diverging of the two great trends of Lutheranism in the previous century is undoubtedly to be traced to the fact which Vilmar saw correctly, namely that even the Lutheran Church had not yet become completely clear about what the articles on the Church in the Augustana meant for the *life* of the Church. That is how it happened that the great Lutherans of the past century, and precisely those who did not merely theorize at their desks about the essence of the Church, but who at the same time had to build the Church, have left us a heritage that is far from being fully developed. The objective which has thus been established for our generation cannot merely consist in reviewing the formulations on either hand, and continuing the discussion at the point where it

came to a standstill a hundred years ago, but rather on the basis of the experiences gained by the Church and the possibility of a deeper insight into the teachings of Holy Writ which may here and there have been granted, once more to think through what remained an unsolved problem at that time.

4.

It is worth noting how modern historical research into the beginnings of church organization has confirmed the profound exegetical insight of Luther, namely that the New Testament knows of no specific polity of the Church, and therefore could not give canonical sanction to any such polity. Even as in the history of the Liturgy, so also in that of church polity the origins do not indicate singleness, but rather a manifold variety of form. Therefore one can, indeed, read into the New Testament widely different types of church organization, and then with great satisfaction find them there. In this way there was read into the passages concerning Peter a doctrine of Primacy that definitely developed on other than Biblical soil. That is how men discovered in the account of the Council of the Apostles the theory of the Infallible Synod, a theory that has its roots not in Scripture but in ancient sociology. For the doctrine of Catholicism, namely that an individual may err, but not the entire body, runs through antiquity from the Stoa down to Mohammed. What connection is there between the presbyters of Calvin and those of the New Testament? —or between the “church of God at Corinth” and what modern congregationalism means by “congregation”? Paul would not at all understand what the doctrine of the Body of Christ in the encyclical “*Mystici corporis*” of Pius XII has to do with what he taught concerning the Church as the Body of Christ.

That is why there is also a certain lack of assurance as to the Scripturalness of the several church polities throughout Christendom. It is quite plain that in Reformed Church circles one no longer finds in the Bible the “*ordo, quo Dominus ecclesiam gubernari voluit*” with the old assurance of Calvin, but only a few great basic principles (the Presbytery as an ecclesiastical senate, the Synod as the final authority, rejection of the Episcopal Office even when, as in Hungary, the title is retained for the sake of state-church law), principles, however, which are considered as binding.

Even Catholic dogmaticians are seeking to moderate the stern decrees of the Tridentinum and Vaticanum to such an extent that they may be reconciled with the historical facts of the New Testament. Thus M. Schmaus (Kath. Dogmatik III, 2, p. 421) declares “that Paul can describe the celebration of the Eucharist ... without expressly mentioning the specific priestly office (1 Cor. 11, 17–34)” and then goes on to say: “It is an action of the entire congregation in Corinth.” If one adds the splendid statements of this same dogmatician concerning the priesthood of all believers, then the statements which treat of a special priestly office actually have the effect of a foreign body in the organism of the entire treatise, where many passages are indeed quoted for the universal priesthood, but not a single one for the special priestly office.

On another page we read about the relation of Presbyters and Bishops: “The New Testament terms *presbyteroi* and *episkopoi* do not yet designate different degrees of holy orders (*verschiedene Weihestufen*) as do our words *priest* and *bishop*, which go back to this Greek terminology. The analysis (*Aufgliederung*) of this one office with the two names occurs with Ignatius of Antioch. Here for the first time the triple division of holy orders is clearly attested. It can therefore be traced back to about the year 100. Its roots (*Keime*) lie in the Apostolic era” (p. 422). Only the roots! In plain words that would mean: The Catholic hierarchy is not yet in evidence in the New Testament. At best it is the unfolding of something that the New Testament has only in embryonic form.

So careful has even Catholic theology, which is under so strict an obligation of dogma, become in determining the Biblical basis for the organizational structure of Catholicism. No one who considers the statements of the Bible will in these days be so bold as to claim to have discovered in the New Testament a complete system of church organization, valid for all time. And those Lutherans of the 19th century, who with all their precaution did not escape the temptation to inquire into the true, the Biblical form of the Church and its organization, would today simply bow before the fact that there existed in the Church of the New Testament a number of possibilities as to the manner of organizing the spiritual ministry and the Church as the congregation of saints.

5.

The point at issue between Loehe on the one hand (also Vilmar and Kliefoth, though in a different way) and Walther on the other was the problem of the relation between the ministry and the congregation. (This disregards Hoefling, whom neither side took seriously and who in spite of his many other fine qualities does not merit serious consideration in connection with this problem.) Which has the primacy? Does the congregation originate from the ministry, or the ministry from the congregation? At first this problem seems to be kin to the other, namely whether the chicken stems from the egg or the egg from the chicken. But actually there is hidden behind it a problem of greatest theological significance. One's entire concept of the Church depends upon it.

When Walther and Missouri argued for the priority of the congregation, they could well quote Luther and the early Lutheran Church for their case. It is well known that in his address "To the Christian Nobility of the Nation" Luther had illustrated the doctrine of the universal priesthood of all believers by picturing the situation of a group of Christians who find themselves in a wilderness without having an ordained priest among their number, and who then proceed to elect some one out of their midst to be their spiritual leader, who then by virtue of this election rightfully holds office, being invested with all the authority and duties which can possibly belong to an incumbent of the *ministerium ecclesiasticum*. One should compare the assurance with which Luther answers this question with the uncertainty and indecision with which the humanist Sir Thomas More had treated this same problem in his "Utopia" but a few years before. After describing the tolerantly liberal religion of the Utopians, and its affinity to Christianity, as this liberal humanist understood it, he states that many decided to accept Christianity and were baptized. Then we read: "Unfortunately there was among us ... not a single priest. Even though they had been initiated into the other doctrines, they could not receive the sacraments, since among us these are administered only by priests. Nevertheless they have a most accurate conception of these sacraments and desired them to such a degree that I heard them eagerly discussing the question *whether some citizen of their choice might not acquire the character of a priest*. At my departure they had not yet elected such a one, but seemed determined to take this step." This uncertainty marks the humanist, the friend of Erasmus, and the Englishman who is disinclined to arrive at decisions in matters of dogma. It is only a logical consequence when this early advocate of liberal religion became a martyr for the cause of Papal primacy and has in our day been enshrined as a protagonist of the Papacy.

This question, namely whether Christians isolated under such conditions as Luther presupposes in his famous Address to the Nobility, or as More pictures in his Utopia, may establish a legitimate ministry, provides a test which indicates whether men think evangelically or not. Accordingly, no evangelical theologian has ever in principle judged differently than Luther, not even August Vilmar, the man with the most pronounced high-churchly tendencies among the Lutherans of the last century, - to say nothing at all of Loehe. Vilmar considers Luther's hypothetical case a fairy tale, a borderline case that would hardly occur in actual life. But considering the possibility that it might occur, he decides in favor of the authority of the congregation and thus remains within the area of evangelical faith. "Emergencies, perhaps of such a nature that certain scattered *ecclesiolae* might produce an emergency pastor (*Nothirten*) out of their own number, something which is of course possible, but reads rather like romantic fiction, may never be used to establish a rule ..." (*Die Lehre vom geistlichen Amt*, p. 74.)

The rule for Vilmar as also for Loehe was, of course, that pastors be ordained by pastors, even as this is accepted as the normal procedure in the Confessions of the Lutheran Church as well as in its Church Orders. Thus our Church has also specifically endorsed this ancient practice of the Catholic Church. But that it is possible to establish the ministry without the traditional ordination by an ordained pastor, that is something that has never been questioned in the Lutheran Church. That is also agreed upon by those who are not able to look at the exercise of the spiritual ministry as a functioning of the universal priesthood. For the priestly office includes sacrifice as an essential part, therefore in an evangelical New Testament sense, the bringing of the spiritual sacrifices that are offered by the entire Church. The proclamation of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments are closely connected, but not in themselves an essential part of the priestly function.

6.

That the great freedom of the Reformation is truly the liberty of the Gospel is demonstrated first of all by the fact that in the New Testament the *potestas clavium* is not conferred once but three times: Matt. 16 to Peter, Jn. 20 to all the Apostles, and Matt. 18 to the entire *ekklēsia*. These grants dare not be separated from each other, neither may one place one into the foreground at the expense of the others and consider that the true form. And when Jesus gives to the Twelve His commission to preach the Gospel to every creature, and through Baptism to make disciples of all nations, when at the Last Supper He instructs them, “This do in remembrance of me!”—then who are the Twelve? They are the first to stand in the office of the ministry. From them proceeds the *ministerium docendi evangelii et porrigendi sacramenta*. But they are at the same time the Church, the *ekklēsia*, the representatives of this new “People of God” of the Last Days. Thus it is simply impossible in the New Testament to separate the ministry and the Church from each other. What is said to the Church is said to the ministry, and vice versa. The ministry does not stand above the congregation, but invariably within it.

How does the Church of Antioch, Acts 13, come to commission Paul and Barnabas for their mission work? They had been commissioned by the Lord long before. What could the laying on of hands in this congregation give to Paul that he did not already have by virtue of his personal mission, through having the direct mandate of his exalted Lord? And yet this mission and this laying on of hands are deliberately repeated here. The ministry and the congregation belong inseparably together.

That is confirmed by the history of the Church. Only where there is a living ministry, functioning with the full authority of its mission, there one will also find a live congregation. And only where there is a living congregation, there is also a vital ministry. Vilmar’s pessimism concerning the congregation is explained by the fact that he simply had not yet learnt to know such a thing as a living congregation, but only this “Mr. Everybody” who in 1848 was also presuming to govern the Church. No one will seriously claim that there is even a single true congregation among the districts of ecclesiastical administration (*geistlichen Polizeirevier*) of Munich or Nuremberg. The Evangelical Church of Berlin would certainly rejoice if it had but a single congregation with the spiritual vitality of the Catholic Church of St. Matthias, a congregation that according to canon law simply does not exist. (We have once before, but in another connection, discussed the fact that the *Codex Juris Canonici* has nothing to say on the subject of the congregation.) And among all the Lutheran bodies there is perhaps none that makes so much of the ministerial office as the Missouri Synod, in which the individual congregation so definitely stands at the center of all ecclesiastical thinking. The ministerial office and the congregation are like inter-communicating channels. The life of the one is also the life of the other. As the ministry fails, so also the congregation, and vice versa.

This was incidentally recognized by Loehe himself, as Hebart demonstrates in his splendid book. But no one had the strength at that time to draw the proper inferences from this connection (namely between ministry and congregation—Ed.). Every one misunderstood the underlying motives in the doctrines of the other. That Missouri’s system of organization had nothing to do with the democratic inclinations of the American people has been demonstrated by Mundinger in his penetrating study of Missouri’s church polity. Walther and his adherents were anything but democratic in their views. And Hebart has shown that with Loehe the picture of the Church was not determined by conservative political thought. Loehe was never influenced by nationalistic motivation, as were Bezzel and the later men of Neuendettelsau. On either side there was an overemphasis of some Biblical truths that in the New Testament really belong together with others. This overemphasis, however, occurred because one side of these New Testament statements was brought out as the true one, to which the other would have to be subordinated.

7.

This becomes quite clear when one asks how the conferral of the ministerial office is brought about. There is a *vocatio immediata*. There God alone does the calling, without the agency of men. That was the case with the apostles, prophets, and teachers, if we may here leave out of consideration the recipients of the gift of healing and other special charismata. Christ alone can make a man an apostle. When a replacement for Judas had to be

chosen He did it by lot. God has reserved it to Himself alone to call men to be prophets. Neither in the Old nor New Testament does it appear that men can make any contribution to this end. In the estimation of the Primitive Church the same situation prevailed concerning the office of the “teacher,” the charismatically endowed interpreter of the Scriptures, which in those days meant the Old Testament. These ministries that thus originated out of a *vocatio immediata* belong to the entire Church. The incumbents may exercise the functions of their ministry anywhere. The Church, the congregation, need concern itself about one question only: whether it may recognize the *charisma* of the respective “minister,” or whether it sees in him a false apostle, a false prophet, or a false teacher, —a difficult problem, to be solved only by the charismatic gift of “discerning the spirits.”

In addition there is, however, also a *vocatio mediata* for the ministries of an individual congregation. These also are given by the Lord Christ, but He does this through men. The bishops and deacons which according to Phil. 1 were already to be found in the Pauline congregations were chosen by the congregation. In such places where, in keeping with the custom of the Synagogue, the institution of presbyters was retained, that caste of the “honored ones” who were entitled to the *protokathedriae*, the chief seats in the synagogues (Mt. 23:6), there the congregation likewise determined who the members of this body of elders should be. There were evidently some congregations served by bishops and deacons, and others with a presbyterian organization (Acts 20:17ff.). Paul did not consider it worthwhile to eliminate this diversity, which does not begin to grow into a unity until in the time of the Pastoral Letters. Nor does the New Testament tell us who elected these leaders of the congregations, whether the entire congregation or, —as it was in Rome in the days when the First Epistle of Clement was written—the “honored ones,” a part of the congregation, in which case the subsequent approval of the congregation would however be required.

Nothing is more misleading than to impose the standards of a modern political order upon the administration of the New Testament Church. The *ekklēsia* is not a democracy in our sense of the word, not a mass of individuals each of whom is possessed of the same rights and privileges. Nor should it be called an aristocracy. It is an articulated body with a graded structure of organization and authority. There are grades even in the college of presbyters, which in other respects is a unit. For here special mention is made of “the elders that rule well . . . especially they who labor in the word and doctrine” (1 Tim. 5:12), —who were therefore bishops at the same time. In our previous letter (not yet translated—Ed.) we established the fact that the “laymen,” the Christian people, also constitute a certain rank, followed by that of the catechumens and others subordinate to an even greater degree. Reception into the ranks and offices (*Stände und Aemter*) of the congregation was generally by laying on of hands and with prayer. And once more it may either be an individual person like the Apostle Paul who performs this laying on of hands (2 Tim. 1:6), or the Presbytery (1 Tim. 4:14), or both, as is probable in the case of Timothy, or an entire congregation (probably through representatives—Acts 13:1).

One should note carefully that the idea of a succession in the laying on of hands did not yet exist in the Second Century. For the oldest extant Order of Succession, that of the congregation at Rome as given by Irenaeus, does not refer to a succession of consecrations, but lists the incumbents of the episcopal office without consideration of the question who may have laid his hands upon each individual bishop. Here again a considerable variety of custom obviously prevailed, at least in the beginning. None of the Catholic theories of consecration can claim the support of the New Testament beyond this that it teaches that a certain charismatic endowment for the office (*ein Amts-Charisma*) is conferred by the laying on of hands with the essential concurrent prayer in the Name of Jesus.

In this connection it is to be observed that the laying on of hands, which plays an important role in the Primitive Church (Hb. 6:2) and which did not only occur in connection with the formal installation into office, is not essential to the ordination (Jn. 20:21ff.), that is, that it has no special mandate of Christ. It is rather a rite taken over from the Old Testament, in which the example of the ordination of Joshua by Moses (Num. 27:18; Dt. 34:9) was appropriately applied to the installation of the official servants of the Church. This rite is neither a sacrament nor a mere gesture, but the outward sign of an intercessory prayer for the Holy Spirit and His gracious gifts, prayer which has the assurance that it will be heard. For in the final analysis it is God, it is the Lord Christ, it is the Holy Spirit who is acting through men, acting through an individual, through an official

group, or through the entire congregation (cf. Acts 20:28), or who occasionally *extra ordinem* grants His gifts directly and confers an office with them. Therefore—as our Lutheran fathers saw correctly—it is impossible to establish an essential difference between call and ordination, perhaps even to build this difference up into a divisive issue. God calls men into His service, generally through men. It makes no difference how it is done. Whether it be an individual that is acting, or an official group, or the *ekklēsia* assembled for the worship of God: it is all done in the name of the Church, the entire Church, which is the Body of Christ, and thereby in the power of the Holy Spirit.

8.

If one has worked one's way through to this understanding, then the differences between the theological theories of the 19th century become very small indeed. Then one begins to understand the glorious freedom of the Lutheran Church, which knows no law *de constituendis ministris* because Jesus Christ has neither directly nor indirectly given such a law. Then indeed the *ministerium ecclesiasticum*, stationed not *over* but *in* the congregation, becomes truly great because now the entire emphasis no longer lies on how this ministry came into being but what it offers. In that case its apostolicity does not depend upon a more or less questionable apostolic origin but upon its apostolic content. That means that it has no other objectives, but that it actually does have this one purpose, namely to do what the Apostles were charged with, to preach the pure Gospel, to administer the Sacraments instituted by Christ, and nothing more.

Only from such a profound understanding can come a renewal of the ministerial office. All the accretions that have in the meantime attached themselves to this spiritual office because of the modern hyperorganization of the Church, down to the church-political trivialities with which modern bishops waste their own and other people's time, will then dissolve as an intangible mirage (*versinkt dann im wesenlosen Scheine*). Then every sermon becomes more important than those sessions in which grandiose ecclesiastical resolutions are discussed concerning the Bonn Constitution, or the Atom Bomb, or the Goethe Bicentennial. Furthermore: whenever the ministerial office is taken seriously, this will lead to the Christian congregation's being taken seriously. Then the mistaken conception can no longer be entertained that troubles our territorial churches (*Landeskirchen*) so deeply, namely that men speak as though their civil districts of church administration (*das geistliche Polizeirevier*) were congregations in the sense of the New Testament, needing only to be activated by some modern methods of soul-seeking. For it is incompatible with any concept of the Christian Church that one should become a member of a Christian congregation by registration at police headquarters. That will also be the end of this other mistaken view, that church taxes which are more or less painlessly collected by the agents of the State Revenue Department should constitute the offerings from which the Church of Christ shall live. That will put an end to this other misconception that the clever, the all too clever operations of a centralized church administration, functioning *non verbo, sed vi*, should be church government in the sense of the Lutheran Confession.

All of this must collapse and will collapse, even as the ecclesiastical rule of the princely *Summi Episcopi* broke down overnight. But what will remain is the ministry of reconciliation (*das Amt, das die Versöhnung predigt*), and the congregation of sinners who believe and, believing, are justified. This may well be in forms with which we are not yet familiar, but which the Head of the Church is under a thousand pangs preparing for the Christendom of our day, since He is the Savior of His Body even under such circumstances where we can only see dissolution. For Luther's great statement concerning God's course in history still stands: "*Occidendo vivificat.*" "In slaying He brings to life." This faith in God's course of action certainly does not eliminate responsibility on our part, but rather includes it, so that we will renounce everything that will tend to destroy the genuine Christ-instituted ministry and the genuine Christ-instituted congregation by turning these foundations of Christ into an arena where human ambition to rule, whether it be of the clerical or the congregational variety, may exercise itself. The ministry is not to lord it over the congregation (2 Cor. 1:24); the congregation is not to lord it over the ministry (Gal. 1); but both have above themselves the One Lord, in whom they are one.

These are a few thoughts about Church and Ministry that I wanted to submit to you, dear Brethren. Just a few thoughts that are meant to aid you in reading with new attention what God's Word says about these things. Other matters may come up for discussion at other occasions, and I would be sincerely grateful if you will present your concrete questions to me. In the meantime greetings in the bond of faith, from

Your very devoted

HERMANN SASSE.

IX.

On the Relation of the Universal Church and the Individual Congregation in the New Testament

(Translation by E. Reim)

Dear Brethren in the Ministry:

The new address at the beginning of this letter² will be sufficient explanation for its delayed appearance. "I chose Freedom." This title of a widely read book of our day might be applied to the step which has brought me from my professorship at Erlangen into the Seminary of the "United Evangelical Lutheran Church in Australia." This Church, founded by Lutheran emigrants from Prussia in 1838, closely connected with the old Breslau, with Hermannsburg, with the Neuendettelsau of Wilhelm Loehe, shall henceforth be my church home. For us Christians who—as Loehe ever again has reminded us—partake of the Passover of our Lord as pilgrims with staff in hand, our earthly home is there and only there where stands the Altar of our Church.

The vital decision that stands behind this step was made in principle in those days in 1948 when the Lutheran territorial churches of Germany helped to found the "Evangelical Church in Germany," thus voluntarily repeating the resolution which they had passed exactly 16 years before, when with that combination of gnashing of teeth and enthusiasm which is so characteristic of German church history they at Hitler's behest created the "German Evangelical Church."

It is by no means my intention here to prefer charges against individual men. German Protestantism and World Lutheranism are obviously lacking in men today with the power of faith and strength of character, with the understanding for things theological and ecclesiastical, and the courage of conviction of a Scheibel and a Loehe, of a Vilmar and a Walther, of a Harms and a Petri, a Rocholl and a Bezzel. There will hardly be any doubt in anyone's mind as to what these men would have said and done about the EKID³, and about a United Ev. Lutheran Church (in Germany) which is capable of existing within the EKID, bound to it by its own assurance of inviolable loyalty. Never would they have joined in this sacrilegious playing with the word "Church." They would have sensed what lies behind this maneuvering: Not merely theological uncertainty and helplessness, but gnawing doubt as to the truth of the Lutheran Confession, and uncertainty as to what God's Word is and what it teaches. What becomes of churches that build upon such drifting sand, that we shall soon see, just as we have seen it in the fate of the DEK (German Evangelical Church) of 1933. Just as we have seen it in the history of all Protestant Churches within and outside of Germany that have sacrificed their confession of the eternal Truth to the so-called interests of their land and nation.

For those who cannot follow this course nothing remains but to register their protest, in whatever manner the individual may be able to do so. That is a matter of conscience and of what is humanly possible. The readers of these letters may be sure that the writer has weighed the various possibilities. Should he not remain in his teaching position and train young theologians for—well, for what? For martyrdom or apostasy? Or for that half-and-half condition which is a hundred times worse than a frank forsaking of the Lutheran Confession? Can one train theologians for the service of a church in which they must tolerate an unrestricted intercommunion as

² Immanuel Theological Seminary
104 Jeffcott Street
North Adelaide, South Australia—October 1949.

³ Evangelical Church in Germany

something self-evident, simply because no one, least of all the governing ecclesiastical authorities, still take seriously the old statutes which now have only a paper standing? Can one expect students to take seriously what is no longer taken seriously by their Faculty, by their Students' Congregation which is based upon a program of indiscriminate communion fellowship, and by the Church to which they belong? I for my part cannot do this. I consider it impossible to take comfort from the fact that the Lutheran Confession still has a *de jure* standing, and that heterodoxy is unlawful. It is in the final analysis quite immaterial whether error prevails in a church by lawful or unlawful means. The Devil is not concerned about that. On the contrary, he is probably quite well pleased with the theology of the "*as though*," which acts *as though* everything were still in perfect order, as though it were not necessary to exclude error from the Church with a firm refusal *as though* God's Word had nothing to say about such things.

Thank God, there still are Lutheran Churches that do not join in this theology of the "*as though*," churches in which one is still aware of what is meant by the prayer which the Church of Jesus Christ offers daily for its preservation in the true doctrine and in the right use of the Sacraments. They are called to the rescue of the vanishing Lutheranism of large church bodies, swamped with unionism and syncretism, to help by their intercession, by their brotherly admonition, by their example. They are to help as Christians should help one another in such matters: without a trace of Pharisaic superiority, in love toward the brethren for whom Christ has died, humbling themselves in consciousness of a common guilt.

These churches—as a rule they are the smallest and poorest ones, to which the temptations of secularism have not yet come so near—have a special function to perform. They are the ones who, on the basis of their own spiritual experiences, have something to say to the larger bodies, namely that it is not the millions that make a church strong and give it power over the minds, but He alone who is present wherever two or three are gathered together in His name. They are the ones who must tell a World Lutheranism which is striving for unity that the uniting of churches is not a process of addition by which one brings together everything that with more or less justification claims the name of Lutheran, but a process of integration which lets it appear clearly just what a Lutheran Church can be. The arithmetic of God is different from that of men. The greatness of the Church of Jesus Christ does not depend upon the many zeros that make such an impression upon our human eye.

To those who think along these lines and who are concerning themselves about the uniting of the Lutheran Church in this manner, these letters, *Deo volente*, wish to be of continued service, even though they are now being written in another quarter of the globe, and must make long journeys before reaching their addresses. In fact, it will add to their value if they enter upon the problems and trials of the Lutheran Church in other parts of the world to a greater degree than before. They should particularly provide material and stimulation for the doctrinal discussions that have gotten under way in larger as well as smaller circles, on official as well as unofficial levels of our Church throughout the world. As supplement to what was said about the relation of *ministry* and *congregation* in our Number VIII, several theses are presented herewith concerning the relation between the *Universal Church (ecclesia catholica sive universalis)* and the *individual congregation (ecclesia particularis sive localis)* in the New Testament.

1.

In the New Testament the word *ekklēsia* designates not only the *Una Sancta*, which comprises all believers, but also the local congregation to which those believers belong that live in a definite locality and regularly assemble for worship, particularly for the celebration of the Lord's Supper. The fact that the New Testament does not differentiate between "Church" and "congregation" according to our way of speaking, in referring to what since Ignatius has come to be designated as *ecclesia catholica* and that which later was called *ecclesia particularis* (Joh. Gerhard) is by no means to be explained as being due to the primitive state of New Testament terminology. For according to the trustworthy record of Matthew, Jesus Himself was first to speak of "church" in the twofold sense of Universal Church and individual congregation (Matt. 16, 18; 18, 17), obviously using the same Aramaic word (most likely *Qahal*), which then was rendered with *ekklēsia*. Upon His authority we teach: The "Church" is in its essence "congregation," the "congregation" is in its essence "Church." In the New

Testament the difference between “Church” and “congregation” is without substance and theologically therefore of no special import.

2.

That the “congregation” of Matt. 18 should be the same as the “church” of Matt. 16 seems to be an intolerable contradiction, and would be indeed, if the Church of Christ were to be thought of as a sociological concept, according to the analogy of human organizations. The “congregation,” the local church, would then have to be considered part of the Universal Church. The equating of Church and congregation would then imply that a part could be equal to the whole. And that, of course, is impossible.

In order to escape this logical contradiction two ecclesiological theories have been formulated, which may be described as the “catholic” and the “congregational” theory, respectively (not taking the words in their denominational sense). The “catholic” theory considers the Universal Church, *ecclesia catholica*, to be the primary organization, and the individual congregation, *ecclesia particularis*, as part or branch of the Universal Church. The “congregational” theory begins with the individual congregation and considers the “Church,” the *ecclesia catholica*, as the sum of the congregations, the *ecclesiae particulares*. Neither of the two theories is capable of understanding the essence of the Church. The “catholic” theory does not do justice to the fact that Jesus Himself gave to the smallest individual congregation imaginable (Matt. 18:19f. Cf. also Tertullian’s “*Ubi tres, ibi ecclesia*”) the same promises and the same authority as to the entire Church. The “congregational” theory, on the other hand, is not able to understand the fact that the Church of Christ extends beyond the reach of the local congregation and exists outside of it.

4.

In order to comprehend the essential unity, yes, the identity of the Universal Church and the local congregation, one must recall the sense in which the New Testament speaks of the *ekklēsia* as the Body of Christ. That is more than a mere figure of speech. In the New Testament the Church is not merely likened to a human body, although this comparison does occasionally occur, as in Rom. 12:4f. and 1 Cor. 12:14ff, nor is it only a corporate body in the sense of other human “corporations.” It is even more than a body “in Christ” (Rom. 12:5). It is the “Body of Christ,” and that is more than a mere comparison. In contrast to the Roman (Plus XII in “*Mystici Corporis*,” 1942) and to the Reformed and modernistic interpretation, we say: The Church is not merely likened to a body; it is the Body of Christ—the *Corpus Christi Mysticum*, as the theologians of the Middle Ages put it; the spiritual Body of Christ, to quote the Fathers of our Church.

That is clearly to be seen from Eph. 4:4. “One body and one Spirit” (cf. 4:12; 5:30, etc.) “Body” is to be taken no less realistically here than “Spirit.” But if this is true, then the question how the individual congregation can be identical with the Universal Church becomes a pointless one. For like the Body of Christ in the Eucharist *the Body of Christ, the Corpus Christi Mysticum, is not possessed of quantity. It is the same in every individual “congregation” as in the universal “Church.”* The presence of Christ in His Church is not dependent upon the number of members that happen to be present (cf. Matt. 18:20 with 28:20; Acts 1:8; Rev. 21:3; also 1 Cor. 12:3 with Phil. 2:10f.), just as the work of the Holy Ghost is the same in the individual Christian, in a Christian congregation, and in “the whole Christian Church” (Luther’s explanation of the Third Article).

The same is true of the Church as the People of God. The Church is not merely likened to a people. It is God’s People, the true nation of God, the Israel according to the Spirit. God’s Holy People can be present even when not all members are present. So it is with every nation. No people can ever be assembled in its entirety, even if only because of the different generations which certainly all belong to it. In effect as well as in law every nation is represented by a part, sometimes by a very small part, of its people. So also the effective representation of the Church as the People of God is entirely independent of the number of members assembled. Israel is present in its holy “Remnant,” which according to the teaching of the Prophets should survive the general

apostasy and be saved (cf. e.g. Is. 10:19; 6:13, and the thought as taken over by Jesus, Mark 4:11f.). So also the Spiritual Israel is already present in the Twelve who in turn represent the Twelve Tribes (Luke 22:30).

5.

Thus we arrive at the following understanding of the word *ekklēsia* in the New Testament:

a. *Ekklēsia* signifies the *Una Sancta Catholica*, which comprises all believers and which, though hidden as church before the eyes of the world (*Abscondita est ecclesia, latent sancti*. Luther, *De Servo Arbitrio*), is recognizable on earth to the eyes of faith by the use of the Means of Grace (e.g., Matt. 16 and all the passages from Ephesians).

b. *Ekklēsia* signifies the congregation = church of Jerusalem, Acts 2:47, 5:11 and many other passages. Possibly the meaning *ekklēsia* = church of Jerusalem is to be found with Paul in 1 Cor. 15:9, Gal. 1:13, Phil. 3:6. That this usage existed is shown by Acts 18:22 (Paul went to Jerusalem “and saluted the church”). In other passages as Acts 8:1, 11:26 the name of the city (*Ortsname*) is added, the church at Jerusalem thus being treated as other congregations. The passages cited indicate, however, that the church at Jerusalem did consider itself as “the Church” *par excellence*, as a kind of *caput et mater omnium ecclesiarum* (cf. the official designation of the cathedral church of Rome, the Basilica of St. John Lateran). In this congregation the Church of Christ, this new People of God, had become manifest for the first time—in the Holy city where (as also the early Christians of Jewish descent firmly believed, until the destruction of the Temple, dwelt the Glory of God. This self-regard (*Selbstbewusstsein*) of the Church of Jerusalem may well have found expression in the request for an offering, Gal. 2:10 (cf. Rom. 15:26ff. and the other passages), considered by the strict Jewish Christians as a sort of Christian *didrachma*, parallel to the Temple Tax of the Jewish Diaspora. Paul recognized the validity of this claim (Rom. 15:27), not as a tax, but as a gift of love “for the poor saints,” that is for those who were really poor (not for the “poor” in the sense of the ancient self-descriptive term for the true member of God’s People).

c. *Ekklēsia* may perhaps refer to all Christians in Judea, Galilee, and Samaria, and thereby signify what we would call a regional Church (Acts 9:31, if the singular, *ekklēsia*, is the original reading, which cannot be decided with certainty). The “Church” of these areas would then be the extension of the Church, the People of God, of Jerusalem, even as it did actually originate out of the dispersion of the same in times of persecution. This way of speaking would be in perfect agreement with the view of the Church at Jerusalem concerning itself. There are more reasons for than against recognizing the singular as the original version. A particular consideration is that the Aramaic word *qahal* has no plural, and the Christians of Jerusalem therefore could hardly have spoken of “churches.”

d. *Ekklēsia* signifies the Church at a particular place. This is the normal use of the Greek-speaking Christians of the primitive period, especially of Paul. The entire number of Christians in a city are called the *ekklēsia* of that particular place, as the *ekklēsia* of Corinth, of Philippi, etc.; the Christians of a region like Galatia are called the churches of Galatia (Gal. 1:2; 1 Cor. 16:1; cf. “the churches of Asia,” ch. 16:19); Christendom at large is called “all churches” (1 Cor. 14:33, cf. Rom. 16:4).

If the singular use of Church is natural to the Aramaic, so the plural use of Paul is what one would expect among Greek-speaking Christians. For in Greek the word *ekklēsia*—with which the Greek version of the Old Testament translates *qahal*, the solemn assembly of the people before God—means first of all the assembly of the people, the gathering of the citizens of a community. It occurs in this secular sense in Acts 19:32, 39f. The solemn political *ekklēsia* is the forum where the freemen of a Greek city gather to transact their business of state. In the speech of the early Greek-speaking Christians all these meanings combine to form the comprehensive concept of “Church” as we have it in the New Testament.

Ekklēsia is the equivalent of *evocatio*, a calling forth. Called forth from among the nations unto the sacred *qahal* of the true People of God, the *ekklēsia* is the People of the Saints of the Most High, who have the promise of the Kingdom. As God in the Old Covenant declares that He will betroth Himself to His People into eternity, so the Church as the People of God is the Bride of Christ,⁴ and the relationship between Christ and His

⁴ Rev. 22:17.

Church stands as the archetype (rather than antitype) of marriage (Eph. 5:25ff.). As God's People, as a holy priesthood, the *ekklēsia* becomes manifest in the solemn *ekklēsia* of the public worship of God (*des Gottesdienstes*). When on the Lord's Day services were conducted and the Lord's Supper celebrated in the Seven Churches of Asia, to which the message of Revelation was addressed—they represent all the Christians of the province—then the Church of God becomes manifest in each of them. And John, though physically separated from his Church and observing the Day of the Lord on Patmos, is nevertheless united with them “in spirit.” For above him and his congregations the Heavens are open, where that worship takes place of which this worship on earth is but a copy and a faint echo. There on high is the Heavenly City, the New Jerusalem, of which the saints on earth are citizens. There is their home (Phil. 3:20; Heb. 13:14). Here on earth they are sojourning as *paroikoi* (1 Pet. 2:11), and the congregations here on earth are but *paroikousai*, as the Church at Rome, entirely in the New Testament manner, calls itself 1 Clem. 1, 1: “The Church of God, sojourning as a stranger (*paroikousē*) in Rome.” Scattered abroad over all the earth, these many churches are still one Church. United they certainly are by the closest bonds of brotherly love, of brotherly assistance, and of mutual intercession, yet most of all they are one because of the presence in their midst of the Christ who has ascended on high and of the Holy Ghost who comes from on high.

e. *Ekklēsia signifies the congregation in some house*: Rom. 16:6; 1 Cor. 16:19. The gatherings of Christians, particularly for the breaking of bread, the Lord's Supper, occur in private homes. In many cases, particularly in the early phases of mission congregations, local congregation and house-congregation, church-in-a-home and church-in-a-city, coincide. But as the congregations grew, and in view of the fact that it was not yet possible to have special church buildings, this phase soon came to an end. That was the case from the beginning at Jerusalem where after the first Day of Pentecost the congregation probably never was able to assemble at a single place, certainly not for a Sunday service. As was originally the case at Jerusalem, so other metropolitan congregations like Antioch and Rome soon had to come together in the form of several house-congregations conducting their services simultaneously and side by side. From the chapter of greetings in Romans, which probably indicates a specific list of the Christians whom Paul is remembering in his prayers—so to say a preliminary stage of the diptychs—on the mass altar—Theodore Zahn deduces the existence of three house-congregations, and before long this number will undoubtedly have been increased.

But it is worthy of particular note that neither in the New Testament nor in the primitive church thereafter the unity of the local congregations was thereby set aside. No matter how many house-congregations there might be in a city, these house-congregations still constituted but *one* congregation. The ministers were still officials of the entire congregation. The bishops—presently the bishop—and the deacons, the presbyters, all were officials of the entire congregation, even though they might be in charge of a house-congregation. All official acts, elections, administration of property, negotiations with other congregations remained the business of the local congregation as a whole. According to the conception of the ancient church, which obviously stems out of the conditions prevailing in the congregations of the New Testament period, a city may have but *one* bishop, and the huge city of Rome, with a congregation that soon numbered many thousands of members, had to content itself with a mere seven deacons, an intolerable condition which they sought to remedy by appointing seven sub-deacons.

Rome and Alexandria consistently remained single congregations. In theory the City of Rome is such today. In fact, if one looks closely, perhaps the entire Church of Rome is something like a single parish, the *orbis* that has become the *paroikia* of the *urbs*. That is indicated rather symbolically by the fact that even today the Roman Missal in connection with each festival mentions the Chapel (*Stationskirche*) where the Roman bishops of old would conduct the Chief Service of the City. And it is here at Rome where it becomes very clear how the idea developed that in the strict sense of the word there could be only *one* church in every city; that the city-congregation rather than the house-congregation represents the Church of Christ. What subsequently becomes evident at many different points in the history of Liturgics really goes back to primitive Christianity. Each city has seven deacons because Jerusalem had the Seven. The house-congregations of each city constitute *one* congregation because the Church at Jerusalem was as *one* church, with its many little house-congregations: the People of God that had become manifest in *one* city, the Holy City. Jerusalem as *omnium orbis ecclesiarum*

caput et mater, every city-congregation as a counterpart of the First Church, every individual *ekklēsia* as a *paroikia* of the heavenly Jerusalem, —these constitute the biblical background for the Christian concept of Church and congregation. In spite of all the misrepresentations and distortions it has remained alive through the centuries, even in churches where one would no longer expect it.

6.

What theological and dogmatic deductions may be drawn from these New Testament findings?

a. The Church of Jesus Christ, the *Una Sancta Catholica perpetuo mansura*, which we confess in the Creed, is, as an object of faith, hidden from our earth-bound eyes. It cannot be seen from without. It must be believed; and it can be believed only within the Church, by the believers in the Church. The Church is therefore at the same time the subject and the object of this faith, —a situation for which there is no parallel and which can therefore never be understood by analogy to human organizations of any kind. Even where the Scriptural statements concerning it employ concepts taken from the social life of men (to the previously discussed terminology of people, state, marriage, etc., should be added “brotherhood.” Cf. Matt. 12:49f.; 23:8; 1 Pet. 2:17; 5:9), there is always reference to a reality for which these temporal institutions provide no more than a mere image.

This Church, which is no mere intellectual abstraction but a reality, becomes manifest in this world in the form of individual congregations which are confined to the categories of space and time (*orts- und zeitgebundene Einzelkirchen*). In these churches or congregations, scattered throughout the world, the One Church is believed. It is present in all, to the extent that the means of grace are rightly used in them, and each of them is therefore not merely a part of the Church, but *the Church* at that particular place.

Thus the following is established. *The individual or local congregation*—we use these terms with the understanding that this “individual” and “local” status calls for further definition—*is just as much by divine right as the Una Sancta Catholica. There is no authority and no attribute of the Una Sancta that does not belong to the individual congregation as well.* It is noteworthy that as early as the Second Century the attribute of catholicity was applied to what in later times would have been called a particular church (e.g., when in the “Martyrdom of Polycarp,” 16:2, the congregation at Smyrna is called the catholic church at Smyrna, or when in that same period the anti-Gnostic church centering on Rome and Asia Minor—which we would call orthodox—designated itself as “catholic”).

b. In the usage of the New Testament the “congregation” in which the *Una Sancta* becomes manifest is not the same as that which would be called congregation in modern religious sociology, and what a Reformed, Congregational, Baptist, and Pietistic Protestantism has read into the New Testament, namely an association of believing Christians who join themselves together for the practice of their religion. The Christian congregation never comes into being as the result of the will of man, like some human society, not even when subsequently the organization of such a congregation as a *societas externarum rerum ac rituum* takes place according to the forms of secular corporate law. What makes an *ekklēsia* of a congregation is solely the will of Christ who establishes, calls, and gathers that which is *ekklēsia* in the society which is called “church” or “congregation.” *One joins a society; one is added to the Church* (Acts 2:41).

Every modern ecclesiology must be subjected to a searching study, every theology must carefully examine itself, in order to determine whether and to what extent it has permitted its concept of the Church to be influenced by modern sociology. That applies, of course, not only to the exponents of the congregational idea, but also to those of so-called high-churchly tendencies who have introduced into their ecclesiology a secular sociology of another kind, perhaps the organizational concept of Romanticism or the institutional concept of modern constitutional law.

c. *In New Testament usage the individual congregation is neither simply a house-congregation, nor a city-congregation, nor a regional church (Gemeinde eines Landes).* But it can be all of these. That formation of the primitive Christian era that comes closest to what we understand by “congregation” today is the house-congregation, to wit, that congregation which regularly assembled for worship in a given building. When one wished to go to “church” in Jerusalem one would, for instance, go to “Saint” (were they not all “saints”?)

Mary's, the mother of John Mark (when Peter was delivered from prison he knew at once "where many were gathered together praying" - Acts 12:12.) In Rome one would go to Saints Aquila and Priscilla, just as we go to some certain church. Those were not "house-congregations" as we would understand it, a family with perhaps some guests at its private devotion, but much rather what we would call a church-congregation. If divine services are held there, then the Church is present.

But the Church, the congregation, at Jerusalem, Rome, or some other city is something that extends beyond the individual house-congregation, as we see. The bishops, deacons, and presbyters are the official ministers (*Amtsträger*) of the entire city-congregation, even though they may be specifically assigned to some particular house-congregation. This also disposes of the theory of Rudolph Sohm who wanted to recognize the *ekklēsia* only in the tangible assembly (*konkreten Versammlung*) engaged in the celebration of the Lord's Supper.

But even the *city-congregation* is not simply to be identified with the local congregation. For even in the New Testament the boundaries of the local congregation do not coincide with those of the city. Just as it was a matter of course for the *ekklēsia* that it included also *the believers of the surrounding region*, so the congregation of Corinth also included "all the saints which are in all Achaia" (2 Cor. 1:1). This holds good even when they do not always go to "church" in Corinth but have their own services. That explains why, immediately after the days of the New Testament, when the college of bishops in a congregation began to narrow down to a single man, the episcopate immediately extends beyond the confines of the city, as with Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, who at the same time is called Bishop of Syria (ad Rom. 2:2). This has its origin not in the fact that this new office was grasping for power, but rather that while in the New Testament the individual congregation is designated as the church of the city in which it is located, yet it may also extend beyond the same, a condition which is repeated as a matter of course throughout the ages in the history of missions.

d. If this is correct—and we have merely determined the historical facts of New Testament times—then the following important conception results. *The New Testament recognizes and constitutes the divine right of the ekklēsia which is confined to a certain locality and which is circumscribed as to its territory; but it contains no law as to how large the area may or must be in which the individual congregation exists. The ecclesia localis, the local congregation in the sense of the New Testament, may be a "house-congregation"; it may be a "city-congregation" with a number of churches; and it may be a regional church (Landeskirche)—provided that each of these forms of the ecclesia localis possesses and preserves what every ecclesia must have in order to be Church of Christ.*

A house-congregation in which the head of the house would arrogate rights unto himself that would militate against the authority of the entire congregation would just as surely lose the character of a Christian *ecclesia* as a city-congregation which would oppress the house-congregations, or a *Landeskirche* which would violate the rights of the city-congregations. The authority of the Church is established and defined by the will of the Lord who has given His means of grace, the preaching of the Gospel, Holy Baptism, the Sacrament of the Altar, the Office of the Keys, and has commanded their administration. Wherever the Word is preached in truth and purity and the Sacraments are administered according to the institution of Christ, there is the Church, whether it be in the *congregatio* of a house, of a city, or of an entire region.

Certainly the *congregatio* must assemble in order to hear the Word of God and celebrate the Sacrament. As a rule that will be possible only within the frame of a locally quite restricted congregation. But nothing in the New Testament speaks against this that also a synod like the Council of the Apostles (cf. Acts 15:4, 6, 22) may speak and act in representation of the absent ones, if it has been determined by thorough discussion where the consensus lies, and that it is the consensus of the Church in a true understanding of the Divine Word (cf. the *concordantia verba prophetarum*). A synod may also be Church, just as the little group of *duo aut tres* may be Church. That is why it is an old tradition of the Church that the sessions of a synod are held within the frame of a Divine Service, and that its decisions are arrived at under invocation of the Holy Spirit and are proclaimed in the Divine Service.

e. In distinction from other confessions the Lutheran Church has always been agreed that the New Testament prescribes no definite church polity. If the *congregatio sanctorum* and the *ministerium*

ecclesiasticum are there, then it is a matter of human jurisdiction to regulate the details of the Order of the Church. It is a question of human arrangement whether a special office of deacons shall be established and how it shall be constituted. For the Church was there before this office, and Christ Himself did not institute it. Here our Church differs from others that see a divine institution in the installation of the Seven, and who even consider it mandatory that there be Seven Deacons.

The basic difference between the Lutheran Church on the one hand and the Catholic and the Reformed on the other is the answer which is given to the question whether the ordinances of the Primitive Church constitute a binding law or whether they merely serve as examples of the different possibilities in the field of church polity. Did the First Church under all circumstances have to organize every local congregation as a Jerusalem on a small scale? It certainly did not. So also those Lutheran Churches which in constituting themselves have closely followed those things in the New Testament which seemed exemplary to them have neither sought nor found a *lex de constituenda ecclesia*, after the manner of Catholicism or the different Reformed denominations, but they have held fast to *the distinction between Law and Gospel*, by which the Lutheran Church stands and falls.

So much for the theses about the individual congregation and the Universal Church, which are meant to be a contribution to some current discussions and at the same time a stimulus for new discourses in wider circles. They do not say all that might be said, but they are meant to indicate the direction that must be taken by efforts that aim at agreement in the doctrine of the Church, to go beyond the *theologoumena* of the nineteenth century, back to the doctrine of the New Testament. Such an unbiased study of the Biblical aspect of the Church will then end with a discovery that will come as a surprise to many, namely how particularly the Lutheran Confession has so profoundly understood the Church of the New Testament; understood it in its heavenly and earthly, spiritual and corporeal, eternal and temporal being; seeing it as the *one* Church of which it can be said that while its life is hid with Christ in God, it nevertheless is the greatest reality in all the history of the world,— a mass of sinners in the sight of men and even in their own eyes, yet at the same time a communion of saints in the justifying verdict of God.

Trusting that we may remain united in praying and working for the Church of the Lutheran Reformation and its unification—

Greetings from your

HERMANN SASSE.

X

On the Problem of the Union of Lutheran Churches

(Translation by E. Reim)

Dear Brethren in the Ministry:

Word has just arrived from Germany (Advent, 1949) that the pulpit and altar fellowship which two years ago was established between the Ev. Luth. Free Church (formerly of Saxony and other States) and the Ev. Luth. Church in Old Prussia has now been extended to include the Independent Ev. Luth. Church of Baden, Hesse, and Lower Saxony. Just as this news was received by the two Lutheran Churches of Australia with gratitude to the Lord of the Church, so there will be a joyful response wherever men still know what it was that the Lutheran Free Churches of Germany were fighting for, during more than a century, in great weakness and under untold sacrifices and opposition; and also what this struggle has meant for World Lutheranism. One can only wish, with all one's heart, that the *communio in sacris* which now unites the Free Church Lutheranism of Germany may also be extended to the few congregations which are not yet included, and that all participants may help to carry out their common tasks and in due time achieve the needed formulation of a common Church Order.

What gives special character to this union is the fact that here, after long and detailed doctrinal discussions, unity has now been achieved by Lutherans who have always been painstakingly exact about questions of doctrine and the theological terms of church fellowship. Here are Lutheran pastors and

congregations among whom the theological schools of Scheibel and Huschke, of Walther and Pieper, of Loehe and Vilmar still continue with great vitality. If today they have come to the conclusion that in view of their common understanding of Holy Scripture and the Lutheran Confession the differences of ancestry and the resultant heritage of tradition can no longer be considered divisive of church fellowship, then this outcome is possible only because men have learned anew that instead of more or less canonizing the fathers and teachers of their own church, they are rather to subject them also to the sole judgment (*dem alleingültigen Urteil*) of Holy Scripture and to apply to them the standard of a Scriptural confession. Furthermore, there is an equal readiness gratefully to honor the fathers and teachers of another Lutheran Church that is also true to the Confession and to think of them as such “who have spoken unto us the Word of God.” If it was possible to attain this attitude and then to set down this agreement in a common acceptance of a Lutheran Confession that is to be taken at full face value⁵ then this is important for all attempts at union in present-day Lutheranism, no matter how small the group of churches in which these decisions were arrived at. For the significance of such a decision does not depend upon the size of the participating churches, not upon the practical secondary effects (*praktischen Nebenwirkungen*) that every union involves, but only upon whether it was a decision worthy of the true Church, that is to say, a doctrinally correct one. May this incident in the most recent history of the German Church therefore provide the occasion for some necessary *comment upon the general problem of Lutheran Church Union*.

1.

The present movement toward Lutheran Union can be correctly understood only if it is thought of in its relation to the general present-day trend toward church union. It is a part of the great Ecumenical Movement of our century, closely connected with parallel manifestations in the Protestant and Catholic world, but at the same time differing from these as to its character. For the Ecumenical Movement is certainly one of the great movements in church history, like Pietism or the Enlightenment (*die Aufklärung*) that spread through all of Christendom and affect all churches. Even the Roman Catholic Church, or a Lutheran church that was once as exclusive as the Missouri Synod, experience their “ecumenical” trend.

The roots of this mighty movement lie in the decades between 1830 and 1870, when following the collapse of the churchless Enlightenment (*der kirchenlosen Aufklärung*) and in view of the increasing urgency of the social needs of a modern world all Christendom began to weigh anew the question concerning the essence and the reality of the *one* Church of God, and the churches of all confessions, Catholic and Orthodox Russian, Anglican and Lutheran, Reformed, Methodist, and Baptist, began to furnish their answers, each after its kind. In all this there was a constant connection between a rediscovering of one’s own church and the striving for an understanding of the *Una Sancta*. Always the “Confessionalists” were the protagonists of ecumenicity. For after all, in contrast to those who hold their confessions lightly, they were the ones who took the dogma of the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church in its entire seriousness, even though to their sorrow they had to differ in their understanding of it.

In those decades the Lutheran Ecumenical Movement was born, together with that new Lutheran awareness of the Confessions (*Konfessionsbewusstsein*). In their theological thinking as well as in their ecclesiastical action men like Vilmar and Loehe represent both true confessionalism and true ecumenicity. It is significant that incidents like the struggle of the Lutherans in Prussia against the Union of 1817, which at first glance looks like a purely provincial issue and is treated as such by the State, should immediately have its consequences at long distance in America and Australia. It is the reawakening of Lutheran consciousness in Germany and Scandinavia that brought forth the great conservative Lutheran synods of the Middle West, like Missouri, Iowa, Ohio, and Wisconsin. It seems, therefore, that the really great fruits of the Lutheran Awakening in Germany came to their maturity in transoceanic lands. But here in the Land of the Reformation the Lutheran Awakening came to a definite end in the era of Bismarck. The Prussian victory of 1866 meant the triumph of

⁵ As was done in the Articles of Agreement concluded between the Breslau and Saxon Free Churches, with their thoroughgoing thetical and antithetical statements. Ed.

his church policy in the field of German Protestantism, and the founding of the Empire in 1871 caused the ecclesiastical issue to be dwarfed by that of nationalism, even in “churchly” circles.

After the struggle for the re-establishment of the Lutheran Church in Germany had gone on for decades, the final result was the founding at Hanover in July, 1868, of the “General Evangelical Lutheran Conference.” By establishing immediate contact with American Lutherans, and by the accession of Swedish groups in the following year, this Conference became the first ecumenical organization of Lutheranism, out of which under the decisive influence of American Lutheran churches came the world-wide organizations of the Lutheran World Conference in 1923 and the Lutheran World Federation in 1947. If one considers that the ecumenical organization of Anglicanism, the Lambeth Conference of Bishops of the Anglican Communion, is only one year older, and that the corresponding Reformed organization (Alliance of the Reformed Churches holding the Presbyterian System, 1875), that of the Methodists (Ecumenical Methodist Council, 1881), Congregationalists (International Union of Congregational Churches, 1891), and Baptists (World Baptist Union, 1905), all follow in the subsequent decades, then it will not be possible to charge that in this instance Lutheranism failed to discern the signs of the times.

The generation whose final achievement was the founding of the General Ev. Lutheran Conference was blessed with men of long vision, men who clearly understood the position of the Church in a civilization that was becoming increasingly secularized. Just as at the Vatican Council of 1870 the leading theologians, secular philosophers (*Kulturphilosophen*), and statesmen of Roman Catholicism took the steps that in their judgment had to be taken in view of the approaching wars and revolutions that would shake the Christian foundations of Western civilization, so there were also in the Evangelical churches men who, in the delirious progressivism (*Fortschrittstaumel*) which was so universal in those years, were not deceived as to the real situation of the Church. They knew that the continued existence of the Church of the Lutheran Reformation was no longer simply to be taken for granted. And they acted. They did what men could in order to preserve the Lutheran Church for the sake of ministering unto all of Christendom.

2.

In 1868 concern for the preservation of the Lutheran Church brought into being the first ecumenical organization of Lutheranism. It was justified concern. For after the Lutheran Church of Germany had for half a century been struggling with the Union and had lost the greater part of its substance to the same, there appeared in 1867 a Memorial by the Supreme Consistory (*Oberkirchenrat*) of the Prussian Church, which appealed to John 17 and to an “enlightened patriotism” in opposing the thought of a dissolution of the Union. The Memorial argues that such plans were based upon “the premise that the great majority of the congregations in Prussia should be considered Lutheran, and that the Lutheran church body which should be formed would, with the exception of an insignificant minority, be made up of the Evangelicals of the present *Landeskirche*.” This was, however, declared to be a great fallacy. “The great majority of Evangelicals is not simply Lutheran, but *of the Union*, even though to some extent with the reservation of the Lutheran Confession, a privilege which they have so far been enjoying without interference. But how shall it be reconciled with *justice* simply to nullify that character which they have acquired by becoming members of the Union?” (The emphasis appears in the original, as quoted in K. Matthes, *Allgemeine Kirchliche Chronik*, Vol. 14, 1867, Altona, 1868, p. 61.)

Again and again, for an entire generation, the solemn assurance had been given that is being repeated even down to this day: “The Union neither intends nor implies a surrender of the previous confession of faith, nor has the authority which the confessional writings of the two evangelical bodies have so far possessed been suspended by it. Participation in it merely gives expression to a spirit of moderation and charity which no longer permits individual points of difference in the doctrine of the other Confession to be a reason for refusing outward church fellowship.” (Order in Council, February 28, 1834.)

But this assurance could not be kept within the Union, even had there been the will to do so. And the Memorial is cynical enough to state the reason. It denies to Lutherans in the Union the right to have a church government of their own Confession: “According to their Confessions, and if they are true to them, particularly the Lutherans have no right to demand a separate ecclesiastical organization as a matter of doctrine or

conscience”(l. cit., p. 59). Congregations and pastors may, therefore, be Lutheran. But to demand for them a Lutheran church administration, to demand that the future Lutheran pastors be trained by Lutheran faculties, that they be ordained and supervised by a church government that is obligated to the Lutheran Confessions, that is to be considered un-Lutheran!

If one considers that when the Union was introduced the Lutheran Church of Prussia was the largest Lutheran church in the world, and that in the years following upon 1866 there was danger that the Union might devour the rest of Lutheran church organization in Germany, and that as things stood at that time this might sooner or later become the fate of World Lutheranism, then one will understand the action of 1868. One understands why Kliefoth’s famous address at the organization of the General Ev. Lutheran Conference in Hanover dealt with the theme, “What does Article VII of the Augsburg Confession demand concerning the church government of the Lutheran Church? ”

That was the basic issue concerning the lawful existence (*rechtliche Existenz*) of the Lutheran Church, and still is today. Has the Church, have the congregations of the Augsburg Confession the right to a church administration that is obligated to this Confession? That means: Must the persons who *jure humano* perform the functions of ordaining pastors and visiting these pastors and their congregations be bound to this Confession? Only under such conditions can the Lutheran Church exist as Church. Harless, the first president of the General Ev. Lutheran Conference, was completely right when in a moving communication to Bismarck concerning the tentative provisions for a State-Church code which were to be included in the new Imperial Constitution he formulated the alternatives as follows: Whether the Lutheranism of Germany should also in the future still be permitted to exist as a church, or only as a school of thought within a large Union Church or a universal Protestantism. That, since the middle of the last century, is the issue for world Lutheranism, even though many Lutherans are only now coming to see the situation. The General Ev. Lutheran Conference has seen to it that it was not forgotten. That is how the Conference became the focal point for the ecumenical gathering of Lutheranism.

3.

Nowhere has this issue been better understood than in the Lutheran churches of America. For them also the vital issue was the question concerning their right of existence as autonomous churches of the Lutheran confession, independent of other bodies. For it was by no means to be taken for granted that the Lutheran Church, which was brought to North America by Dutch, Scandinavian, and German immigrants, should continue to exist as an independent church. In their former homes a large part of these immigrants had been church members in name only. In the New World they soon were lost to the Church. Others soon found their way into the sects, particularly if they were of the religiously susceptible type. It is significant that as soon as the guidance and support of the (Lutheran) State Church in the homeland ceased, the older Swedish congregations turned Anglican. It was therefore one of the most important decisions in modern church history when the German Lutherans who were scattered from New York to Georgia, centering on Pennsylvania, and who were not content merely to represent another school of thought among many similar trends of Protestantism, finally under the leadership of Henry Melchior Muehlenberg and in the founding of the first Lutheran synod, the Pennsylvania Ministerium, deliberately chose the form of a Lutheran Church for their *modus vivendi*.

Of course this was as yet by no means an irrevocable decision. Both of the men who at that time were competing for the spiritual leadership, Muehlenberg and Zinzendorf, were Pietists. It was the “Lutheranism” of Zinzendorf that was contending with the “Lutheranism” of Francke, the Pietism of Herrnhut with that of Halle: and the church which resulted had much in common with Halle, but little or nothing with Wittenberg. The affinity which the General Synod of a later day as well as those groups in the present United Lutheran Church of America which have grown out of it have constantly shown for “Association-Lutherans”⁶ of the Prussian

⁶ *Vereinslutheraner*. The term is hard to translate. It refers to those Lutherans who remained in the Union churches, but sought to preserve their Lutheran consciousness and identity by associating themselves into confessional groups—a Lutheran society within a church of the Union. Ed.

Union, or even with that Union itself, is closely tied together with this heritage of Halle. It was flagrant unionism that occasionally manifested itself in the young Lutheran Church at the close of the eighteenth century, and confessionally minded Lutherans of a later generation have not failed vigorously to abjure it (*sich kräftig davor zu bekreuzigen*).

Nevertheless, something could come to pass here in America that was unthinkable in the Europe of that day. The same Lutherans whose appreciation of the Lutheran Reformation and of the Confession of the Lutheran Church had been materially weakened by the influence of Pietism and the Enlightenment, and who furthermore lived in an environment where the divided state of Protestantism constituted a far greater practical problem than in Germany, rejected the temptation of a union with the German-Reformed with the same matter-of-factness with which their brethren in Germany fell victim to it. While in Germany one Lutheran church after another was swallowed up by the Union (Prussia and Nassau in 1817, the Palatinate in 1818, Baden in 1821), the Lutheran synods of America (Pennsylvania, New York, North Carolina, Maryland-Virginia) joined in 1820 in the founding of the "General Synod," thereby taking a stand against the Union and in favor of a confessional church on the basis of the Augsburg Confession. One must keep in mind that, apart from certain Methodistic and Puritan influences, the theology of these synods was the same as that of the contemporary territorial churches of Germany: a mixture of Supernaturalism, Rationalism, and Pietism, not touched as yet by the Awakening and the rediscovery of the Confession.

To this decision of 1820 the Lutherans of America, united in the General Synod, held fast even when the tides of unionism were running high in their own ranks. For example, in a letter "to the Evangelical Church in Germany," written in 1845 and asking for contributions for Gettysburg, *Samuel Simon Schmucker*, one of the leaders of the General Synod and head of its seminary at Gettysburg, could declare, also in the name of the General Synod: "In most of the principles of our church we stand on common ground with the United (*Uniert*) Church of Germany. The doctrinal differences between the old-Lutheran and the Reformed churches we do not consider essential... Luther's peculiar view concerning the bodily presence of the Lord in the Eucharist has long been abandoned by the majority of our preachers." (Quoted according to Herzog-Hauck, *Realenzyklopädie für prot. Theol. und Kirche*, 3rd ed., XIV, 194, 49ff.)

If one considers that the same Schmucker was a protagonist of the Evangelical Alliance, which at that time was spreading mightily from its beginnings in Scotland and England, then one asks why a "Lutheran" church whose pastors were trained in this spirit could resist the great temptation of a union with a Reformed Church with German antecedents, which after all offered so many advantages. I can find no other answer than this, that in Germany the deciding factor for the acceptance of the Union—no, the unions, for almost at once there were half a dozen, a different one for each territory—was the peremptory decree of the State. This would then also explain the destructive and demoralizing influence of the German unions upon the Church. This interference of the State was absent in America, and that made it possible that Lutheranism there decided in favor of Church of the Confession, first because of a vague feeling of what a church should be, but then also because of theological conviction.

The far reaching effects of this decision became evident when during the course of the nineteenth century the Lutheran Church spread over the entire North American continent, within a few generations providing an organized Church for an area as large as Europe. With its 17,000 congregations and 13,000 pastors this organization may well be compared with the Lutheran churches of the Old World. Is it saying too much if one considers this, rather than the feeble accomplishments of the history of contemporary European Lutheranism, the real contribution of the nineteenth century toward the Lutheran Church?

In the far-flung reaches of the Middle West, which had quite recently been opened for settlement, the Lutheran Church came under the leadership of the Confessional Awakening that was even then crossing the ocean. Thereby unionism was being overcome and the development of a strictly confessional Lutheran Church advanced. The immigration of Prussian (Buffalo), Saxon (Missouri), and Franconian (Iowa) Lutherans, the work of Ferdinand *Walther*, under whose spiritually strong leadership the Missouri Synod began to develop into one of the largest churches of World Lutheranism, and the constant silent influence of the confessional Lutheranism which was then at its height in Europe—all this came to bear upon the General Synod also, and

eventually brought about the downfall of the “American Lutheranism.” of Gettysburg. When the “Definite Synodical Platform” appeared in 1855, the author of which Schmucker subsequently admitted himself to be, then this new version of the Augustana, a *Variata Americana*, so to speak, became the occasion for a separation of the conservative forces from the General Synod, which led to the founding of the General Council in 1867. Not until 1918 did the reunion of the General Synod and the General Council, together with the (conservative)⁷ Synod of the South, take place in the formation of the United Lutheran Church of America.

But we cannot here tell the history of the American Church, nor do we wish to. We merely want to establish the fact that the nineteenth century, which inflicted such grievous wounds upon the Lutheran Church of Europe, brought very rich gains to our Church in America. The hope raised by the Lutheran Awakening during the generation following 1830, namely that there might be a restoration of a Lutheran Church that would be true to the confessions and would live of the heritage of the Lutheran Reformation, proved to be impossible of attainment in Europe. In America, however, it seemed to be in process of fulfillment.

The “General Ev. Lutheran Conference” of 1868 was an organization for the defense of German and European Lutheranism. Because from the very beginning, however, at least the General Council and particularly its spiritual leader, *Charles Porterfield Krauth*, were allied with it, it became clear that the struggle for the preservation of the Lutheran Church would have to be carried on simultaneously on both sides of the ocean. When the General Council sent its letter of greetings to the newly founded General Ev. Lutheran Conference, the president of the latter, Adolph Harless, replied from Munich with greetings and words of blessing to the Council: “We rejoice over the union of Lutheran churches and synods in America, as it has begun to take form in the General Council. We recognize the wisdom and circumspection with which this was done, scorning premature results, avoiding superficial union, everywhere seeking the sure ground of clear understanding and unambiguous confession, so that the house might be firmly founded.”

The fact that the hopes which were entertained at that time were not realized, namely that the General Council might become the gathering of the entire conservative and confessional elements of Lutheranism, but that under the leadership of Missouri the Synodical Conference in 1872 became a second focal point of determined confessional Lutheranism, shall here not be pursued any farther (*mag hier auf sich beruhen bleiben*).

The net result of the history of our Church in America during the nineteenth century remains the fact that confessional Lutheranism asserted itself and despite the perils of its divided state could build a strong Church that knew what it wanted.

4.

In spite of a few successful undertakings such as the News Service of the “*Allgemeine Ev. Luth. Kirchenzeitung*” of Luthardt, and in spite of the great amount of work done in closest contact with Nordic and American Lutherans, the history of the General Ev. Luth. Conference, all things considered, is a single chain of misadventures. The tragic story of the Lutheran *Landeskirchen* of Germany, which retained their name and legal standing, but could not prevent that German Protestantism was governed by the great Prussian Union, yes, which could not even achieve federation because the idea did not meet with favor in Berlin; the much greater tragedy of those Lutherans within the Union who, as often as the *casus confessionis* occurred, immediately would deny everything which they had ever confessed; the gradual dying out of Lutheran theology since the end of the old School of Erlangen; the betrayal of the Church to the State, of the Lutheran Confession to Patriotism, and eventually of Christian faith to a political philosophy, a betrayal of which the editorial policy of the *Kirchenzeitung* gives evidence since the days of Bismarck—whoever traces this entire evolution will no longer be puzzled by the fact that in this century the Lutheran Church of Germany has lost its leadership of World Lutheranism.

Since 1918 this leadership has unmistakably passed to the Lutherans of America. Out of the practical work of the National Lutheran Council, a founding of those days, grew the great undertakings by Which

⁷ We regret that we cannot share the author’s favorable opinion of this particular sector of American Lutheranism. Ed.

American Lutherans came to the relief of their brethren in stricken Europe; and this again led to the founding of the Lutheran World Conference at Eisenach, in 1923. American activity built up something that the churches of Europe up to that time had failed to achieve: a great working organization of World Lutheranism, which German professors, members of consistories, and Nordic bishops could never have done, even though there were among them able and sometimes truly outstanding men; that was wrought by the Americans. How? Not by means of the financial resources which were at their disposal. Not by that “activism” which contemporaries who love their ease so frequently like to contrast with their own German “inwardness” (*Innerlichkeit*). It is well known that the disciples of Wichern also became quite efficient “activists.” Nor would anyone be able to find a lack of *Innerlichkeit* in the great organizer, J. A. Morehead. What is the secret of this energetic and effective intervention in the history of the European Church?

This question has become even more realistic since World War II, with the building up of the great relief organizations of the churches, and the transformation, under the determinative leadership of the Lutherans of America, of the Lutheran World Conference into the world embracing Lutheran World Federation.

Certainly we are faced here, among other things, with the ecclesiastical parallel to a process of secular history: the passing of leadership in the Western World from the nations of Europe to America. And occasional observations of the policies pursued by the United States in regard to the churches of Europe cause one to feel that the American *imperium* may have been as little able as all the other *imperia* in world history to resist the temptation of using the Church of God a bit for its own purposes.

Well, this church policy will end like all undertakings of this kind. But that will remain which was done out of the most profound spiritual life (*aus dem tiefsten geistlichen Leben*) of the real Church of America. What may that be? And what power is behind it?

To begin with, it is simply a fact that millions of human lives have, in the sheer physical sense, been saved from utter ruin. These millions can never forget—or can they?—that the Church of their fathers, the Church of Christ, the Church of Him who spoke for the least of His brethren, has met them at least once in their lives, met them as impressively and as really as that can happen to us men.

If there is such a thing as that primacy and rank of love of which Ignatius reminded the Church at Rome, then one may think of it here. And if one asks what constitutes the special quality of this charitable work of faith, of this action of the Church, and wherein it differs from what we have in the churches of Europe and always will have, then one thing will have to be pointed out. In Germany the author (*das Subjekt*) of such a relief program is the Inner Mission Society, the Caritas, the Welfare Organization, the Relief Agency, this or that society, or the *Pfarrer*, the Deacon, the Christian. Behind the agent there is a committee, an authority. All of that one has also in the American churches. But behind that there is something that we simply do not know in this fashion, or know in theory: the congregation. Behind a German bishop stands his *Landeskirchenrat* (if he stands!); if he is very fortunate, then also his synodical council. But behind the president of an American synod stand 1,000 congregations, real congregations, in whose name he acts and to whom he owes an accounting.

This is something great and new, something that our Church has known neither in Germany nor in the Scandinavian countries. Think of the Church of Sweden, and then of the Augustana Synod in the United States; of the churches of Denmark, Norway, and Finland, and of their daughter churches. Whatever may be the advantage, on the one hand, of an ancient parochial system embracing an entire nation, and, on the other, the disadvantage of a Free Church system of congregations, like the American—and we want to weigh all these things well—it means something when not only theologians, church officials, and a little group of interested people, but really entire congregations, and that means many hundred thousand members, consider themselves personally responsible for the future of the Lutheran Church. The entire “activism” of American Lutheranism would not have been possible without this “congregation.” The great question now is how the problem of Lutheran union is viewed by such a church, and what we may expect from it by way of practical solution as henceforth it intervenes with greater and greater leadership and decision in the affairs of World Lutheranism.

There is one thing that, at the outset, we may well expect from our American brethren, namely that they are in earnest about the *truth*, probably more so than the Lutherans of Europe, and that they are helping us toward a new grasp of the concept of truth. That sounds like a paradox. Have not we Europeans, particularly we Germans, constantly laid claim, as a kind of honor that is our due, to the distinction of being the theologians with an inexorable mind for truth? Were we not accustomed to begin each ecumenical discussion as well as every conference with our co-religionists from America with the monition that there can be no uniting of churches without a uniting in the truth, and that all trans-oceanic pragmatism be kindly left aside? As a rule, that secured us an immediate prestige. Our Lutheran friends from America were pleasantly surprised to find us taking the matter of truth so seriously. After the many things that they had heard about our church affairs, and the little they had read of our most recent writings, they had hardly expected this. Magnanimously we forgave their ignorance (although, just between us, it is really unpardonable if some one has not read our books, and of course in their latest edition, since the previous one represents an outdated position. How can Christendom really look for recovery, unless it be by our theology, the theology of Germany! But this merely by the way!) At that it is quite doubtful who may have taken the importance of doctrinal truth for the life and the unity of the Church more seriously, the Lutherans of Europe or those of America.

One can certainly not charge those churches with lack of understanding for the importance of truth concerning whose stirring struggles for the preservation of Lutheran doctrine in an entire continent an authoritative German textbook of Church History (Krueger, *Handbook*, 2. Ed., Vol. IV, Leube & Stephan, 1931, p. 400f) has nothing more to report than the following sentences: “Most often these Lutherans have been troubled and divided not over organizational issues, but rather by doctrinal controversies.”—“Too much time was spent upon confessional matters which seemed strange and antiquated to detached observers.”

Neither the fathers of these great western churches, who went into a strange land for the sake of their Lutheran confession, nor those synods which struggled with one another for the sake of the truth, renouncing their mutual church fellowship and yet ever seeking it again, need suffer by comparison with their European contemporaries. Whatever their sins may have been, they have not become guilty of the sin of Erasmus who sought the peace of the Church at any price. That is why they have remained confessional churches, churches of the Augsburg Confession. As such they stand today—must one perhaps say: still stand?—before the Lutheran Church of the Old World. And just at the point where, because of their unmodern theology, they seem strange to us in their strict confessionalism, there they place the Lutheran churches of Europe before the solemn question: Are you still churches of the Augsburg Confession? You Churches of Sweden and Norway, of Denmark and Finland, of Saxony and Hanover, of Bavaria and Wuerttemberg, are you really still churches of the Unaltered Augsburg Confession? In what sense?

That is a question that must be faced, even though we may perhaps at first be inclined to ward it off impatiently as a question of unwarranted suspicion. It must be understood against the background of a great development that has taken place in the entire area of the national and territorial churches of Europe. The gradual loosening of the ties between the nations of Western Europe and their churches, which has been going on for generations, has not only altered the character of those respective nations, but also of the churches. The Church of Sweden is no longer what it was when the Swedish people were a Lutheran people, that is, a nation living in and by their fatherly heritage of Lutheran faith and Lutheran ethos. And what, beyond the name and certain legal entitlements, has the Church of Hamburg really still in common with that church in which lived an Aepinus and a Westphal? Neither the houses nor the churches nor the families exist any longer. But thereby the spirit has become a different one.

What this ancient European “establishment” leads to can perhaps be observed best in the case of the Church of England, the most imposing church ruin of Europe. In the 18th century with its Methodist movement it lost the people, and in the 19th century the intelligentsia and notable churchmen. Today it has nothing left but “society.” A tremendous amount of faithful work is being done in this church even today, with great missionary zeal and under real sacrifices. But this changes nothing. The bishops govern as for centuries past. That is, they believe they are governing, and they seem to govern. But in reality, others rule. Regardless of what church he may belong to, the Prime Minister designates the man whom the cathedral chapter after invocation of the Holy

Spirit, is to choose. The House of Commons vetoed the new version of the Book of Common Prayer, and for more than twenty years only a trick of law can now serve to confer legality upon the services of the Church. A civil court decided 100 years ago that the denial of regeneration in Baptism is in accord with the Confession. To this day the Church bows to this verdict.

It grants further recognition to this principle (*diese Instanz*). It instructs the Lutheran churches of the world that only a bishop consecrated in Apostolic Succession can be a rightful ruler of the Church, and it offers to furnish “the less perfectly established churches” with what is lacking to their perfection. For example, the Bishop of Hanover would at last become a legitimate Christian bishop in the sense of Anglican Church Law if the Bishop of Birmingham would lay his hands upon him. The fact that this bishop (Barnes) has for some decades denied about all dogmas of the Christian Church, and recently has advocated euthanasia, the murder of incurables, (“Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.”) detracts nothing from his episcopal perfection. Nor is there any ecclesiastical court that could call this “father” and “teacher” of the faithful to account. And the Church is silent. It suffers under the yoke. But for the sake of peace, of the people, of the nation—it bears it. It will bear it until the sounding of the trumpet of Judgment. Speaking of the old and venerable Randall Davidson, they said, “What will the Archbishop of Canterbury do when the last trumpet sounds? He will appoint a commission to investigate whether it was not perhaps the next-to-the-last trumpet.” In doing so he will be in the good company of all Princes of the Church, a truly ecumenical crowd! It has always been known that churches can die. But how hard it is for a church to notice that it is no longer leading more than a mere shadow existence, which is taught by contemporary Church History.

The transition of a church from real life to a mere phantom or shadow existence is recognizable by the fact that its Confession becomes a mere sham confession. That is particularly true of the churches of the Reformation. When in the 19th century some matter was in controversy in the Church of England, men would still ask what the Thirty-nine Articles taught, and how they were to be interpreted in a given point. For in this confession the Anglican Church of the Reformation era had declared its conception of the Gospel before the world. When in answer to a newspaper questionnaire the present Archbishop of Canterbury set forth “The Beliefs of the Church of England” in an official public statement (*Sunday Express*, September 14, 1947), the Thirty-nine Articles were no longer even mentioned. But with the confession of the Reformation there falls, as always, also the *sola scriptura*: “The Church of England believes that the Holy Spirit of God, the only final authority, speaks to us in Holy Scripture, in the tradition of the Church and in the living thought and experience of today.” If this should really be the belief of the Church of England, it would no longer be possible to recognize it as evangelical.

We note quite a similar development in other churches of Reformed antecedents. If in the 19th century the Evangelical-Reformed churches of Switzerland have invalidated their old 16th century confessions and thereby rescinded the confessional obligation of pastors and congregations, they have only seemingly preserved the authority of Holy Scripture. What does it mean when one pledges pastors to the true doctrine of Holy Scripture, and then must witness how they publicly oppose belief in a Triune God? Is this not as much as to say that the Church has indeed for many centuries believed that the Holy Scriptures teach a Triune God, but that we can no longer say the same? That here Scripture is obviously lacking in *perspicuitas*, and we must call upon the reason of some current interpreter (*des jeweiligen Auslegers*)? What would Calvin and even Zwingli have thought of such a church?

Let these examples of the apostasy of entire churches from the confession of their Reformation suffice. It would be too painful to be compelled to answer the question whether not some Lutheran churches also are already on the way to that state of affairs that we noted in the Church of England. Unlike the Anglican and Reformed churches, they have not yet declared the surrender of their Confession (*nominell noch nicht preisgegeben*). They still bear the name of churches of the Augsburg Confession, and want to remain that. But how long can they?

In a night session of the 1934 Confessional Synod (*Bekennntnissynode*) at Dahlem the undersigned said to Karl Barth: “You can certainly not expect that we should annul the Augustana in this hour when our church government has been deposed and our bishop is under arrest!” “Why not?” was the answer. The answer of a

Reformed churchman, who had that utterly different conception of an ecclesiastical confession that we discussed in our Letter III: “Why not?” Even within Lutheran churches men are asking whether the Confession is really so important after all. And must it absolutely be a Confession of the 16th century? Can one, as a prominent representative of the Bavarian Church liked to ask, fight the wars of the 20th century with 16th century weapons? And must the Confession absolutely be an *Invariata*? Is it not enough to speak of a “Church of the Lutheran Reformation”? This is the loophole discovered by some of the keen minds of Berlin. Is it perhaps possible to affirm “the Lutheran Confession” in a general way, while at the same time emphatically declining to specify certain confessional writings? Are those influential members of the Bavarian Church on the right track after all, who can not endure that one sets over against the constitution (*Grundordnung*) of the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKiD) those unambiguous statements of the Augustana or the Formula of Concord which cannot possibly be reconciled with it? Do they stand inside or outside of the Lutheran Church?

They have, indeed, never been able to invalidate or perhaps refute the theological and legal arguments of their confessional critics. They contented themselves instead with charging those who quoted the Confession and who desired to let it mean what it said, verbatim, with a “legalistic” conception of confessional writings, with “Rabbinism,” “Talmudism,” etc. But one who nevertheless held fast to a literal understanding of the confessional writings, and because of this obligation drew the obvious consequences with regard to the leaders of his church, had to experience that his further ministry was declared to be “no longer profitable,” and that this was made the basis for his removal from office (without even the semblance of an orderly procedure). What is more, further ministrations of the deposed were declared to be “invalid,” to have been “performed in opposition to ecclesiastical order,” and only recently the church members that remained faithful to the Confession were charged with a “breach of their confirmation vow.” What shall one say to this that a church which is a member of the EKiD, and in which all these things are done, still insists emphatically on calling itself “Lutheran”?

In spite of all trials and dangers, in opposition to frequent denials and manifold forms of confessional apostasy, the true Lutheran Church, by name as well as substance, exists only as *the Church of the Unaltered Augsburg Confession*. What does this mean? The experience of the Lutheran churches of America shall give us the answer to this question.

6.

According to its very nature the Lutheran Church, the Church of the Unaltered Augsburg Confession, is a *confessional church* in the strict sense, and can only exist as such. This is the unmistakable lesson of American Church History.

There would be no Lutheranism in America today if Lutherans had lacked the courage to present to the world, also and particularly to the Christian world, the *skandalon* of a confessional church. They knew from Holy Scripture that there is no heart that believes without a mouth that confesses. They had learned from Luther that faith comes by preaching, the preaching of the pure Gospel, and that the Church lives by this that the Word of God is taught in its truth and purity and the Sacraments are administered according to the institution of the Lord Christ. In spite of the religious and irreligious trends of their century they were not ashamed to identify themselves with the great dogmas of the orthodox church of all the ages, to the doctrines of the Lutheran Confessions, because they had come to recognize in them the true exposition of Holy Scripture as the inerrant (*untrüglich*) Word of God.

Thereby American Lutheranism became an enigma to its environment. For with the exception of a few remnants of old Reformed churches, American Protestantism is not familiar with a doctrinal Christianity. Only by means of this “rigid” (as the world calls it), of this firm and clear position, was Lutheranism able to maintain itself. There was no Lutheranism that was receptive to the influences of the world that was broadminded, liberal, and modern. There were indeed Lutherans that became liberal. But then they ceased to be Lutherans.

Really that was the case in Europe also. What makes men like Soederblom and Harnack look like Lutherans is basically merely a sort of nostalgia for the Lutheran Church. What is Lutheranism without the actual Incarnation, without the miracles that belong to the bodiliness of the God-man, without the Real Presence of the Body and Blood of Christ, without the Washing of Regeneration? There is no Lutheranism save

that which is “orthodox.” Anything else may be a beautiful, congenial humanitarianism and Christianity, but it is not Lutheranism. That must be kept in mind, even when one is with an all-embracing love gathering those who adhere to the Church of the Augsburg Confession. Our Church does not burn heretics or judge consciences. But it does concern itself about true doctrine and must concern itself about it. A Lutheran Church that would not do that, a Church that would not train and guide its pastors to this end, a Church that no longer shields its members against false doctrine, is no longer a Lutheran Church.

There is a connection between this doctrinal quality (*dogmatischen Charakter*) of the Lutheran Church and the fact that in the modern world it invariably functions as a foreign body. This by the way has been the case ever since Luther parted company with Erasmus. The great truths of Lutheran doctrine call forth the ridicule of the world: beginning with the Doctrine of Man and his Sin, which runs counter to all natural anthropology; continuing with the Doctrine of Justification, which implies the end of all natural morality; culminating in the Doctrine of Christ and of Salvation, of the Church and the Sacraments. But this alienism toward the world (*Weltfremdheit*) is the alienism of the true Church; this unreasonableness is the unreasonableness of the true Gospel.

This does not mean that Lutheran theology and preaching can not still make a deep impression upon entire nations and entire eras. It is quite possible that it can influence entirely different classes of men than has previously been the case. The description that W. Elert in his *Morphologie des Luthertums* gives of the impact of Lutheranism upon the nations has been called the story of what the Lutheran Church might have been. Who will say that the influence of Lutheran doctrine upon greater areas of mankind is forever past? Here the Lutheran Church is confronted with great tasks, tasks that should be undertaken without any illusions, yet hoping where there seems to be no hope. But we shall never be able to fulfill them in the manner imagined by a posthumous spiritual child of old Schmucker in the *American Lutheran* (October, 1949, p. 22), a layman who looks to the theologians to give “this sick old world ... a new ‘unaltered Augsburg Confession’ expressed in the language of 1949 and applying these great basic truths to the social, political, and theological problems of today just as this great historic document applied these same truths to the social, political, and theological problems of the sixteenth century.” In view of the ample experience that the Church has had with so many “new unaltered” confessions it will do well to stand by the old and leave to the live preaching of the day the matter of timely application. That does not mean, as we are often charged, that we are “repristinating” the theologians of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but that we are returning to the eternal truths of the Gospel which were still known at that time and have been forgotten since.

7.

The Church of the Augsburg Confession must be a confessional church also in this sense that it rejects every *union* not in accord with Scriptures, and for the Gospel’s sake maintains the confessional boundaries. This also is taught by the experience of the Lutheran churches of America.

One need only ask what would have become of the Lutheranism of America if it had followed the “American Lutheran” program and adopted the “Definite Synodical Platform.” Together with other “errors” of the Augustana (e.g., approval of the Mass, of private confession and absolution, Sabbath Law) there would have fallen the Lutheran doctrines of Regeneration by Baptism and of the Real Presence of the Body and Blood in the Lord’s Supper. Thus the decision (*Schritt*) of 1820 would have been rescinded and union with the Reformed made possible.

The fate of Lutherans following this line would have been the same as that of the Lutherans of the “German Evangelical Synod” of 1840, the daughter of the Evangelical Church of the Old Prussian Union. The confessional basis consisted of the Augustana, also the Catechisms of Luther and Heidelberg, where they agreed, while wherever they did not agree, Holy Scripture was to decide! That was meant as in the Prussia of the nineteenth century and about as is now the case in the areas of the German Union, particularly in what is called the Confessing Church (*Bekennende Kirche*). The fate of Lutheranism in this church (the Evangelical Synod—Ed.) is characteristic for that of Lutheranism in any union. In the course of the present century this

church has amalgamated with the Reformed, and since then is called the “Evangelical-Reformed Church.” Now it has entered upon a union with the Congregational Church.

Here for once we have a thoroughgoing example demonstrating the fate of all Lutherans who would remain Lutheran without the safeguard of a Lutheran church administration (*Kirchenregiment*), that is, outside of an autonomous Lutheran church. From this angle must be understood the determinedly anti-unionistic character of American Lutheranism thus far. With this the Church of the Augsburg Confession will stand or fall. It will fall in America if and whenever Lutherans turn back to the dream of a new “Definite Platform.”

In this respect one cannot escape a feeling of deep concern over many sectors of American Lutheranism. Blinded by the propaganda of Barthianism—not to be confused with much that is great in Barth’s Reformed theology!—and by the myth of the “Confessing Church” which is claimed to have defeated Hitler, they do not see that in themselves the old tragedy of Schmucker and of the “Evangelical Synod” is repeating itself, if they do not awake betimes. The tragedy is unavoidable unless a profound concentration upon the doctrines of the Church and of the Sacraments will open many eyes that have already been sorely blinded.

Probably it will be only the Lutherans of America who in the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) can put across the idea that only a determined declining of the Union can shape this new world alliance into a living and effective instrument of Lutheran ecumenicity. The eyes of our Scandinavian brethren are held in this respect because they have no Reformed Church in their lands, and the Union therefore does not constitute an object of personal experience for them. The decision concerning the confessional course of the World Federation is determined by the answering of some very concrete questions.

Unfortunately, since 1947 there has been a failure to make a concrete application of the *Confessio Augustana Invariata* (so solemnly recognized at Lund) when the entry of the German Lutheran *Landeskirchen* into the unionistic EKID was impending, and then was consummated. Lutheranism outside of Germany avoided answering the question whether this *Anschluss* was compatible with the Confession or not. If this silence should mean consent, then those who are responsible for it will be unable to withstand similar alliances in their own lands.

But even if one were inclined to assume that the leaders of a member-church of the EKID can still act as an administration that is committed to the Lutheran Confession, and be recognized as such, even then the World Federation must answer the further question, whether Lutherans belonging to a Union Church may in any manner belong to it, be it as groups, as congregations, or as individuals. It will be asked what then those poor Lutherans within a church of the Union should do? The simple answer is: Confess! If they have confessed over against Hitler, then they must now confess over against Niemoeller and Dibelius, even as Lutherans within the “Lutheran” *Landeskirchen* are also compelled to confess over against Meiser and Lilje. Of those “Lutheran” bishops who are tied up with the EKID it must be demanded that pastors and church members who for the sake of the Lutheran Confession are remaining outside of the EKID be given the opportunity to unite in a church organization of their own. Of the officials of the United churches it must be demanded that congregations with a Lutheran confessional stand and pastors with a Lutheran confessional obligation finally be given the freedom to band themselves together and to establish a Lutheran church administration that is bound to the Confession.

Should these well-founded requests go unheeded, in the “Lutheran” as well as the United member churches of the EKID, then pastors as well as congregations must enter upon a state of resistance. For the authorities of the *Landeskirchen* have no reason to refuse to comply with these demands. Even the outward difficulties seem insurmountable only because men are not willing to resolve to act in a truly confessional manner. And yet everyone must see—even in the Nordic countries, where it is apparently almost impossible to develop an understanding for the problems of ecclesiastical law created by the Union, it really should be recognized after some thought—that an ordaining official can require a specific confessional pledge from a candidate only if he himself affirms that Confession, and that the same official cannot pledge several different candidates to opposite Confessions, possibly even in the same ceremony, as was the rule in Germany. One should likewise be able to see that where an administration of a previously Lutheran *Landeskirche* is committed by decisions that run counter to the Confession, it can no longer be recognized by those who under no circumstances are ready to acknowledge these decisions or even to be indirectly co-responsible for them. For

the controversy between such church-administrations and these men who cannot follow them does not touch upon any question of discipline or outward order, but upon a critical function of the episcopal office, which is “to judge doctrine, to reject doctrines contrary to the Gospel.” (Augustana XXVIII.)

What are the implications of this official duty with regard to those who adhere to false doctrine? Is it possible to reject a controversial doctrine as anti-Scriptural and at the same time to recognize it as the “testimony of the brethren”? Can the officials of a church render the service of Ordination and Visitation to those who in answering the basic questions of church fellowship and doctrinal unity must emphatically contradict them?

Here, in the demand for a Lutheran church administration that will be obligated to the Confession, a demand voiced in the program of the General Ev. Lutheran Conference at its founding in 1868, — here lies the key for the solution of the problem of Union, also for the Lutheran World Federation. How real these problems growing out of the church unions of Germany are for the unification of Lutherans may be observed in all its fields of work. One should consult the informative, clear survey of Lutheranism in South America by Stewart Herman, *Lutheran World Review*, 1949. The Lutheran World Federation stands before the decision whether to stand fast on the issue of the confessional obligation of church administrations or whether to admit to membership also such as do not stand under a Lutheran church administration. If the latter be the choice, then it is traveling the way of the General Ev. Lutheran Conference, which as early as 1908 broke up over this issue.

In no way does this entire question of the (internal—Ed.) order of Lutheran alliances involve the ecumenical relationship with the other confessions. Just how the relationship between the various denominations of Christianity shall be inwardly reconstituted and outwardly rearranged, that is a separate question. Here also the Lutheran Church will need to give definite answers. These dare not be confined to the rejection of false programs. In our day one must reckon with the fact that there are among the denominations of Christendom certain matters that are commonly accepted, concerning which there is no controversy. There are also certain practical matters that need to be settled, for instance in world missions. As Lutherans, and particularly as such, we should each day, and in all the affairs of our church, be mindful of what our Confession, especially the Apology to Art. VII and VIII of the Augsburg Confession, states about the *Una Sancta*, this great chapter of comfort for all who are in danger of despairing of the Church. This may serve to bring to mind what was said on this score in the third of these letters. And even though the world will not believe us, we also want to mention again that whatever we may do for the preservation of the Lutheran Church constitutes a service rendered to all of Christendom. Where would American Protestantism be today if during the last century the Lutheran Church had not, like some lonely bird upon the rooftops, stood guard over certain great, indispensable truths of the Reformation! Missouri and Wisconsin have been sentinels for other churches also, and are that even today. Just as there is no struggle for true doctrine that is not at the same time a battle against the false, just so there is no project for the true unity of the Church that does not include the warding off of false union.

8.

The history of American Lutheranism has a third thing to teach about the question of what the Church of the Augsburg Confession really is: as a *confessional* church it must necessarily be a *confessing church*.

Now during the last few decades we in Germany have also learned a little about this, and it may be said that nothing has made so deep an impression upon our American brethren and brought us so near to them as the fact that among us also the Church was again becoming a Confessing Church (“*Bekennende Kirche*”). Just this bold testimony of individual confessors and the confessionally minded resistance of congregations and larger church groups to the totalitarian State have shown the world and the rest of Christendom that in German Protestantism the Church is not yet dead.

But we ourselves, who during those years of struggle were constantly stationed in some sector or other of the wide front and shared the experiences of battle at first hand, we are very sober in our estimation of what we have lived through, and we believe it would have been better had it been the entire “Confessing Church.” It must have been the unmerited grace of God that still permitted the Church to escape. For the same authority that God employed in order to lead some confessors to their freedom served, as an instrument of God’s wrath, to

bring about the imprisonment of equally faithful confessors. The *Kirchenkampf* with a happy ending is an invention of the London Radio. The New Testament with its deeply moving frankness also bids us to be sober by picturing the First Confessor of the Church as the author of the First Denial as well. And an old lesson of Church History demonstrates how rapidly confessors can become persecutors.

What made such a deep impression about a figure like Martin Niemoeller was his physical courage and honesty of Christian conviction. One was glad to see that there were still such men in times when there was so much lack of character, and people who had become complete strangers to the Church expressed their respect for the institution which could produce them. But did one in his confession also hear the confession of the Church? And behind this man of the "*Bekennende Kirche*," did men detect the confessing Church of Christ? Certainly this Church was there. But was it there in such a way, and was it discernible to a simple faith in such a manner as should have been the case?

As we ask this question it becomes clear why the Church has constantly stood for the principle that the cause makes confessors and martyrs, rather than the suffering. If it were a matter of the intensity of suffering or the heat of persecution, then "Jehovah's Witnesses" would be the martyrs of the (recent? —Ed.) past, and Roman bishops may become those of the future. In America the leaders of Communism consider themselves the martyrs of this age. The fact of martyrdom—in the sense in which the word is used among us—indicates nothing as yet about the right or wrong of a cause. Humanly speaking the act of confessing, the "confessional attitude," may be ever so honorable. But its Christian sense is acquired only because of the content of this confession. Socrates was no martyr, nor are the "International Bible Students." For Christian martyrdom is the witness concerning Christ, His person and His work, that is borne in a specific situation.

This brings up the question that our Lutheran brethren in America will be placing before us who have experienced something of the duty of the Church to be a confessing church. "*What is your confession?*" What was the confession of the *Bekennende Kirche*? —That Christ is the sole Lord of the Church? —Good, but what does that mean? The avowed purpose of the entire Papacy is nothing else than the sole rule of Christ in the Church and in the world. —Yes, but we mean it differently. We stand upon the *sola scriptura* of the Reformation. We mean it in the sense of Barmen. —Good, but how should Barmen be understood? In the Lutheran sense, or the Reformed? In what sense is Christ the Lord of the Church? As He who has purchased it with His own blood, and governs it with His Means of Grace, without visible manifestation of His regnum? Or as He who is also its Lawgiver, and whose kingly rule becomes apparent in their obedience to His Law? You say that everyone can take that as he likes. But you profess to affirm the Confessions of the Lutheran and the Reformed Church, and they speak on the subject. They also have something to say on the Presence of Christ, however in a sense that is completely divergent. On the one side one has the comforting article of the Real Presence of the entire Christ, according to His divine and His human nature. On the other it is lacking. Why have you nothing to say about these questions that are so decisive for the understanding of the Church, for the life of the Church? Why are you silent? Why are you silent about the Truth?

Such a discussion would have to develop if our American brethren should ask for the confession of the Confessing Church (*Bekennende Kirche*). For them it is still self-understood that the Church should be a confessing church, and that it is that if it confesses its Confession. This is done not only on special occasions, just as the Christian is a confessor not only in particular moments. To adapt a quotation from Harnack: Just as a poet is a poet even though he may not at the moment be making a poem, so a confessor is a confessor even though he may not just then be standing before the Gestapo. And the Church is a confessing church even though it does not happen to be writing a new confession.

The Church of the Augsburg Confession is what its name implies—namely a church which confesses the Augsburg Confession—if in its preaching, its cure of souls, its instruction it teaches and does what has been proclaimed as the Gospel of salvation in its Confession. If it does this, if this proclamation is made with the full authority of the Holy Ghost, with the powerful witnessing of a living faith, then the world will sense: Here there is a confessing church. It will not understand this confession. It may perhaps even reject this testimony most emphatically, but it will note: Here a confession is being made. This is not merely some pastor or professor. It is the Lutheran *Church* that is declaring its faith.

But if, as is unfortunately ever again the case, there is a discrepancy between the act and the substance of such a confession, if there are confessors without a confession, and a confession without confessors, what then will be the consequences? The first consequence will be one within the Church. We are revealing no secret if we state that the deepest distress of the Lutheran Church of Germany is that in the souls of so many pastors the confession and their confessing have become so widely separated from each other that it seems impossible that they should ever grow together. I am not thinking here of those prosperous worldlings in the ministerial office who have no conception of the Confession and have no idea of what it means and costs to confess. I am speaking of those who, being influenced by the theological and ecclesiastical movements of our times, have rediscovered many truths of the old confessions. These intellectual conversions seem to belong to the signature of our times. We do not wish to undervalue them. But if the conversion of the head does not lead on to a conversion of the heart, then woe unto such a man and woe unto the Church. Since the days of the Apostles the pious flesh has been the bane of every church. And there is surely a connection between the failure of the individual and that of church administrations and entire churches.

This fearful contradiction between the Confession of the Church, affirmed with such solemnity before the world, and its real confession, does not this constitute the most basic reason for the decline of the Lutheran churches? What solemn assurances of their unalterable confessional loyalty had not been given by all the church leaders of the last decades! What have we not at every church convention had to hear in the way of declarations about the inviolability of the Augustana, about the enduring validity of the confessions! And then compare with this the true state of affairs. What does the Lutheran *Landeskirche* of Bavaria or Hanover profess to teach about the Lord's Supper—and what do its pastors really teach? And what does the administration of the Bavarian Church do to bring about purity and unity of doctrine in the sense of Article X of the *Invariata*, or even merely to lead up to and facilitate it? What indeed can a church administration do that has permitted itself to be bound by the decisions of Treysa and Eisenach? What are the churchmen of Wuerttemberg thinking of when with their application to the Lutheran World Federation they sign an affirmation of the *Augustana Invariata*?

As a rule we theologians simply do not note the inconsistency anymore. We have adjusted ourselves to it. But one thing we must know: The world looks more sharply than we do. One should ask what those keen observers in Moscow think about our churches of Western Europe. They see that the churches no longer believe what they profess, and that the weakness of their faith acts corrosively upon the strength of the individual believer's conviction. So they are waiting for the day when the churches of Europe will stand there like the Eastern churches in the world of Islam, mere shadows of what they were in a great era of Christian faith.

For the Lutheran churches of America this situation spells the duty of serious self-analysis. In what sense are they still Church of the Augsburg Confession? To what extent have they already been drawn into the great process of the dissolution of confessional churches? Might it not be that Wisconsin today stands where Missouri stood 25 years ago, the Missouri Synod about where Iowa stood 25 years ago? And that the American Lutheran Church occupies the place where the United Lutheran Church stood at that time? And is the ULC perhaps gradually moving into the position where the Lutherans in the "Evangelical Synod" stood not more than a generation ago? These are questions that on the basis of our experience in Europe we are addressing to our brethren in America in order to make clear to them the vital significance (*die existentielle Bedeutung*) of this issue, what it means for a church when it designates itself as Lutheran, as Church of the Augsburg Confession.

9.

What are the practical objectives that all this presents for the program of Lutheran union?

The first and most important task is to awaken a new appreciation of the Confession among the Lutherans of the world. How will one bring together the Lutheran Christians of the world if they do not even want to be united? How shall there be a will for unity if one does not even know why one belongs together? Let no one deceive himself about this, a large part of the Lutherans of Germany simply do not want to live in a Lutheran Church at all. The Churches of Wuerttemberg and Oldenburg, for instance, have declined membership in the United Ev. Lutheran Church of Germany because they are hoping for a united Evangelical Church of

Germany, and upon the basis of its name and constitution look upon the EKID as a church, and consider wrong the interpretation that counts the EKID as a mere federation.

What sense then has the membership of these churches in the Lutheran World Federation? Certainly not this - that there was a desire for establishing a world wide Lutheran confessional church. On the contrary, this is considered out of order, and *Wuerttemberg* accordingly seems to have a declaration to that effect. In quite a number of the Lutheran Churches of Germany belonging to the United Ev. Lutheran Church of Germany and to the Lutheran Federation, pastors and doctors of theology are publicly and with much support denying that the ideal of a Lutheran confessional church is compatible with the church concept of the Augustana. They come close to the many pastors and laymen who, being members of some Lutheran *Landeskirche* more or less by chance, are really determined adherents of the Union.

Just how things stand in the Nordic churches with regard to this will for Lutheran Union, that is something about which one would have to hear the testimony of some one from over there. But it is certain that also in these Scandinavian churches there are at the very least strongly divergent opinions about the future organization of the Lutheran world and Protestantism in general. Under these circumstances a *consensus de unitate ecclesiae Lutheranae* would first have to be established. And perhaps the attempt to bring this about would end with the conviction that Lutherans cannot be brought into agreement concerning the question "*quid sit ecclesia Lutherana.*"

Though this may seem a deplorable state of affairs at first sight, yet it nevertheless need not discourage us. For every attempt to bring about a real unification of Lutheranism presupposes the dawning of a new ideology concerning the Church (*neues Kirchenbewusstsein*) in which true confessionalism and true ecumenicity arrive at their balance. As Lutheran theologians we know that all serious study of the Biblical doctrine of the Church brings us nearer to this goal. At the hand of Scripture the fathers of the Awakening became Lutherans. Only at the hand of Scripture can our generation become Lutheran again. And so the great practical undertaking will be to find and to study the Church in Scripture.

That can and should be done in the simplest village congregation. In this connection it will among other things be the function of theologians to provide guidance for sermons and Bible classes on the topic of the Church in the New Testament. This Bible study should then be supplemented by a study of the doctrine of the Church in Luther and the Confessions. But one should never fail to make the concrete application of the understanding gained by such study. Thus it must become clear to what extent the current conditions in the Church agree with the Scriptural doctrine of the Church, what the things are that may need to be changed, and at what points the Word of God today calls for a gathering, as well as where it compels a separation. That all of this can be done in such a manner that non-theologians can follow and join in the discussion is demonstrated by the great synods of America.

The second great understanding must be *the gathering of Lutherans wherever possible*.⁸ In all this the following principle should prevail: All existing associations should be preserved if they have proved themselves. No existing merger or conference should be given up unless replaced by a better one. Never should an existing union be abandoned in favor of one that is still to be created. Thus for example the Lutheran conferences and associations in the Union areas of Germany should either be preserved or, if they are unable to survive, immediately replaced by others. The same holds good for corresponding organizations in Lutheran territories. And yet this effort would make sense only if one does not shrink from the consequences of a clear and determined allegiance to the Lutheran Confession, if one is willing to risk the implied struggle, and does not simply accept as an unavoidable evil whatever may contradict the confession. —We shall express no opinion on

⁸ It may strike the reader that the procedure advocated by the author in the following lines is at least in some points in marked contrast to the course followed by our Wisconsin Synod in such matters, a course that is governed by the conviction that much of the current trend toward union tends toward ignoring or compromising rather than acknowledging and removing differences. But if one observes the emphasis that Dr. Sasse places upon the central statement of this paragraph ("not shrink from the consequences ... clear and determined allegiance to the Lutheran confession, ... risk the implied struggle, " etc.) then it becomes clear that we are not so far apart after all. But even if we would be mistaken as to the author's real meaning, we bring his views nevertheless, since we certainly always want to remain open to friendly criticism.

the prospects in other lands. But to one who stands on the outside it seems that an analogous procedure should be followed. One should, by the way, remember the approved rule in building a church—to begin from the bottom and not from the top. Special importance is to be attached to the assembling of theologians into working organizations, not merely in occasional meetings and conferences, but in permanent commissions. A sort of “Association for Lutheran Theology,” which would make the publication of Lutheran theological literature its chief concern, could substantially supplement all efforts for the unification of Lutheran Churches within the LWF as well as without.

A great part of the work of the assembling of Lutherans can certainly be done in connection with the LWF and be fostered by it. It is a fact, however, that as a result of developments in State affairs a part of the European churches is dominated by the designs of centralization and totalitarianism in church government. Over against this it should be brought out that in the program of unification there must also be room for the unrestricted work of independent individuals and free organizations. Even the Roman Church recognizes this need, and it is to be expected that the Lutheran churches will remain Lutheran in this respect also. It should therefore be considered how such independent work can be done, in some connection with the LWF, or independently of it, albeit in friendly contact.

For doctrinal reasons a part of the Lutheran churches is not in position to join the LWF. These reasons are to be discussed later. The present question is only whether the LWF and those who are outside of it must content themselves with merely occupying a parallel position, or whether they can arrive at a limited cooperation. The matter is brought up here as a problem that must be faced and discussed between those who are involved—without the least ill will, in all frankness and brotherliness. This is of course possible only if one can on both sides presuppose an honest determination to do what will aid in preserving the Lutheran Church and promoting its return to the Confession.

In this connection there should also be established a brotherly understanding to the effect that it is no insult when we observe the restrictions of close communion (*die Schranken der Abendmahlszucht*) even with regard to other Lutherans. The Church of Sweden can, for instance, be in communion fellowship either with the Church of England or with the Missouri Synod, but not with both. The Church of Bavaria can maintain altar fellowship with the Union—as it has in effect long since granted admission to the Sacrament (*Abendmahlszulassung*) to members of the Union almost everywhere (Prussia, Baden, the Palatinate), and has by its acceptance of the constitution of the EKID officially recognized this state of affairs, or even established it as an obligatory church order—or it can have altar fellowship with the Lutheran Free Church, but not with both. Members of Reformed and United churches will never understand this, but theologians of a church in which Loehe and Bezzel once worked, should at least still be able to understand it, even though they may now find themselves in the EKID, and thereby are standing in opposition to their own fathers. The same either-or applies, of course, also to those Lutheran Churches in the world which by their origin stand in special relationship to some group or center of German Lutheranism.

The third great task is the preparatory answering of *the question concerning the possibility of a future union of the still separated Lutheran churches*. In view of the grand ecumenical designs of our times such a union of all Lutheran churches seems to be a foregone conclusion. For if not even those churches can unite that claim to confess the Augustana *magno consensu*, then who can? And yet it seems that every other union is more readily conceivable than a union of all Lutherans.

What constitutes the obstacle? Here one must recall the fact that ever since the sixteenth century there have been two Lutheranism, in constant struggle with each other. They show up again and again under different names: as Gnesio-Lutheranism and Philippism in the sixteenth century, as Orthodoxy and Syncretism in the seventeenth. And since the days of V. E. Loescher and Franke there has been the controversy between Lutherans of the Confession and those of the Union, —in Prussia, in America as the conflict between the General Synod and the General Council, in Germany up to the debate about EKID and VELKD⁹, and up to the

⁹ United Evangelical Lutheran Church in Germany

present separation between the Lutheran *Landeskirchen* within the EKID and the Lutheran Free Churches outside of EKID and VELKD.

Is it perhaps as many think, that the Luther-Melanchthon dialectic, the issue of Confession *vs.* Union, lies deep in the very nature of Lutheranism? Or is it so that with its requirement for unity in the true doctrine the Lutheran Church must find this an intolerable contradiction, in other words, a cause for severance of church fellowship? It has been said ever again: Both “Lutheranisms” must bear with each other, even as Luther finally did bear with Melanchthon. But then there comes to mind the Formula of Concord that, after all, is for the churches the binding commentary upon the Augustana. No Lutheran church has ever officially rejected it, often though its doctrinal decisions have by design and in effect (*grundsätzlich und praktisch*) been ignored, despised, or invalidated—most recently by the Eisenach Resolutions of the German Lutheran *Landeskirchen* (1948). It has always been possible to be Lutheran *without* the Formula of Concord, that is, without having the FC as a part of the historically received and legally valid confessional documents of the old territorially limited *Landeskirchen*. But it has not been possible to be Lutheran *against* the Formula; nor could one establish free Lutheran Churches and thereby sever the old connections with the territorial churches without an unequivocal affirmation of allegiance to the Formula of Concord.

Particularly during this last decade the Formula has demonstrated its unifying as well as its separative power anew for the preservation of the Lutheran Church. To the extent to which the dreams of Asmussen and others were realized—namely of a universal communion fellowship within the Confessing Churches as it was proclaimed in Halle (1937) and Treysa (1947)—this was incontestable proof that the participating Lutherans had aligned themselves against the Formula of Concord. In so far as this program was met with an earnest opposition which was not merely based on church politics or on tactical considerations, but which was really concerned about purity of the Scriptural doctrine of the Sacrament and about unified Lutheran practice, the Formula of Concord proved itself a stout bulwark before which all the attacks directed at an anti-unionistic Lutheranism had to fail.

Because of their allegiance to the Confession there are here and there in the “Lutheran” *Landeskirchen* some who reject membership in the EKID as being contrary to the Confession and who are associated with their territorial church administration *in externis* only. Because of their allegiance to the Confession the unification of Free Church Lutheranism had to go forward since 1945/46, and at the same time a severance of church fellowship with those Lutherans within the EKID toward whom the Free Churches now take precisely the same stand as was formerly taken by the Breslau Free Church against the *Vereinslutheraner* in Prussia.

Because of this allegiance to the Formula of Concord the unification and the separation that we have briefly described here cannot be limited to the current debate in Germany. The same issues present themselves for instance in America. The American Melanchthon, old Schmucker with his *Variata*, cheerfully emerges again and again out every grave that has been dug for him. At the moment he even seems to be doing quite well. And the issue between the churches of the Synodical Conference on the one hand, and the American Lutheran Church (Iowa, Ohio, Buffalo) and the United Lutheran Church cannot simply be ruled out of existence.

In spite of widely varied efforts that are being made on either hand, there hangs over the entire Lutheranism of America as the final divisive issue the question of Modernism, of that neo-Protestant theology that seeks to combine liberal Bible criticism with a positive doctrinal system, which calls itself “neo-orthodoxy,” but is neither new nor orthodox. That is an issue that even Missouri, with all its great open-mindedness and willingness to come to an understanding, cannot ignore. And so also in America there will continue to be two “Lutheranisms.” Only by battle between these two schools of thought will the future of world Lutheranism be decided. Since this is a struggle about the same questions over which Christendom throughout the world is concerned today—the essence of the Church, the Ministry, the Word of God and Holy Scripture, the Sacraments—this controversy within the Lutheran Church need not be considered a mere tempest in a teapot, an intra-Lutheran outbreak of *rabies theologorum*.

This state of affairs can be disappointing only for the organization-minded churchmen (*Kirchenorganisatoren*), who have ready in their pockets the detailed blueprints for a Lutheran World-Church, and who believe that this church will be completed when eventually all who bear the *name* of Lutheran and who

have in some duly lawful sense received the Augsburg Confession will have been brought into one organization.

That is how men may organize their churches. God builds His Church another way.

VII.
Concerning the Freedom of the Church
(On the Problem of “Territorial Church” and “Free Church”)
(Translation by W. Gawrisch)

Dear Brethren in the Ministry:

1

An already completed letter on the question of the relation between the office of the ministry and the congregation will be deferred until next time because the circle of readers of these letters, who belong in part to the territorial churches, in part to the Lutheran free churches, has been deeply stirred by an event in which, the entire question of the Confession in the territorial churches becomes clear: *the deposition of colleague Friedrich Wilhelm Hopf in Muehlhausen by the Bavarian church authorities*. This is not the place to report the details of this removal from office, which ensues administratively in the form of a “transfer to reserve status.” The readers will find a number of pertinent documents appended to this letter. The basis given for this measure, which in its immediate effect robs Brother Hopf of his pastorate and of every pastoral function within the Bavarian territorial church, was that “fruitful labor within the territorial church is by no means assured” as long as he adheres to the position that when the Evang. Luth. Church in Bavaria joined the “Evangelical Church in Germany” (EKiD) it meant a violation of the Confession and thereby also of the constitution of the Bavarian territorial church. Furthermore, because he could no longer recognize the officials of the territorial church who were connected with the EKiD as confessionally sound Lutheran church authorities and was associated with them only *in externis*. Finally, because he demanded that the opportunity be given those pastors and congregation members who refused to join the EKiD “to form their own parishes under an independent leadership bound to the Confessions with the retention of all their rights in complete independence from the member churches of the EKiD.” The refusal to join the EKiD on principle as championed by Brother Hopf, and the condemnation of the joining of it, as of a decision which for a Lutheran church is contrary to the Confessions, is shared by many Lutheran pastors and congregation members, even though not all of them have stated so publicly. It is the position of all those who today still take seriously the pledge to the Augustana Invariata, and that means to the Augsburg Confession as it is expounded by the affirmations of the Formula of Concord. No theologian has as yet been found, and none ever will be found, who would even so much as try to bring that relation between Lutheran, Reformed, United, or non-confessional territorial churches which the constitution of the EKiD presupposes or establishes into harmony with the doctrinal declarations of the Lutheran Confessions. One can justify the EKiD by all kinds of possible arguments, by national interests, by Reformed or pietistic ideas of union, by practical motives, but never on the basis of the Lutheran Confessions. One can heap upon those Lutherans who adhere to the Formula of Concord all the insults which our church has had to listen to from the days of Zwingli and Calvin until the present and which it will hear in the future also. But that does not alter the fact—and every candidate of theology knows it—that there is no longer any room in the “Evangelical Church in Germany,” and therefore also not in those nominally Lutheran churches which belong to it, for the Luther who laid down his confessions of 1528, 1537, and 1544 with a view to the Day of Judgment, whereas Calvin presumably would feel very much at home in them.

It is a real tragedy of German Lutheranism, a development in which fate and fault flow together, that our territorial churches despite the ephemeral rediscovery of the Confession—or what was considered as such—no longer are able to take their Confession seriously and label those who still do as “rabbinites,” “fanatics,” “legalists.” In other territorial churches which have now been suffering under the curse of non-confessionalism for a longer time one will perhaps be more sensible to this tragedy than in Bavaria. But even a church

directorate so destitute of all theology as that at Munich will not rid itself of a feeling of uneasiness when it must either silence or depose those men who do not subscribe to the doctrinal affirmations of the Lutheran confessional writings in word only, while it tolerates the most glaring cases of false doctrine. If radical “communions” are tolerated in the territorial church, and if during the time of the Third Reich and of the confessional controversy one could very easily tolerate the “German Christians” among the pastors and put up with the fact that a number of them were connected with the church directorate only *in externis* or not even *in externis*, although their activity in the congregations ravaged by them was anything but “fruitful,”—why can the same territorial church now not even take under discussion whether and in what way a position independent of the EKID must be made possible for staunch Lutherans? Why does one not try to accord and to guarantee to confessionally loyal pastors and congregation members who refuse to join the EKID the same independence from the Bavarian church, which is a member of the EKID. An independence which is enjoyed by those Reformed congregations in Bavaria that are united in their own synod alongside the territorial church, which, as far as we know, have never belonged either to the DEK or to the EKID but nevertheless before the state enjoy the rights of the territorial church organization. To what has a “Lutheran” territorial church come if, in addition to those who deny the real presence, it can also tolerate a pastor in office and, indeed, in the very position which he has held till now, who in 1947 permitted himself to be re-baptized in a sect of enthusiasts? Obviously no one gets the idea that in this case “fruitful labor no longer can be assured.” And to what is this territorial church now coming, when it dares to remove by a peremptory bureaucratic decree without any disciplinary dealings or doctrinal investigation a pastor from his ecclesiastical and ministerial office who subscribes to Luther’s doctrine of the sacraments as well as to an administration of the sacraments in accord with the Confessions? Just on that account he was unable to follow the incumbent church authorities into the EKID, because he did not “voluntarily” leave his congregation, because he did not “voluntarily” go over to the Free Church. What has become of the church of Wilhelm Loehe and Hermann Bezzel if it expects, and by means of removals from office must see to it, that those leave Bavaria “voluntarily” who today defend those same things for which those fathers fought and suffered? We do not say all this for the sake of the Munich church directorate, whose provisional deputy on May 22, 1949, announced from the pulpit in Muehlhausen that henceforth any ministerial acts which might still be performed by Pastor Hopf would be “invalid” and would “not be recognized.” This one example proves that here a theological or even just a discussion on church law has become impossible. We are simply establishing all of these things because the deep-seated disease of Lutheranism of which we spoke in our first letter has here become manifest in a particularly crass and perceptible form. And if we at that time established that it is a matter of a disease which can be observed in all faiths, even so must we in this case recognize that the tragedy of Bavarian Lutheranism is really fundamentally the tragedy of all territorial church Lutheranism within and outside of Germany and beyond that the tragedy of the territorial and national church system. Can a Lutheran territorial church of the twentieth century really still be a confessional church? We do not here consider as a confessional church either a church in which the Confession is only *de jure* in force or a church that might assert of itself that it is “safe” against the constant danger of false or impure proclamation, against hypocrisy and insincerity. Such a church knows neither the New Testament nor the Augustana in relation to its existence on earth. By a confessional church we mean rather a church in which everything is done that Christians as faithful stewards of the mysteries of God can do to preserve the pure doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments according to their institution and to ward off heresy, where therefore the Confession is the norm for the action of ecclesiastical authorities not only in theory but in practice. That was surely also the import of the ecclesiastical controversy, as we understood it; that was to be its result for the evangelical Christians of Germany. We did not want the “violent century of the church,” which was proclaimed to us in 1926, or the abominable theology of *Als Ob* on which our territorial churches subsisted.

We wanted the church to free itself from bondage to extra-ecclesiastical powers in order to exist as a church independently and in the regal liberty of servants of Jesus Christ to perform that humble service for the world that its Master assigned to it. Instead, since 1945 the disgraceful *ruere in servitium* of 1933 has repeated itself. At that time “in the hour in which God is permitting our German nation to experience a great turning point in history” the Lutheran bishops and territorial churches for nationalistic reasons joined the “German

Evangelical Church” which, contrary to the Confession of the Lutheran church was decreed by Hitler but then collapsed under the wrathful judgments of God without any merit or worthiness on our part. Now, when God again permitted us to experience a turning point, the “Evangelical Church in Germany” was entered in upon, which is not a whit better than its predecessor. Again the action was contrary to the Confession—the theologians among the bishops are well aware of it. And why? Because the world wanted it. Because the poor, misled people would not have understood that suddenly there should no longer be a “united DEK.” Because the national interest of the German people, torn asunder into four zones, allegedly imperatively demanded the unity of German Protestantism, and theological scruples about the misuse of the term “church” must be set aside in the national and political interest. Because Lutheran churches are plainly also no longer able to repent. So that unworthy toying with the terms “church” and “federation” again began, which had started in July 1933 and had been sanctioned at Barmen. To the people the EKID is a church; to the theologians it is just a federation, but not to all theologians, *e.g.*, not to the Reformed, not to the Fraternal Councils (*Bruderraete*). When a parliamentary council plays with the concepts “federal state” and “federation of states,” one can put up with it. For that’s simply the way politicians are. One can not expect of politicians that they will follow the word of the Lord, “Let your communication be Yea, yea; Nay, nay.” But in the church it must still be in force, and if it is no longer in force, then the churchmen have become politicians. Perhaps they have long been that. And in truth not only in German Lutheranism, not only in the Lutheran churches. They probably are that to a far higher degree and with exceedingly greater success in the other confessional churches. At no point does the great process of secularization, which has laid hold not only of Christian nations but also of the churches of Christendom, become more clearly visible than in the victory of church politics over theology, of opportunism over faith, of the secular in the church over the spiritual. And the question arises: What is the cause of this? For only with a clear understanding of the causes of the disease can the recovery begin, if God wishes to grant His mortally ill Christendom in the West a recovery and to keep it from the fate of the oldest churches of the Orient.

2

We take a glance at the history of the ancient church. How did the church at that time lose its freedom? One will think first of its fate in the age of Constantine, which has always been understood to be the great turning point, and indeed already by its contemporaries. When Constantine after the victory at the Milvian bridge had become the sole ruler of the West, his order to the proconsul of Africa to grant state funds to the church was among the first of his governmental measures. For the Christians this was a “reparation” for the injuries that had previously been done them, for the state a self-evident step in its religious politics. For if the other cults received state aids, why should Christianity, now that it was recognized, be excluded from them? For the ancient state, religion was, of course, always a concern of the state, while, fortunately, it had not yet come upon the idea that the school could possibly also be so. To his great surprise the emperor then in the course of appeal received the counter-inquiry from the imperial bank of Carthage to which church the credit was to be extended since there were two churches in Africa adjoining one another in the same localities. The emperor thereupon had to establish or have established which church might now be the legitimate one. He never finished with this question, at least not in Africa, all the more so since after the conquest of the East the Arian controversy, which divided the church of the Orient, was added to the Donatist controversy. Thus the first “*Donatio Constantini*” was followed by that which might be called the “*Judicatio Constantini*,” the claim to the decision as to which was the true and which was the false church, which he as the savior of Christendom considered his right and duty. The state-church system began, that unnatural and therefore unsuccessful marriage between state and church in which both partners chafed one another to the point of soreness. From the lament of the Roman Christians of the fourth century, who longed to be out of the gilded basilicas and back in the simple emergency churches of the persecution era, continuing through the conflict between the sacerdotal and imperial power with its misunderstandings, its demoralizing consequences for both state and church throughout the entire Middle Ages, up to Luther’s solution to the Gordian knot in his doctrine of the spiritual ministry and the secular power, and the classic statement of the Augustana: “*Non igitur commiscendae sunt potestates ecclesiastica et civilis,*” the chain of witnesses who knew that the mixing of church and state must lead to the destruction of the church

and of the state is unbroken. But these voices did not succeed in carrying through their point of view in Christendom. Why not? Upon close examination one notes that even before Constantine the church was on the road to becoming a state-church, that not the state but the church desired that unfortunate marriage. Already in the third century Paul of Samosata and others appealed to the secular authorities in questions of dogmatics and demanded their *judicatio* even in matters of faith. And whereas the earliest church strictly forbade its members to appeal to courts of the world even in civil disputes between Christians (1 Cor. 6), the Roman church even in the third century did not hesitate to go to court with a secular corporation about a building site where it proposed to erect a church before a tribunal of the state which was persecuting (and between times also tolerating) it—one of the first masterpieces of jurisprudence of the Church of Rome. It did not yet even have a legal existence, but it won a lawsuit; it carried its demand through with the state. The Roman Church can afford to do this. For whatever else it may be, it is also something like a state that comes to terms with other states. It was that then, and it is that today. Rome is Rome. But the state-church which subjects itself to the *judicatio* of the state in order then on occasion to demand *judicatio* on its part over the state was in essence then already in existence, long before Constantine. By this is not meant the acknowledgment of the secular authority as an ordinance of God according to Rom. 13 and 1 Pet. 2. That is something altogether different. For “authority” and “state” are certainly not the same things. “Authority” is the divine institution that exists, more or less distorted, in the innumerable and entirely heterogeneous forms that are called states. It is a divinely instituted office in that human social structure, the state. Not the recognition of the secular authority and obedience to it, as far as it does not conflict with the obedience to God’s commandments, is the aberration of the church from that which it ought to be—that is certainly much rather God’s will and command—but the confusion and commingling of the governmental and spiritual offices and of their functions. In this commingling the church ceases to be church and the state ceases to be state. This commingling, however, is obviously not only a temptation which besets the state, but likewise one of the most severe temptations for the church of all times.

3

How severe this temptation is, is shown just by the history of those churches which came forth out of the Reformation. At no time did Luther’s great principle of the separation of the secular and spiritual power prevail in the Lutheran churches and states of Europe. That was one of the Reformer’s keenest disappointments, which he ever and again expressed in his well-known complaints about the princes and their lawyers. To a large extent the responsibility for this lies in the development of the state, which already in the late Middle Ages developed the territorial church government, which then became the springboard for the absolute state, which also laid claim to sovereign authority over souls. How little this development let itself be arrested by theological convictions and church dogmas the development of the Reformed churches shows, which never—with the exception of the churches and congregations “under the cross,” those therefore which were in existence illegally—were able to carry through in Europe their demands, based on their peculiar confession, for that which they considered the system of government instituted by Christ. As in the Napoleonic era Catholic Bavaria devoured the secularized ecclesiastical principalities with the same appetite as did Protestant Prussia, so during and after the age of the Reformation the Reformed princes dominated their territorial churches in exactly the same way as the Lutheran ones did. No church possessed the power to prevent this. Only worldly implements of force, which are not at the disposal of the church and which it also may not use, would have been able to do this. Only one thing the church should not have done. It should not have tried to establish and to justify theologically the wrong done to it. But that’s the way theologians are. For every kick dealt them by some cavalryman’s boot they forthwith have a theological proof. Whether it is St. Bismarck, without whose icon a Lutheran parsonage in Germany was hardly conceivable, or the Fuehrer, who according to the official papers and agendas of the church was God-given, whether it is the Supreme Council of Basel or Queen Elizabeth in the sixteenth century, the English Parliament which did not sanction the new Book of Common Prayer of 1549, or the Danish Reichstag which decides upon the admission of women to the ministerial office, whereupon a bishop is also immediately found who performs the ordination of women candidates: always the church accepts the abrogation of its freedom with gratitude and enthusiasm. It sells the birthright of its royal freedom for the mess

of pottage of some nebulous national missionary possibilities. That a synod could also for once have a president who does not simultaneously play a political role and by means of his political position shore up his power in the church—naturally only for its own good—and by means of his ecclesiastical position his political power—naturally in the interest of the public recognition of Christianity, —this thought has till now occurred to no one in Evangelical Germany. That’s the way it was in Prussia. That’s the way it is in Bavaria. And that’s the way it seems to be at every decline in history until the Day of Judgment. The church succumbs to the charms of whatever beast happens to arise out of the abyss if only it speaks in a somewhat religious vein.

4

How profoundly this temptation determines the life of the church shows itself even there where a separation of church and state exists. To the most deep-seated ethos of the American people belongs an instinctive rejection of “*Cuius regio, eius religio.*” If anywhere in the world, then it is in the United States, whose best immigrants once sought out the new world for the sake of religious freedom, that one finds a deep aversion to the mixing of the church and state. It took several generations, however, before this principle could be carried through. For in the New England states there was still for a long time a state-church with the deprivation of rights and persecution of those of other faiths like the Baptists and Catholics. But is it not positively astounding how quickly the Americans as an occupation force have adapted themselves out of inner necessity to the methods of European state-church politics! Of course, they have also brought with them their idea of tolerance, and for that one must be thankful to them. But alongside stand the very doubtful Old World ideas of church politics which they have appropriated according to the principle: “*Victus victori legem fert.*” From Treysa I in the year 1945 up to the synods of EKID in Eisenach (1948) and Bethel (1949) no large ecclesiastical conference met without representatives, and indeed very friendly and well-meaning representatives, of the military government. And these were not only silent listeners who left it up to the Germans how they arranged their church affairs. The DEK came into being by a decree of Adolf Hitler. The legal basis of the EKID was a resolution of the Allied Control Council introduced by territorial bishop Wurm. By this resolution it was legally called into being before a German Gremium (committee) could do so. The gentlemen of the military governments, particularly of the American, as strangers in the field of state-church law, did not achieve clarity on the far-reaching import of these things. It was certainly well meant when the friendly Lutheran professor of theology, whom our religious press designated as President Truman’s delegate (by what right we are not able to say, but a correction never followed), after the meeting at Trysa designated the resolutions, which for the Lutheran church were unbearable, as the work of the Holy Ghost. We do not want to dispute with him about that. But we must, nevertheless, express our astonishment at the fact that the men of the “Confessional Church” were as proud of this declaration as the fathers of the ancient councils when the representative of the Byzantine emperor affirmed that this or that resolution was inspired by the Holy Ghost and received the imperial *placet*.

We know that none of the Americans, and none of the American theologians either, who came at the behest of their government and helped poor Germany with generous, embarrassingly generous gifts of love even so much as in a dream thought of interfering in the inner affairs of the Evangelical churches of Germany. But the principle of the strict separation of church and state as it prevails at least in theory in America was violated here with fateful necessity in favor of the European state-church law, particularly if one thinks of the filling of the ecumenical patriarchate by the Orthodox Archbishop of New York and of the relations between Washington and the Vatican which are constitutionally not entirely clear. And again the action of the state is illustrated and accompanied by the action and conduct of the churches. To say it in plain words: The rejection of the confessional principle on the basis of political-rationalistic grounds in favor of the territorial church principle in Germany would not have been possible if the Lutheran churches of America had not in practice agreed to the abrogation of the rule which constitutes or until now has constituted the legitimate basis for the existence of a Lutheran church in America: “Lutheran pulpits for Lutheran pastors, Lutheran altars for Lutheran communicants.” In as much as the American churches have not only observed the European-German development but have expressly sanctioned it, they are not able to evade the necessary consequences for their own teaching and life. They have taken a position there, and just there, where they were silent. They will have

to bear the consequences in their own land, even if they as pragmatically minded persons at first do not notice that here dogmatic decisions have been made which will also determine their church life in the future, because all church life and activity is ultimately dogmatically determined. The question is only if it is a good or a poor dogmatic. The poorest is, however, always one that is not supposed to be dogmatic at all. So in the classical land of the separation of church and state *Cuius regio, eius religio* has not yet died out. It is experiencing a revival, unimaginable in the nineteenth century and even in the first stages of the Russian revolution, in distant parts of the present day world, above all in the East where under the cover of a theoretically radical separation a new state-church system is arising.

5

The surprising thing in the development of the American church, the appearance of a mixture of church and state which is contrary to the principles of the American constitution and yet brought into painstaking formal agreement with it (manifest, e.g., in the queer hymnbook for the army and navy, where a Protestant order of service is prescribed in intimate conjunction with the adjoining Catholic and Jewish ritual), is this however, that finally it is not the state but the churches (with a few small exceptions) which are preparing the way for this commingling. It is extraordinarily instructive that this is observable in the churches of America, which are certainly the largest “free churches” of the world, independent of all state supervision, existing without state subsidy and dependent on the free-will offerings of their members and congregations. Was the free church system (*Freikirchentum*), the system of churches wholly independent of the state, the existence of independent churches (*freier Kirchen*) perhaps a passing phenomenon of the nineteenth century, of the age of liberalism? (The distinction between “*Freikirche*” and “*freier Kirche*” is a linguistic trick that is possible in no other language than German and which even for this reason ought to be abandoned.) So it seems, particularly when we consider the Lutheran free church system of Germany, which stems from the nineteenth century and to a large extent still carries the shells of that time. No one can consider the confessional struggle of the Prussian Lutherans since 1830 or the severe and tragic history of the Hessian Nonconformist Church (*Renitenz*) without being moved.

To comprehend the significance and extent of the free church system of the nineteenth century one must adduce in addition the parallel cases from abroad: Vinet’s battle for the *Eglise libre*, the Dutch separation, Kohlbruegge’s congregation in Elberfeld, the Tractarian Movement in England, and the rise of the Scottish Free Church since 1843. One can understand that the babble of voices on the Glasgow market fell silent when the news of the decisive vote of the General Assembly arrived. Two fifths of the Scottish clergy, 470 pastors, together with the majority of their congregations, on May 18, 1843, left the national church, the church buildings, parsonages, and benefices. With their families they faced destitution, but in spite of all “mission opportunities” they could not submit to the creedless National Church because they had to choose between human ordinances and the Word of God. And within a year five hundred new churches were standing in Scotland. Of the pastors none went hungry. But the new church became the conscience of the state-church. Only within our time have they been reunited. This division, branded as treason against the state by the opposition, was the salvation of the Scottish church.

Our free churches never attained such size or importance. But one thing they can claim for themselves: They too became the conscience of territorial church Lutheranism. In all smallness and weakness they prevented the new Prussian provinces from being devoured by the Union in 1866. And their bold testimony made the way into a national church, as it was planned already in 1870, impossible for the Lutheran territorial churches. And as they have since 1933 refused to concede to the DEK the character of a church and refused to join it, so today they stand with their testimony concerning that which the Augustana on the basis of Ephesians 4 says about the true unity of the church as a warning to the EKID and its VELKD subsidiary and under sacrifices of which those in the territorial churches have no conception, with human fortunes, yes, with whole human existences at stake bear testimony to the big “*satis est*” of the Augustana: “*Et ad veram unitatem ecclesiae satis est consentire de doctrina evangelii et de administratione sacramentorum, nec necesse est ubique esse similes traditiones humanas, seu ritus aut ceremonias ab hominibus institutas.*” Their confession

does not consist in great proclamations, in resolutions and paper, but in their presence, which is indeed the life of poor, sinful men, but at the same time the existence of congregations which know that the church draws its life not from its political influence, not from its relations to the state and its financial aid and contributions, but altogether solely from Christ's Word and Sacraments and from that which the Word and Sacraments effect in the congregation. They are a weak, but in their weakness not to be ignored, proof that there is such a thing as a really free church. And if the councils of the territorial churches were not so immeasurably stupid, they would consider these free churches their best allies instead of letting them be reviled as sects, and they would endeavor to arrive at a genuine *modus vivendi* with them.

6

For on this score one must be clear: The day of the old system of territorial churches in Germany and Europe is approaching its end. The momentary, relatively good relations to the state cannot mislead one on this point. That can and will change very suddenly. For the state gives nothing gratis. It can never suppress its beast of prey character, which it usually reveals in its coat of arms. And *Cuius regio, eius religio* is today everywhere experiencing its revival. The deeper reason for the irresistible dissolution lies in the growing disparity between the churches' claims that they embrace the whole people, and the actual attitude of the people. Even in the most church-minded regions of Europe those participating in church life do not exceed one third of the number counted as members of the church. What would happen in Germany if the principle were introduced which is in force in England that church taxes are not collectible? We are not even thinking now of those regions of Germany where church life has virtually wholly died out, above all in central Germany, communities with congregations where Sunday after Sunday the services are dropped because no one comes any more or where at least neither the men nor the youth are reached by the church. The millions in these regions appear, however, in the statistics as Lutherans, their parishes, which when seen in their true light are simply spiritual police districts (for one automatically becomes a member of them by reporting to the police), are treated *de jure* as Evangelical congregations. How long will this highly untrue system, this relic of a great history of the church be able to maintain itself? This refers not only to Germany but to England and the other countries of Europe as well. It is moving to see with what mighty zeal the churches are devoting themselves to mission work among the estranged ranks of society. Christian youth, student congregations, evangelical lawyers, yes, even Christian dentists are gathered into Evangelical academies. New missionary methods are devised. They missionize, train, and organize. But there are times when just those men who have dedicated their whole life to this intensive work admit to themselves how little the results correspond to the expended effort. We must confess: All of the attempts to convert the large and small parishes into living congregations have failed. They had to fail because the congregations, as they are today, no longer have any strength to form real congregations. With terror the church authorities see the sects blossoming out. There, countless people find a substitute for the congregation, a pseudo-congregation. Why does one not make it possible, at least in the large cities, for lonely persons, hungering for genuine fellowship, to find Lutheran congregations? A Reformed person who moves to Berlin may join a Reformed congregation. A Lutheran who transfers to Berlin must join one of congregations there; but since he was never instructed on this possibility in his territorial Lutheran home church, he belongs, without knowing or desiring it, without further ado, as a result of his reporting to the police at the inhabitants' registering bureau to the geographically defined Union parish of the district in which he happens to live, even if it is the parish of the Zwinglian congregation. And that's the way it is throughout Germany. A Bavarian official who was transferred into the Bavarian Kaiserslautern thereby became a member of the Palatinate Union without knowing it or wanting to; as a result his children were instructed and confirmed as Reformed or United. Should the family later move to Nuernberg or Munich, it would by virtue of its registration with the authorities belong to a Lutheran congregation. One's religious convictions are no longer taken into account in such matters.

In the long run this system is not tenable. Moreover, it can not be defended by an appeal to the renowned "*Volkskirche*." Even the fact that one can not translate this expression from the barren theologians' dialect of the nineteenth century (coined according to our knowledge by Wichern) into the language of any other cultured nation should awaken doubts as to its theological legitimacy. Every deeper theological reflection, if not even the

consideration of the reality of church life, shows that it is untenable. There are territorial churches. There are national churches. But with what right does one designate the Lutheran diaspora in strongly Catholic surroundings as “*Volkskirche*?” And how will one justify an essential difference between free church and *Volkskirche*? The Lutheran church in Wisconsin and in parts of Michigan and Minnesota is more a concern of the people, also in public life, than in Thuringia and Saxony. And that one should be born into the *Volkskirche* is nonsense, at least as far as Lutheranism comes into consideration. It is at all events necessary that the territorial and national churches of Europe, instead of ever and again burying their heads in the sand in the face of the reality of life, view the facts before it is too late. That the churches of Hamburg or of Saxony are Lutheran churches is a fiction, not to use a worse expression. Bavaria and Hannover are no longer such either in spite of remnant of Lutheranism that survives in them in a similar manner as the Gospel does in the Roman church. That is a bitter acknowledgement, to which these churches must first laboriously strive to come. Even though the older generation may never comprehend this, a generation is growing up in these churches that will not put up with these fictions any longer (to which we do not reckon the great number of candidates reared in the theology of *Als Ob*). And that is true not only in Germany but in England and in the northern countries as well.

7

But as soon as this is generally recognized, then the cry for the freedom of the church will be raised in this century with new vigor. And this cry will at the same time be the cry for the genuineness and credibility of its confession. We do not claim that our Lutheran free churches have solved the problem, as they themselves most likely have always been ready to admit, even as their fathers did. For that which has been neglected for centuries cannot be made up in a few generations. Our Lutheran free churches are in their own estimation only miserable emergency churches alongside the great cathedrals of the territorial and national churches. But in a house of God it is not its size or the splendor of its appointments which makes the difference, but that which is proclaimed in it and who is worshipped in it. Neither do they think of exalting themselves above other churches in the Novatian or Donatist way. As Lutheran churches they know that they are a little band of wretched sinners. They make Luther’s words to Henry VIII of England their own: “Because of my person and life I am willing to humble myself before every one... For I deserve nothing for my life but the pit of hell, that I know for certain, if it be judged strictly... But because of my office and teaching ... let no one expect patience or humility... For in that respect they should consider me a living saint.” (WA 23:29). And because they know that, therefore they are not sects which the people of the territorial churches might win over for themselves, but Lutheran churches, which can not look on idly at the death of the Lutheran Confession as the correct exposition of the Holy Scriptures, which place the simple theology of Yea, yea, Nay, nay over against the theology of *Als Ob*, which is a senseless decoration of display windows. Our Lutheran free churches want nothing else, and those who are still struggling with the utmost earnestness of Lutheran conscientiousness within the territorial churches to have the Confession taken seriously and for the freedom of the Confession want nothing else, but that the church of the Lutheran Reformation should not succumb to the temptation which is the big temptation of the church from the days of the apostles until the Day of Judgment: the big temptation to betray the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the world, unintentionally and unwillingly, and yet with so much the more terrible consequences. Simply and solely this purpose is served by those battles which the confessional Lutheran church must wage today and by the sacrifices which are brought in this regard.

* * * *

May He, however, whom we today in a special way confess on this Ascension Day as the One who has ascended into heaven and is sitting on the right hand of the Father, who shares in the omnipotence and omnipresence of His heavenly Father, strengthen us all in the battle and in the work for the Lutheran church, and may He father His Christendom in the one true faith! Let me close with the ancient verse in which our

fathers gave expression to their longing for the peace and freedom of the church and which Valentin Loescher, now deceased for over 200 years, so gladly cited:

Grant that the Truth retaining,
In freedom e'er remaining.
To Thy name we sing praises.
Amen, Lord Jesus, bless us,
Bound to you by sincere ties—

Hearty greetings from your
HERMANN SASSE

V

Ecclesia Orans

(Translated by Ralph Gehrke)

Dear Brethren in the Ministry:

1

Before we continue that discussion of the Means of Grace that we began with the Doctrine of Holy Baptism, allow us to speak about another question, which today concerns Christendom of all confessions, the question concerning *the Prayer of the Church*.

This question expresses itself in the great liturgical movements, which, as is the nature of such movements, run through the Christianity of all peoples and of all confessions. The liturgical movement of the Roman church, which from beginnings about 1910 suddenly broke out after the First World War into a mountain torrent, until it was guided into quiet channels and ecclesiastical control by the encyclical *Mediator Dei* of 1947; the corresponding strivings for a real renewal of liturgical life in the Lutheran churches of Germany and of the world, whose tragedy lies in this that they joined the great confessional movement of our time either not at all, or too late; and finally the fact that the world of Reformed churches—liturgically sterile except for Anglicanism—has likewise been gripped by such movements; all of this points to the fact that here we are dealing with a basic phenomenon of life in the very depths of present-day Christianity.

One must, so to say, shake his head in amazement, when one sees such things as the following: namely, that at the very same time that Roman Catholic churches were replacing the high altar by the Ancient Church's old Christian *mensa*, behind which the priest celebrated mass, facing the people—a practice since forbidden by the *curia*—at that very same time in the Reformed churches of Scotland the Scoto-Catholic Movement was restoring the high altar, which their own reformation had once abolished. And when even that most un-liturgical German church, the church of Wuerttemberg, in which every Amen by the congregation used to have to be defended against the suspicion of Papism and in which consecration at the celebration of the Sacrament of the Altar is to my knowledge still forbidden, when even that church has experienced her own liturgical movement with a restoration of the Gregorian choral, then there must be something like a revolution taking place in Christendom.

And though many of the happenings in the liturgical movement are questionable, and though the movement is often dilettante and un-theological: still behind the movement there lies hidden Christendom's own deep longing to come forth from the misery into which she has fallen through the modern secularization of her life. In fact, she finds herself unable to withdraw herself from the necessity of larger and smaller conferences. Even as the Ancient Church had to use the methods of work and the communication facilities which Antiquity provided—the “holy” ecumenical synod was after all originally a very profane institution—likewise the church of today must make use of the technical achievements of our time. The great August Vilmar has called them the earthly basis for our perceiving the one, holy Church.

But she must not forget where her peculiar tasks lie. Now it is true, under circumstances the Church too can confer with the State through its Secretary for Foreign Affairs (*Aussenminister*). But she must be clear on this: that with her resolutions, announcements, and proposals she makes no impression on the world. All that disappears in the wastepaper baskets of governments this side and that side of the iron curtain. Only a few church politicians are making an impression on the world today, not because they are churchmen, but because they are politicians. This is something the Lutheran churches of the world still have to learn, although they might have learned it from Father Luther, who wasn't nearly so naively unacquainted with the world (*weltfremd*) as many often say. The Lutheran churches are still even now sunning themselves in the delusion that they have something to expect from the world other than the dear holy cross, which all those must carry who proclaim God's Law and the Gospel of Jesus Christ to mankind. But this delusion will soon disappear.

Our American brethren in the faith will also learn this through painful experiences. Instead of setting up a church bureau in Washington, it would have been better if they had equipped some place somewhere in the solitude of their immense land where prayers would be made day and night for their government and for the peace of the world. For the Church of Christ is not a church that is always busy holding conferences, nor is she a church that does business with politicians and with the press, but she is *ecclesia orans*, and that is, so to say, her main calling. Either she is *ecclesia orans*, as indeed she revealed herself already in the catacombs, —or she is nothing.

And now let no one say that prayer is self-evident, that, after all, we have services once or twice a Sunday. No, that prayer of the Church, which we meet in the New Testament everywhere the life of an ecclesia is spoken of, is unfortunately not something self-evident. Or who would maintain that prayer is made in our Lutheran churches today with a fervor that even approaches that with which the church of the New Testament prayed "without ceasing?" (Acts 12, 5.) Where today is Luther's mighty praying with its visible answers? Where is the prayer of those pious people, of which Luther spoke in his explanation of the Lord's Prayer in the Large Catechism, the prayer that in those days held the Devil back from destroying Germany in its own blood? Yea, despite all the criticism which the Reformation has directed at the mumblings of Catholic prayer and which the modern liturgical movement within the Catholic church undertook independently from an entirely different viewpoint, —must we not finally put the question as to where, in which church, prayer is being made with more fervor and perhaps also with better training—for prayer too must be learned—whether in the Catholic church or in the churches of the Reformation?

Think only of the rosary, which is rightly a rock of offense to us, even as it has also been sharply criticized by Catholics themselves. Is not perhaps the fundamental mystery of divine revelation, the miracle of the incarnation of the eternal Son of God, still much better preserved in it than in the prayer-poor or prayer-less Protestantism of our day? Is not a Catholic church, where the worshippers go in and out all day long, to be preferred to a Protestant house of God whose doors are closed tightly throughout the week, only because Calvin and the old Reformed people feared that the cult of the saints and worship of the Sanctissimum—which, however, was no longer present—might secretly still be continued? Where else then should poor Christians still pray? That praying in one's chamber which is lauded so much—in a questionnaire of Berlin's working class children twenty years ago Guenther Dehn found that in many cases the passage Matthew 6, 6 was one of the few fragments which still stuck after confirmation instruction—that praying in one's chamber has always existed only in connection with prayer in the church. And remember: how many people today have a chamber for themselves?

Is not the great crisis of modern Christianity, of which we spoke in our first letter, perhaps connected with a prayer-crisis? The Ancient Church entered a world in which prayer was taken for granted among Jews and Gentiles. If the nine-fold *Kyrie eleison* of the Roman mass was really taken over from the cult of the Sol Invictus, as a Catholic scholar, the late Odo Casel, supposed, then that is an example of the fact that the ancient pagan world was in her way a world of prayer. The Church of the present day lives in a world which no longer prays and which can no longer pray. One has only to recall Kant's famous dictum that the more a person progresses in good (*im Guten*), the more he begins to stop praying. Has the lack of prayer in the modern world

influenced the Church more deeply than we are inclined to believe, —even as the incapability of modern man to understand sin has influenced Christendom so deeply?

So much the more promising it is then, when everywhere in Christendom people are concerned about real prayer. For in this concern there lies no attempt to get out of the duty of practicing Christian love over against the world, but rather a striving to find the way back to the One Thing Needful, without which the Martha-service of social work and of “political theology” must become a worldly business. In this concern lies rather the desire of the Church to be again the Church of Christ and not to be only another agency for the general improvement of modern mankind. And that concern addresses itself not to the professional liturgical scholars, who are able to do nothing else but prepare ever new liturgical movements, but crying: “Lord, teach us to pray!” it directs itself to the greatest man of prayer (*Beter*) of all, to the praying Son of God.

2

When the New Testament speaks of *ecclesia*, it thinks, first of all, of the holy people of God of the End-Time, the true Israel, that is assembled for divine worship. That doesn't mean that only those who are assembled belong to the Church. Those people who are absent for valid reasons (remember: at that time there was no legal Sunday as yet), to whom the “Eucharist,” the consecrated bread, was then sent at home, also belong to the Church.

There are many types of gatherings mentioned in the New Testament: first, the Service of the Word (*Wortgottesdienst*) taken over from the Synagogue, in which the Word of God was read and then proclaimed in the sermon; second, the Service of Prayer, which followed immediately after the Service of the Word; third, the Eucharist, that is, the celebration of the Lord's Supper; and fourth the Agape, the Feast of Love, which had earlier been combined with the Communion Service and then later, when the other three forms of the service had coalesced, continued as a special celebration. In all of these services prayer was made, especially in the Eucharist, the Great Thanksgiving, as the Communion Service is called after its main prayer, the most solemn prayer of the entire Christian divine worship. We must at some later time speak of this prayer, which was closely connected with the Sanctus and with the Words of Institution, when we consider the Lord's Supper.

Before the Eucharist there was once a portion of the divine service of which only some fragments have been preserved for us in the great liturgies of the East and of the West; it was the Church's Service of Intercession (*Fuerbittegottesdienst*). While anyone, even pagans, could take part in the Service of the Word as also in its prototype in the synagogue—it was, we should remember, the great mission opportunity of the Ancient Church—before the Service of Prayer all those who were not baptized, even Christian catechumens, had to leave the room. “The doors, the doors!” this call was heard at its beginning. No heathen, no Jew, no catechumen could be present when the *Ecclesia*, the holy people of God, brought their concerns before the countenance of God.

Unfortunately only remnants of this Service of Prayer have been preserved, in the East, *e.g.*, in the great Act of Prayer of the liturgy of the Coptic Jacobites which introduced the Mass of the Faithful, and in the West in the Good Friday Bidding Prayers of the Roman Agenda (according to Pope Celestine I at Augustine's time these prayers originally introduced every celebration of the Eucharist).

What is peculiar to this prayer-part of the service is the continual participation of the congregation. First, every time, for each intercession, the content of the particular prayer is fully announced together with the invitation: “Let us pray.” Then follows the call for all to kneel, and then the silent prayer (a *Kyrie eleison* might take its place, however). Then the congregation rises, and there follows the actual prayer of the priest. Thus all of Christianity's concerns are brought in prayer to God. Prayer was made for the Church, for the pope (remember that in Alexandria as well as in Carthage the Primas also had the title of pope), for the bishops, for priests and deacons, and for all other orders of the Church, among which also the laity was considered an order in the Church. Prayer was made for the Emperor and magistrates, for the army, for the health of men and (in Egypt) of animals, for good weather and for harvest, for the catechumens, for the heretics and schismatics, for the unbelieving Jews (*pro perfidis Judaeis*), that God might convert them. In short, there is hardly a concern, which is not included therein, and always in such a manner that the congregation not only hears the prayer that

is spoken at the altar, but also prays it at the same time. Here there are no passive listeners, but only active, praying participants, only the *Ecclesia Orans*, which is alone with its Head as the Body of Christ and in this sense, prays “in the name of Jesus.”

3

Two things are noteworthy about this praying of the Early Church. First, *the activity of the congregation* is noteworthy. All churches of the modern world, including the Catholic church, suffer from the fact that prayer, also when made in church, has to a greater or less degree become private prayer. The restoration of the *ecclesia orans*, of the congregation that prays together, was the goal of the Catholic liturgical movement of our days, a goal that has not been reached. This movement protested against this that the congregation that was gathered for divine worship, if carefully scrutinized, was a group of individual Christians, each of whom conducted his private devotion.

Their attempt to change this and to return to the *ecclesia orans* of the beginning had of necessity to suffer shipwreck on this fact that in spite of all liturgical training the individual Christian could not understand the prayers which were spoken at the altar in a foreign language, and therefore could not really pray along with the minister. Hence the demand for a Mass in the mother tongue or, to speak more precisely, the elevation of German, English and other modern European languages to the rank of liturgical languages. This demand however, has now been pushed back far beyond the foreseeable future, even though its fulfillment is legally possible; for the *Codex Iuris Canonici* does not prescribe mass in the Latin language, but only in the language of each individual rite (c. 819).

Behind all of this there lies hidden, of course, a deeper phenomenon. The restoration of the “Congregation” and of the rights of the congregation is impossible in the Roman church, since Catholic canon law has destroyed and abolished the concept of the congregation (the “Rights of Persons” in the CIC, to be sure, recognizes besides the clergy and the religious also the laity, but only in their societies and brotherhoods). Here lies the deepest difference between the understanding of the term “layman” in present-day Catholicism and in the Early Church. In the Church of the New Testament and in the entire Ancient Church world the “laity,” the “people,” the “crowd” (*plethos*), still constituted a necessary order in the Church, into which one was taken in most cases only after a long catechumenate; the laity constituted an order which possessed very definite rights, which no one else could exercise.

Only traces of this understanding of a congregation have remained in Catholicism, in the Mass book, e.g., the “*nos servi tui, sed et plebs tua sancta*” in the Anamnesis of the Canon of the Mass; or then the intercessions for the whole estate of Christ’s Church with their enumeration of the various ministerial offices; furthermore in the Good Friday Bidding Prayers; and otherwise undoubtedly in the role played by the people gathered before St. Peter’s at the election of a pope, viz: the right of exultant ovation, a role which has grown out of its ancient right of participation in the election.

It is part of the tragedy of those churches that grew out of the Reformation that they have been able to realize the participation of the congregation in the divine service theoretically, but not practically. If the Reformation had achieved what it should have achieved, it would not have dared to restrict this participation to only a few responses and to the hymn of the congregation. We must confess that the evangelical congregation today at least is not a “praying church” in that sense in which the Early Church was.

Perhaps much of the oft-lamented breakdown of the Church in its tasks over against the modern world can be explained by this that she has long since ceased to be a praying Church in the sense of the Early Church, a Church which behind locked doors brought all concerns of mankind, also those of non-Christian mankind, before the throne of God. Is not our praying in all churches, in the Catholic churches as well as in those that call themselves evangelical, only a weak echo of the Early Church’s mighty praying? Are not also our churchgoers to a great extent simply only listeners, even though they hear the prayer in their mother tongue? Has not modern individualism also disrupted the Evangelical “congregation” to such an extent that it has become only a fiction? Doesn’t the “evangelical” congregation as it exists on paper (supposedly on the paper of the church constitution,

in reality, however, on the paper of the bureau of tax collections) differ from the Roman congregation, which doesn't even pretend to exist thus on paper, essentially in this point: that she is only less alive?

4

The second thing that is noteworthy about this praying of the Early Church is *its connection with faith in Christ*. And this is the thing that distinguishes it from the prayer of the synagogue, with which it otherwise has so many similarities. It is prayer in the name of Jesus and therefore prayer that can be answered. "The lord be with you": this introductory salutation of the bishop expresses the wish to the congregation that the Lord Christ may now pray with it and make its prayer His own. The Head of this Body prays together with the Body. The response "and with thy spirit" expresses the wish of the congregation to the minister who leads the prayer that the Lord may pray together with him, make his prayer His own, so that the prayer rises up before God's throne "through Jesus Christ our Lord." Despite the fact that the Salutation with its *parallelismus membrorum* may well go back to Jewish sources, in the Church that has all received a new meaning because of its strict Christological relationship.

The prayer of Jesus Christ, the prayer that He prayed while here on earth, and the prayer, which He as the High Priest of His Church continually offers to the Father, has given to prayer in general a new and deeper meaning. Christian prayer is, if it is really Christian, something different also from the striking prayer of the synagogue with its Biblical background. It is the prayer of the Church as the Body of Christ or the prayer of the individual Christian as a member of this Body.

No matter whether it be the Lord's Prayer, which Jesus gave to His disciples and which He Himself did not pray—for it is the prayer of sinners—or the great High Priestly Prayer of John 17 which none of us can repeat, because it is the prayer of the sinless Son of God, spoken even as He was on the way to His sufferings and death as the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world: no matter which prayer it be, ever since Jesus Himself prayed and taught us how to pray, a new kind of praying exists on earth, which is unknown in any other religion. The New Testament calls it prayer in the name of Jesus, i.e., "*ex persona Christi*," the prayer, in which He Himself takes part. "If two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them." These words from Matt. 18, 18f correspond exactly to the promises which are attached to prayer in the name of Jesus in His farewell words in John 14, 13; 14, 26; 16, 23ff. Would you expect the prayer that the Lord Christ prays together with us to be unavailing? Shall not the Father hear and hearken to the Son?"

And that is part of the deep New Testament mystery of prayer, that prayer is made not only on earth, but also in heaven, as the Revelation of St. John testifies; yea, that prayer reaches into the Trinity, when the Son prays to the Father and when Paul in Romans 8, 26f teaches that there is such a thing as an Assistance, a praying of the Holy Spirit with us: "Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered. But he that searcheth the hearts knoweth what is the mind of the Spirit, because he maketh intercession for the saints according to the will of God." The Son and the Holy Spirit are our paracletes, our advocates, in heaven, as John expresses it (John 14ff; 1 John 2, 1).

Thus it is to be explained that according to the New Testament church-prayer as an activity of the Spirit is closely connected with the other forms of spiritual speaking, along with confession (Matt. 10, 20), with speaking with tongues and with prophecy (1 Cor. 14). Therefore true prayer exists only in the Church of Christ, which as Israel according to the Spirit has the promises that in the last days God shall pour out of His Spirit upon all flesh, so that then not only individual specially-honored (*begnadigte*: charismatically called) persons, but God's entire holy people in the Church should be "a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people" (1 Peter 2, 9) and thus be in possession of all the rights and authority which the individual Old Testament offices possessed.

And as every Christian has received the Spirit by the laying on of hands at or after baptism, thus He is given to the ministers in a special manner by the laying on of the hands in ordination (1 Tim. 4, 14). Thus in

Early Christian divine worship the minister—be he apostle or prophet, teacher or bishop, or whatever you might call the Spirit-filled incumbent of the *ministerium ecclesiasticum*—prays together with the congregation and the congregation prays with him, be it in free prayer, which seems to have been a peculiar function of the prophets in the Old Church (we hear Didache 10, 7 at the end of the Eucharistic prayer: “But permit the prophets to give thanks as much as they wish”, or be it in the first fixed prayers, which go back into the New Testament age and in which we recognize an echo of the mighty Spirit-prompted (*pneumatisch*) prayer of the first church. “Thou, Holy Spirit, teachest the soul to pray aright,” thus the Lutheran Pentecost hymn has it. In this sentence is comprehended all the mystery of the Church’s praying. That this prayer be answered would be the fulfillment of all the liturgical movements of our time - for they can have no other fulfillment but this.

5

Even as the Church is at the same time both subject and object of faith—the paradox of that article of faith concerning the one Catholic and apostolic Church consists in this that the Church and she alone believes in the Church—in like manner the Church is at the same time both subject and object of prayer. The Church prays for the Church—otherwise who would pray for her?

It is worthwhile to consider the ancient prayers of the Church for the Church. In the prayer at the breaking of the bread in the Didache (9, 4) we hear: “As this bread that we break was scattered upon the mountains and gathered together became one, so let Thy Church be gathered together from the ends of the earth into Thy kingdom.” Added to this petition for the unity of the Church at her perfect consummation there is in the prayer that follows it a petition for the purification and unification of the church: “Remember, O Lord, Thy Church, to deliver her from all evil and to perfect her in Thy love; and gather her together from the four winds sanctified for Thy kingdom, which Thou didst prepare for her” (o.c. 10, 5). These glorious prayers were then taken over by the later Church and expanded, especially in connection with the Lord’s Supper, *e.g.*, even Luther, following the example of Chrysostom, gladly used in his sermons on the Lord’s Supper the symbolism of the many kernels of grain, which make up *one* loaf, and of the many individual grapes which become wine, in order to illustrate the nature of the Lord’s Supper as the *sacramentum unitatis*.

But besides these pictures of the Didache we find also other instances of the Church’s own prayer for the Church. In the same liturgy of the Coptic Jacobites that we just mentioned we hear: “Pray for the peace of the one, holy catholic and orthodox Church of God.” (Brightman, Liturgies Eastern and Western I, 160), and almost all oriental liturgies offer to this. Above all, what was prayer forever and again, also in the Roman liturgy, was the unity and the peace of the Church, even as the orthodox Church also prayed for protection from her enemies. And if heretics are mentioned, as in the Roman Good Friday prayers, then it is the conversion of the heretics and schismatics that is the burden of the prayers. But prayer for the Church always belongs to the nature of these church-prayers of intercession, and besides the peace and unity of the Church, the duration of the Holy Church is often the prayer-content, as, *e.g.*, in the so-called Prayer of Chrysostom, which, by the way, has also been taken over into evangelical liturgies,

What does this prayer of the Church for herself mean? Is it a *sacro egoismo*, a more or less obvious clericalism that is expressed in this prayer? By no means - rather it is the deep conviction that the Church is not what she should be. It is the conviction that she lives by the boundless mercy of her Lord and that without this forgiving mercy she is lost. So it is certainly not a clericalism or a false ecclesiastical cocksureness, but what really prompts this prayer is a great feeling of uncertainty, of continual danger threatening the Church, from without to be sure, but also from within.

If the Church before the Reformation was in any point evangelical, then it was evangelical here. And one can certainly put the question, whether the pre-Reformation church was not at least in this point more reformatory than the so-called churches of the Reformation. At any rate, intercessory prayer by the Church for the Church belongs to the essence of true evangelical divine worship; and we are speaking not of intercessory prayer which has become empty form only, but of prayer which is spoken with all the fervor of the *ecclesia orans* in view of the admonitions and threats to the congregations in Revelation 2 and 3. For there it certainly is

taken for granted that whole churches can die, even though they are outwardly at least still churches of Christ and to all outward appearances at least show signs of important life.

6

But if this is true, then such church-prayer of the Church must be first of all prayer of repentance. The great danger of the Church of all ages lies in this that she preaches repentance to the world and at the same time herself becomes a castaway, because she forgets that all true repentance must begin at the house of God, with the repentance of the Church. Here also there is no difference between the Catholic churches that from principle do not repent and the Evangelical churches that do not repent in practice. We are so accustomed to seeing church politics hold the leadership in the Church that we erroneously expect that a change in church politics must bring forth a new day in the whole business.

But if we have such expectations, then we should learn from Church history that up to now every new day in the Church of Christ has begun with a movement of repentance. Christianity itself once entered world history as a mighty movement of repentance. It was as a movement of repentance that in Antiquity it conquered the ancient world and then in modern time (the so-called “Great Contrition” the people of our day. And when at Constantine’s time the masses began to stream into the church for more or less outward reasons, then the cloisters became the centers of repentance. Every new epoch in the Middle Ages began with a movement of repentance, and the Reformation with Luther’s first thesis and the saving message of the justification of the sinner through faith alone is the greatest example in the history of the Church for this truth.

At that time people didn’t yet believe that you could renew the world by means of world conferences. We believe that by conferences and organizations, by pronouncements and radio speeches we can spare ourselves the bitter way of sorrows of contrition and repentance, —until God’s mighty hand one day will also crush those means and teach us that the Church lives by the Means of Grace, by nothing else, and that her life is expressed solely and alone in this that she becomes a praying Church again, as she was in the days of the apostles, when it was said of her: “And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers” (Acts 2, 42). “And fear came upon every soul” is said of this praying congregation.

Fear has not come upon one single soul because of Amsterdam, Bethel, and Leipzig, because of the Ecumenical Council of Churches, the EKiD and the VELKD, and not because of the college of cardinals either. For only the praying Church which moves heaven and earth with her prayer, even when outwardly she has to go down in defeat in the process, could and might effect truly world-shattering changes in this century. The praying Church, which we do not want to confound with the church of liturgical scholars, is a power that shakes the social and political world of our century, because in her and in her alone He is present unto whom all power in heaven and earth is given. The life of the Lutheran Church in this century depends on this, whether she again will become a praying Church in this sense, a praying church in the sense of Luther and of the Lutheran Reformation.

7

Unlike other confessions, the Lutheran Church has, we know, received a definite liturgical heritage. She is not saddled with the heritage of the ancient sacrifice-idea, a heritage which makes every renewal in the Catholic churches of the East and West always a renewal of the sacrifice-idea, and therewith a renewal of paganism. And yet, on the other hand, the Lutheran Church has never made a complete break with the Early Christian, New Testament liturgy, a break which couldn’t be avoided by the Reformed churches, because they had abandoned belief in the Real Presence—a fact that we must expand in a later letter—, without which there can be no true liturgy. Our Church’s liturgy therefore could be that which it was in the sixteenth century according to a Catholic liturgical scholar, namely: “the first serious attempt undertaken with unique linguistic and musical means to create a German folk-liturgy and thus to bridge that strangeness which has remained between the

German people and the liturgy ever since their becoming Christian” (F. Messerschmid, *Liturgie und Gemeinde*, 1939, S. 66).

If one is to have an idea of the triumphal course of the Reformation in Germany, then “one must,” the same author tells us (o.c. p. 49), “have received from the sources an intimation of the unheard-of vitality of these divine services; of the powerful religious feeling with which they were celebrated by those congregations which had before this been only dumb witnesses and spectators and listeners in the church ... one must have received an intimation of the power with which these chorales were taken up by old and young and by all classes! Even Jesuit eyewitnesses have averred that these chorales brought more believers to this new teaching than all preaching and other efforts to win them!” Why are things not so today? Why has our divine service lost the power over men’s spirits? This is one of the most earnest questions that our church has to consider.

One answer that must be given to this question is the fact, that we pastors no longer know and understand the liturgical treasures of our Church and therefore are not in a position to introduce our congregations to them. And one of the urgent duties of the Lutheran pastorate today is to win back that which has been lost. Why don’t we preach more often on the liturgy? Why do we believe that we must enliven our liturgical life by borrowing from the Eastern church, or from the Roman Catholic church? Why don’t we know any more what the evangelical divine service of the old Lutheran Church was like? Why do we leave it to Catholic theology to rediscover Luther’s importance as one of the greatest liturgical geniuses? Why do we know practically nothing about the greatest liturgical scholars of our church in the nineteenth century, about Loehe and Kliefoth? How can we explain the mass printing of theologically and liturgically worthless works on modern liturgical art, from Arper-Zillessen to Burghart’s unfortunate new Prussian Agenda? God help us, that we teach again the great Prayer of the Church, that our church may become a genuine *ecclesia orans*.

With best wishes for this Easter season, the time of the Church’s jubilation, I greet you in the fellowship of the Faith

Your
HERMANN SASSE.

XV

The Results of the Lutheran Awakening of the 19th Century

(Translation by E. Reim)

Dear Brethren in the Ministry:

(In an opening paragraph Dr. Sasse explains that prolonged illness compelled him to postpone the writing of a number of articles that had already been planned, but gave him the leisure to browse in biographies, memoirs, correspondence, and periodicals of the last century. The following thoughts are the results of this study.)

1.

To an astonishing degree, at least at first thought, the various churches of our time are still living on the fruits of the Great Awakening, this movement which after the Napoleonic wars, and for the period of a generation, influenced all Christendom in Europe and in America, in the Catholic as well as the Protestant world. If one looks at the maps of the German *Kirchenkampf* in the Hitler era, it immediately becomes clear that those church territories of Evangelical Germany in which the Confessing Church (*Bekennende Kirche*) in its several trends had the upper hand are the very regions where the Awakening once stirred the clergy as well as the congregations: Franconia, Swabia, the Wupper Valley and other regions of the Rhine, the Westphalian Mark, Minden-Ravensberg, and Hanover; whereas all those areas in which the Awakening did not reach into the ranks of the people have more or less belonged to the “German Christians” and the Totalitarian Party. Similar observations can be made in other lands, even in the United States of America, where the intellectual and spiritual life, say of the Mid-West, still bears the marks which the Methodistic revivals, the anti-modernistic

Biblicism of the Reformed, and the Lutheran neo-orthodoxy of the last century have left upon the average American.

At this halfway mark of the 20th Century it is perhaps embarrassing for Christendom to admit its complete dependence upon something that was the experience of the third and fourth generations before us. Our century has experienced theological and ecclesiastical movements, such as the Dialectic Theology of Europe, the Social Gospel of America, and the Ecumenical Movement of the entire world. But none of these movements have reached down into the ranks of the people, of the congregations, nor have they molded the piety or the faith of men. With astonishment, yes, with deep concern, Germany—and by this time probably the entire Christian world—has noted how meager the spiritual results of the German *Kirchenkampf* have really been. How small is the number who in concentration camps or in the incidents of the *Kirchenkampf* have experienced something that has revitalized their entire lives! And what spiritual gains did World War II produce, with the unspeakable terror and agony that it brought to soldiers and civilians alike? Something of this should gradually begin to appear, even though experience teaches that the spiritual harvest of such times matures quite slowly.

The First World War brought no awakening. Only the theologians had learnt something. This time (World War II) even they seem to have remained untouched, or perhaps even have forgotten a few things. One should not believe it possible, but it is a fact. Men who went into the stark night of this war as Lutheran theologians are followers of Bultmann today. And the doctrine of the Great Disintegrator of Marburg (*des Marburger Alleszermalmers*), who at one time belonged to the re-discoverers of the “Theology of the Word,” but concerning whose present philosophy of Existentialism no one today can still say what is Christian about it, exercises an attraction for the post-war generation that is positively uncanny. What there still is of real Christian substance among our people and congregations has come down from the 19th century, whether it be the heritage of Pietism or of ecclesiastical orthodoxy.

The same condition is to be noted in other church bodies also, particularly the Roman Catholic. Though the years following the First World War seemed to hold the promise of a new day in the Church of Rome, though the Liturgical Movement of those days together with other trends seemed to herald a new awakening, though at that time the most serious Catholics of Germany sought to renew the Church by a return to the old Christocentric Catholicism of the Ancient Church, these hopes have nevertheless met with cruel disappointment. The Catholicism of the 20th century is no different from that of the 19th. The Dogma of the Immaculate Conception of 1854 has found its continuation in the new dogma of 1950; the Miracle of Lourdes has been repeated in the Miracle of Fatima; and the doctrinal pronouncement of 1950, which is the first practical application of the Dogma of Infallibility of 1870, is in form and content so related to the proclamation of Pius IX that one must declare that it is the Roman Church of the 19th century which is attaining its completion in our time.

2.

If we were right in our observation that even today Christendom is still living on the Great Awakening of the 19th century, and if this be true also of the Lutheran Church, then it will be worthwhile to study this movement ever again. Its essence is this, that in those days, in a reaction against the prevailing “Enlightenment,” and in opposition to a world that was governed by the ideology of this Enlightenment, a generation of Christians re-experienced the realities of their faith. And this essentially in the manner in which each one’s church denomination understood these realities: the Catholic relating it to the reality of the Church as the Body of Christ, the continuing (*fortlebenden*) Christ, as it was formulated at that time; the Anglican to his Church as a branch of the *Una Sancta* and as the *via media* between Catholicism and Protestantism; the Reformed to the majestic reality of the Word of Law and Gospel, and to the Church that is reformed according to this Word, in which Christ and no one else is to rule; the Lutheran to the blessed message of justification through faith alone, and to the Church of the Gospel and the Sacraments; the Methodist to the message of universal grace, and to the call to conversion and sanctification; the Orthodox Russian to the Church of the Holy Mysteries as pillar and foundation of the Truth and as the means for the salvation and sanctification of the world.

It is the peculiar nature of the Awakening of the last century that it brought the various churches to a better understanding of their own assets and to a revitalizing of their distinctive qualities. One dare not look at it as being purely a gracious work of the Holy Spirit. It is also a reawakening of human, altogether too human, religion. In addition to the genuine verities of Christian faith there has been also an awakening of those strong delusions, without which there simply is no church history in this world of sin. From a historical point of view the miracle-mindedness of modern Catholicism and its cult of the Madonna, as well as the closely related intensification of the Papal idea up to the point of the Anti-Christian Dogma of 1870 all belong to the results of the Awakening, just as much as the morbid manifestations of Methodistic revivalism and holiness-movements in the Protestantism of England and America.

But neither do we have pure Gospel gold in all of those things which in the Lutheran Awakening make pretensions to constituting a splendid renewal of the Reformation. Just as the history of the Lutheran Church, like all other church history, is *also* a history of sin, because the church is made up of sinners, so the history of the Lutheran Awakening of the 19th century—in spite of everything else that it may otherwise have been—is a history of grave errors and tragic mistakes. It is a history, not only of faith, but also of littleness of faith, yes, of secret lack of faith; not only of faithfulness, but also faithlessness and apostasy; not only of Christian love, but also of lovelessness. In short, it is a history of sin and guilt, like every other chapter of church history.

Only if this is kept in mind can the Awakening of the 19th century, upon which all of the Lutheran Churches are still drawing today, be understood in its greatness and in its failures: in what it did, and what it did not achieve. Then only will the history of our fathers serve to prepare us for the tasks that we are facing.

3.

In describing the reawakening of living faith in all parts of Christendom that occurred between 1817 and 1948 most historians of this movement (e.g., Thomasius, Wangemann) employ a figure of speech, comparing it with a glorious springtime that the Church was permitted to experience. One need only think of J. H. Newman's famous sermon on the reawakening of Catholicism in England, "The Second Spring." When the leaders of the Awakening arrived at their pessimistic evaluation of the Church in the days of Rationalism, there has been a tendency to tone this down as involving an injustice, particularly since no generation is fair to its immediate predecessors. A well-known man once stated that Rationalism was poor theology but not bad religion. But his own religion was just as weak as his theology. But the overall picture of German Protestantism is substantiated by what one sees of Protestantism outside of Germany, as well as by the state of the Catholic Church of that time.

At the beginning of the century one begins to meet in wider circles the thought that was first imported from France, namely whether the day of the churches was not really past. Their opponents were foretelling their downfall, and their adherents bewailing the decline. Just as in the days when Christianity was enjoying its great mission expansion there was much lamenting among pagans over the *templa desolata*, so Ammon of Goettingen in his sermon on the occasion of the turn of the century sorrows because the "temples stand empty." Just as in the days of Pliny the old pagan priests complained that there were no more buyers for their sacrificial animals, and that men were no longer interested in their ceremonial cults, so this High Priest of a Lutheranism-made-reasonable complains "that the customs and ceremonies of worship"—referring to the Sacraments of the Lord Christ—"with which men as sensual beings will never be quite able to dispense, have fallen lower and lower in the scale of general use." It was not long, and men managed to exist quite well without Baptism, Absolution, and the Lord's Supper. At that time they could even get along without prayer, since Kant had instructed the intelligentsia that the more a man advances in the direction of good, the more will he be inclined to omit prayer.

The autobiographies even of theologians reveal to what extent prayer actually fell into disuse. Thus Pfarrer Fr. Brunn of Steeden, who was born in 1819 in the Province of Nassau, and who for many years was the chief contact between the Free Churches of Germany and the Synod of Missouri, confesses that in the training that he received in the parsonage of his father there was no sign of family devotions or of table prayer. It is almost unbelievable to hear him say: "Thus I had actually reached the age of 18 without ever having entertained a serious thought concerning God, without ever having spoken a prayer" (*Mitteilungen aus meinem Leben*, p. 6).

It was truly a cold and cheerless winter, this winter of Rationalism, upon which the springtime of the Awakening was to follow. The movement that began in those days of 1817 was truly a springtime of faith for Europe, even though not all things that developed at that time were good and wholesome. This springtime was a season of change and renewal for the Church, even though not all the fruits that seemed to be in prospect were to attain their full maturity.

We cannot recount the history of the Lutheran Awakening here, but can only review a few dates and names. The stirring theses that Claus Harms had prepared for the Tercentenary of the Reformation in 1817 affected the Church and its theology deeply and caused a sleeping Lutheranism to rediscover the confessions of its Reformation. At the same time J. G. Scheibel refused to participate in a unionistic Communion. Henceforth the cause of Lutheranism was associated with the struggle against the Union that had been introduced in Prussia on October 31, 1817, a struggle that echoed through all of Germany. It was as though the warning concerning the Union which Harms had uttered in his 75th Thesis were about to be fulfilled: "Be careful that you do not consummate this act over the bones of Luther. It will rouse him, and then—woe unto you!"

When the Union was finally perfected in connection with the Tricentennial of the Augustana in 1830, this led to an outright non-compliance in Breslau. For the next ten years there was to be a bitter struggle within the Church, of confessionally minded Lutherans against the State, which ended in 1840 with the forming of the first Lutheran Free Church, centering upon Breslau.

Humanly speaking, this controversy meant the saving of confessional Lutheranism in Germany. Or to put it more moderately, it postponed for more than a century the final conversion of the German Evangelical *Landeskirchen* to the Union. During the years of public controversy in Prussia there developed in many parts of Germany a new appreciation of the Lutheran confessions, also areas where the Lutheran Awakening was promoted. With the calling of Harless in 1833 the faculty of Erlangen began to become a center of this new Lutheranism. In the same year *Vilmar* became the Director of the Marburg Gymnasium. In 1836 there was founded in Dresden the Ev. Lutheran Mission, which subsequently was transferred to Leipzig. In 1837 *Loehe* became the pastor of Neuendettelsau. 1838 marked the appearance at Erlangen of the *Zeitschrift für Protestantismus und Kirche*. The same year witnessed the Prussian migration to *Australia* (Kavel, Fritzsche) and thus the beginnings of the Lutheran Church under the Southern Cross. In February 1839 the Saxon Lutherans under *Stephan* arrived in St. Louis, and in July close to a thousand Prussians in Buffalo, New York. These are the beginnings of the Synods of *Missouri* (1847), *Buffalo* (1853), *Iowa* (1854), and other American synods that, like the Lutheran Churches of Australia, must be considered daughters of the Lutheran Awakening in Germany.

In 1842 *Walther* began his life's work in St. Louis, founding the *Lutheraner* in 1844. In the same year *Ludwig Harms* came to Hermannsburg. In 1842 *Loehe* began training church workers (*geistliche Kräfte*) for America. In the same year the Pentecost Conference of Hanover received a letter from *Walther's* co-worker, *Wyneken*, and *Petri* began his supply work for America. In 1843 the *Zeitschrift für Protestantismus und Kirche* printed *Wyneken's* "Appeal to the Lutheran Church of Germany for the Assistance of Brethren in America."

It is impossible to mention all of the events of the next few years, up to 1848, events by which the awakening Lutheran Church of Germany began to acquire its inward and outward characteristics. Since *Harless* had begun to teach in Leipzig in 1841, this faculty took its place beside *Erlangen* as an additional fortress of Lutheranism. *Rostock* and *Dorpat* joined them. In Mecklenburg the learned *Kliefoth* was at the head of the Church since 1844 and made his influence felt among all the Lutherans of Germany, ranking with *Vilmar* and *Harless* as an outstandingly spiritual figure among the bishops of Lutheran Germany.

Without doubt these years prior to 1848 were the climax in this renewal of the Church, also in England and Scotland, by the way, and likewise upon the soil of entirely different denominations. One must go as far back as the Reformation to find a period where the Church and its theological problems commanded to such a degree the interest of the best representatives of the German people, its nobles, its citizenry, its landholders, and even the day-laborers of deepest Pomerania. As had been the case in Silesia in 1830, so because of the consequences of the General Synod of Prussia the year 1846 was followed particularly in Pomerania by a separation from the Union, and the Free Churches began to grow. "Everybody speaks of the Church today.

Everyone senses that Church is not merely a name.” So Loehe began his preface to his *Drei Bücher von der Kirche* in December 1844. The graduating class that Vilmar had before him when he made his powerful address on “The Future of the Church” (*Von der Zukunft der Kirche*) consisted entirely of future theologians. In those days the Church also commanded the attention and the heart of Youth.

4.

Then came the frost, as of a night in spring. In some respects the Revolution of 1848 may not have caused such tangible changes in Europe as the upsets of 1830 and 1870. But it left a deep mark upon the life of the nations. In connection with the swift progress of industrialization, and in keeping with the resultant rapid growth of population, the events of 1848 signal the beginnings of an involvement of all forms of life in the political picture (*die Politisierung des gesamten Lebens*). Moved by the ideas of liberalism and nationalism, the citizens in general begin to insist on their political rights, and to move into sharp opposition to the entrenched powers of conservatism. Behind them looms a fourth group (*der vierte Stand*), the speedily growing class of industrial workers with their demands, their politico-economic program, their will to fight.

No writing of the 19th century—neither scientific treatise, nor volume of poetry, nor any religious book of this century which was so singularly productive in the intellectual field—has had such a world-wide effect as the Communist Manifesto of 1848. Today, a century later, it is the political creed of almost a billion people. This provides the explanation for the change that at that time began to manifest itself in the thinking of men. Those were the days when evil tongues said about the students at Oxford that they who but a few years before, in the great years of the Tractarian Movement, had been debating issues like the Apostolic Succession or the validity of the Sacraments, were now, after 1850, chiefly interested in the latest reports from the Stock Exchange.

In Germany the middle class began to *believe* in the German Nation and in the *Reich* that was beginning to take shape. The Church, about which the solid citizen (*Biedermeier*) had once concerned himself very much, was now left to the pastors. And if in the years of the actual Awakening the awakening of the Church went hand in hand with the Conservative Restoration in the political field, so the connection between “throne” and “altar” now became an unbreakable political alliance. The Church became the tool of political reaction. Anyone planning a public career had to be conservative in his politics and orthodox in his church connections—or at least he had to seem so. No longer did the politicians in the State and in the Church understand the high principles held by men like Loehe and Vilmar concerning the Church, men who because of their very conservatism fought the tyranny which the State was exercising over the Church and who were preaching repentance not only to Revolutionaries and Communists, but also to the Conservatives and Capitalists.

The tragedy of Vilmar is significant in this respect. As a Christian this man who had so clearly recognized the manner in which State-churchism is contrary to the Confessions still could not refuse his support to the ruler of his country at a time when the State was in dire need. Therefore the new institution of the State Church took him into its service, removing him from his episcopal office when reasons of political opportunism suggested such a course.

On the other hand the middle class of the people (*das Bürgertum*) was delivered more and more into a condition of churchlessness and atheism. The church emigrants of 1838 were followed by the political emigrants of 1848. What a difference there was between the two groups is demonstrated by the history of the Lutheran Churches of America and Australia. The year 1848 marked the end of the Lutheran Awakening among the German middle class. And for many decades the history of the Lutheran movement in Germany is tied up with the history of the conservative parties and its supporting groups among the aristocracy, the higher levels of the civil service, and the landowners.

Under these changed conditions the work of building the Lutheran Church continued during the next two decades. For after all there were people who had been gained during the Awakening, and who now wished to be Lutheran. Nor was there a lack of theologians. For during the decade before 1848 the best minds had chosen theology as a career. These men were now occupying the pulpits and the teaching positions. Lutheran faculties are staffed by outstanding men. In spite of what must be said in criticism of individual achievements,

one must go back to the days of the Thirty Years' War in order to behold a comparable flourishing of Lutheran theology. For this is a time when the leaders of the Awakening are still at the helm of the Church, particularly Harless in Munich and Kliefoth in Schwerin, their episcopal influence extending far beyond the confines of their *Landeskirchen*, making itself felt throughout Lutheran Germany. In addition to Bavaria and Mecklenburg particularly the populous provinces of Saxony and Hanover constitute the strong pillars of the system of Lutheran territorial churches. These *Landeskirchen* are maintaining the closest contact with the Lutheran Free Church, recognizing its claim to be *the* Lutheran Church of Prussia. Since 1848 conferences are being held from time to time in Leipzig, the center of Lutheran Missions.

But particularly the leaders of the Lutheranism of that era know how grave is the situation of their Church. They are far from yielding to any superficial optimism. Characteristic of their frame of mind are the words of the prayer with which Kahnis on September 1, 1853, closed the Leipzig Conference, which had concerned itself chiefly with that resolution of the Assembly of German Evangelicals (*des Deutschen Evangelischen Kirchentages*) according to which the Augustana was to be considered the Confession of all the Evangelical Churches of Germany, also the Union and the Reformed. This prayer is in part as follows: "... we dare not unite what Thy Word separates. And I know no other way toward oneness than to continue on the narrow path of Thy Word, as it was confessed by our Fathers. Were I to speak according to the manner of men, I would say: Together with the cause of our Confession, which at one time stirred the entire world to its foundations, let us perish in a last blaze of glory, as it is befitting to such a cause. But this cause cannot perish, since it is Thine. Heaven and earth shall pass away, but not the Word of Truth. We hold fast to the confession of the Fathers because we hold fast to Thy Word. Lord, keep us steadfast to Thy Word. And if I say: Lord, let us abide by the teachings of Luther, then let all say, Amen!"

Nothing can now conceal the fact that Lutheranism is only a *trend (Richtung)* in Evangelical Germany, that the Lutheran Church of Germany is not *the*, but merely *an* Evangelical Church of Germany. The problem of the largest of the *Landeskirchen*, that of Prussia, remains unsolved. Particularly among the Prussian nobility there appears a dominant trend which was supported by genuine enthusiasm for the Lutheran Church that was emerging from the Awakening, but which was also fostered by the political and church-political situation following upon 1848, a trend which would like to dissolve the Union and restore the old church communions as they were legally established before 1817 Particularly Pomerania is a center of this movement.

Thus a third group of Lutherans was organized in addition to the Lutherans of the territorial churches and of the Free Churches: Lutherans within the Union, "Association Lutherans" (*Vereinslutheraner*) as they were subsequently called, because they merely represented Lutheran societies or associations rather than duly constituted churches. A wide variety of opinions were represented among these Lutherans of the Union, ranging from the view that the Union was wrong and sinful, and would therefore have to be repealed, to the conviction that the Union was in accordance with divine and human Law and only needed a clear-cut organization.

The struggle over the Lutheran Church in Prussia extends through a full century, from the founding of the Supreme Council of the Evangelical Church (*des Evangelischen Oberkirchenrats*) in Berlin in 1850 down to the reestablishment of the "Evangelical Church of the Old Prussian Union" by Otto Dibelius in 1945. In never ending variations, both new and old, this squaring of the circle has been repeated, according to which the rights of the Lutheran Confession on the one hand, and the inviolability of the Union between Lutheran and Reformed congregations on the other, have been guaranteed in a *single* Evangelical Church. It is touching to note the conscientiousness and confessional loyalty with which Lutheran theologians and laymen have during these hundred years wearied themselves in the struggle for the preservation of the Lutheran Church, striving and fighting in a situation where from the outset every effort and struggle was in vain. Even right after 1850 it became clear that the Union was no longer to be dissolved. This is the first great defeat of the Lutheran Awakening. *It did not succeed in leading the cause of Lutheranism in Prussia to victory*, in restoring the Lutheran Church in Prussia.

This ties in with a second failure: *The Lutheran Awakening did not succeed in winning Evangelical Germany*. Ever since 1848 the greatest problem in the field of church politics was the unification of German Protestantism. Friends of the Union were striving for the uniting of all German Evangelical *Landeskirchen* in

one church, even though there were different opinions concerning the makeup of such a “German Evangelical Church”—the name begins to appear after 1848 in the vocabulary of Wichern and the Inner Mission. But in one point the Lutherans of 1848 and 1870 were successful. They prevented the formation of such a union church. Where they failed, however, was in bringing about a union of Evangelical Churches into a federation of the several confessional churches. Thus the unclarity that existed in Prussia concerning the relation of churches and confessions was extended over all of Germany.

The result of this struggle for the preservation of the Lutheran Church against the manifold designs of unionism became evident when in July of 1868 German Lutheranism held its first “Evangelical Lutheran Conference” in *Hanover*. It was a mighty army in review, an imposing assembly in every respect, before which Kliefoth gave his famous address concerning the question, “What does Article VII of the Augsburg Confession Require Concerning the Administration of the Lutheran Church?” Here there really was something of the “We believe, teach, and confess” of the Reformation Century, when this great assembly with one consent identified itself with the basic thoughts and demands of this address. Born of a genuine consensus of Lutheran faith, the “General Evangelical Lutheran Conference” came into being at that time, the German counterpart of those great gatherings of American Lutheranism, the General Council in 1868 and the Synodical Conference in 1872.

If one considers the great work done during the next generation by the Conference and by its *Kirchenzeitung* under the editorship of Luthardt, then one must say that the year 1868 stands for a victory of Lutheranism. But it was a victory of preservation. Nothing can conceal the fact that the Lutheran Church in Germany was on the defensive. In the final analysis it was the opposition that had determined the theme for Kliefoth’s address. It was the situation that came about after the Prussian conquests of 1866 but before the unification of Germany that produced the question whether a Lutheran administration really belongs to the essence of the Lutheran Church. Does the Constitution belong to the essence of the Church? Is not the preaching of the Gospel and the Scriptural administration of the Sacraments the one thing which is necessary for the unity of the Church, and which must be demanded as the prerequisite of church fellowship? The Lutherans had become convinced that the pledging of the ministry and of Christian congregations to a confession of the true doctrine includes a similar obligation on the part of the administration of the Church. What they achieved was this, that the remaining Lutheran territorial churches were permitted to retain—at least in law and in theory—their confessionally obligated church administrations. One did not force them into a United Church of the Reich. But it was not possible to convince the opposition of the correctness of the Lutheran position. It was possible to preserve what was still left of the Lutheran Church at that time. But to win back the areas of Lutheranism that had been lost to the Union, and thus to bring all Lutherans back into the Church of the Lutheran Reformation, that had become an unattainable goal.

5.

As the Evangelical Lutheran Conference was convening at Hanover July 1 and 2, 1868, August Vilmar was at death’s door in Marburg. For him who since 1866 had despaired of the future of the Lutheran Church of Germany this Conference no longer meant anything. On the 30th of July he who had loved the Lutheran Church as no one else and who had fought for it so gallantly, entered into the *ecclesia triumphans*. His contemporaries of the generation born at the turn of the century had preceded him: Spitta in 1859, Stahl 1861, Rudelbach 1862, Louis Harms 1865. And now one after another departed of the generation that had experienced this great springtime of the Church, souls in which Lutheran faith had reawakened after the fatal night of Rationalism, the younger men who had shared this struggle for the restoration of the Lutheran Church: Hengstenberg died in 1869, G. Knak 1870, Loehe 1872, Petri 1873, Thomasius 1875, Hofmann and Volkening 1877, Muenchmeyer, v. Thadden, and Krauth-Philadelphia 1882, Julius Nagel and Wilhelm Vilmar 1884, Theodor Harms 1885, Huschke and v. Zezschwitz 1886, Ferd. Walther-St. Louis 1887, Buechsel and Theodosius Harnack 1889, Franz Delitzsch 1890, Frank 1894, Kliefoth 1895, Luthardt 1902, Rocholl 1905.

This passing of a generation of men in whose souls a definite process of church history has taken place invariably constitutes the end of an era in this history. No literary heritage, no tradition of a school of thought (*Schultradition*) is capable of holding fast what the “fathers,” the “*presbyteroi*,” lived through. And nothing is

perhaps more indicative of the fate of German Lutheranism in our day than the completely unwarranted air of superiority with which the modern theologians of a “young” church have passed and still are passing judgment upon the devout and learned fathers of the Lutheran Awakening.

With the departure of this generation comes the autumn of German Lutheranism, an autumn during which many a fruit is still maturing, but one that ends in the *rigor mortis* of winter. At the middle of the 20th century it seems to us almost fabulous to note how much life there still was in the Lutheran Church of Germany at about 1900. For us even the Lutheranism of Wuerttemberg has become a legend.

But nothing is perhaps so indicative of the dying of a German Lutheranism that had so recently been revived in the Awakening as the fate of the Lutherans within the Prussian Union. For the course of the “*Vereinslutheraner*” has consistently reflected the status of Lutheranism as a whole. In the first election for a General Synod of Prussia in 1875 the Lutherans were still the strongest party. In 1879 they elected still more members (55) than the “Positive Union” (50), which however attained a majority because among the 30 members appointed by the King there were only three Lutherans. That was the beginning of the decline. In 1885 the relative strength was: Lutherans 54 (elected 48), Positive Union 80 (elected 58), Middle Party 56, the Left 7. The ratio of Lutherans seated in the General Synod declined from one election to another, from 37% in 1879 to 15% in 1925. Today they would muster only a small fraction, —and one should remember that for many years now there has been no synod at which there were any members committed to a repeal of the Union.

If one inquires into the reasons for this development, very many are to be mentioned: the determined church policy of the royal house for which the Union is inviolable; the suppression of all Lutheran theology in the Prussian faculties; the propaganda for the Union in the religious instruction of all schools; the alliance of confessional Lutheranism with ultra conservative political groups. But all of this still does not provide an adequate explanation. Nor can the fact that Lutheranism supinely permitted itself to be stripped of all its rights be explained entirely by its loyalty to ecclesiastical and secular government. For then there would at least have had to be some instances of individual resistance as in 1830 and 1846. The tremendously depressing thing about this struggle for Lutheranism in the Old Prussian *Landeskirche* is that again and again the Lutherans presented ultimate demands that must absolutely be met if they were to remain in the *Landeskirche*, and that they invariably submitted when their demands were denied—a process which *mutatis mutandis* has been repeated in our day in the relation of the Lutheran *Landeskirchen* to the Church of the *Reich*. This inability to carry through a demand made upon the basis of the Lutheran Confession, yes, even to remain in absolute earnest about it, must have its cause within Lutheranism itself.

This cause becomes clear to one who studies the outcome of the German Awakening. This movement had its beginnings in Germany as a renewal of Pietism. This new conception of sin and of forgiveness had guided the men of the Awakening into an understanding of the Lutheran Confessions. So they became Lutherans, without knowing or even understanding what Lutheran faith and Lutheran Church really was. As Thomasius describes the process in his book (*Das Wiedererwachen des evangelischen Lebens in der Lutherischen Kirche Bayerns—1867*), it was nothing more than simply the longing of men for a salvation from sin and death. Then followed, as a belief derived from Scripture, “faith in the free grace of God in Christ, the justification of the sinner by grace, through faith.” (Page 1.) “Thus we were Lutherans before we even knew it; without reflecting upon the confessional idiosyncrasy of our Church, or upon the confessional differences which separate it from others, we were (Lutherans) in fact. We were not even thoroughly familiar with these differences. We read the symbolical books of the Church as testimonies of sound doctrine, ... but their symbolical significance concerned us little. But as soon as we began ... to ask questions, we began to realize that we were standing squarely in the middle of Lutheranism... So we became Lutherans, freely, from within.” (Page 244f.)

Harless confesses precisely the same thing in his familiar account of his conversion: “Not until now, after I had at the hand of Scripture experienced and understood what is saving truth, did I turn to the confessional writings of my Church. I cannot describe the surprise and emotion with which I discovered that their content was in keeping (*konform*) with what had become certainty to me from Scripture and the experience of faith.” (Acc to Th Heckel: *A. v. Harless—1933*, p. 28.)

To quote one more example out of Northern Germany, the account of Wangenmann (*Sieben Bücher Preuss. Kirchengeschichte*, Bd III, 1860, p 99) should be noted concerning Moritz Goerke, this leader of the Lutheran Awakening in Pomerania who had been baptized in the Reformed Church. Dissatisfied with the commentaries, he had confined his reading to the Bible until at an auction he had purchased a copy of the Lutheran Confessions and immersed himself completely in a study of the same. Then he said to his wife: “Now I know what kind of a faith we have; we are Lutherans. What I find in these Confessions is precisely what I have otherwise been reading in the Bible.”

From this angle one must understand what unshakable loyalty to the Confessions meant for the Lutherans of this Awakening, why they stood ready to sacrifice everything for this Lutheran faith. Nor were they only the theologians, or laymen with an advanced training in theology, like the members of the Lutheran Conferences and Societies at the end of the century. In addition to the Rector of the University and the Dean of the Law School there were at Breslau those small business men and artisans who were contending for the Church of the Augsburg Confession. There were the small farmers of Hoenigern and Klemzig, the day laborers of Outer Pomerania (*Hinterpommern*) for whom in those days the Augustana was the confession of their faith. The inquiry of Kliefoth in 1868, “What does Article VII of the Augsburg Confession Require Concerning der Administration of the Lutheran Church?” was—strange though this may sound—in 1830 and even in 1846 the inquiry of these simple people, the inquiry of an awakened Church, standing in living faith in its justification (*im lebendigen Rechtfertigungsglauben*)!

For the “Confessing Church” of those days the Lutheran Confessions, particularly the Unaltered Augsburg Confession, provided the rallying point against the unbelief, the non-confessionalism, and the Caesaro-papism of that era. Even after 1870 there were still such congregations in Germany: the simple church people from all walks of life which gathered around the non-conformist pastors of the two Hessias, the peasants of the Lueneburg Heath who went along in the Hermannsburg separation, the laymen who founded the Saxon Free Church. But the response that had followed the earlier struggles was lacking. There is a measure of respect in Lutheran Germany for the conscience of these men, but no understanding for the necessity of their decision to leave the *Landeskirchen* of Hanover or Saxony. One simply does not recognize that these nominally Lutheran churches do not differ basically from the Old Prussian territorial churches, with which they are united in factual church fellowship. One does not notice that the ecclesiastical boundaries are largely fixed on paper only. A citizen of Berlin who moved to Hanover and from there to Kassel and Ludwigshafen and finally Mannheim had no idea that he had belonged to five different churches (*Konfessionen*). If he was a church minded person, he may perhaps have been surprised that each time there was some difference in the Liturgy, and may have been annoyed at having to buy a new hymnal with each change of residence. But the “confessional position” of these territorial churches was something that was meant only for specialists in Church Law, a legal status of which a congregation was hardly aware, and which certainly had nothing whatever to do with their faith.

How would such a generation still understand why one should for the sake of confessional adherence to the *Augustana Invariata* separate from one’s native *Landeskirche*, leave one’s friends and fatherland, resign one’s position, —as men could do around 1830, and as some peculiar persons were still doing. The deeper reason for all this was simply the fact that the faith that had existed in the great days of the Lutheran Awakening was no longer present.

Certainly there was living faith in the Church at this time also, and there were struggles for the faith. But it is highly significant that the confessional controversies in the period after 1870 dealt with the *Apostolic Creed*. As the Augustana had once been the ensign around which the confessing churches of Prussia had gathered, so at a District Synod in Berlin in 1877 Rudolf Koegel, the leader of the newly developed “Positive Union,” now proclaimed the Apostolic Creed as the symbol around which the Church is gathering: “Under this banner no battle has ever been lost! Touch not the ensign of the King of Kings... In this very Creed it is written: ‘He shall come to judge the quick and the dead,’—those who would do away with His confession as well as us who stand upon this confession and wish to die for it.” (G. Koegel: *Rudolf Koegel*, vol. III, p. 61.)

This the people understood! And thus a new front was established for the church-political battles of the future: Union of all those who still stand upon the basis of a positive Christianity, upon the basis of the

Apostolicum, whether they be Lutheran or Reformed or of the Union, for a common struggle against the forces of unbelief that are invading the Church! One can understand that this new movement of the "Positive Union" soon achieved the popular following that at the middle of the century had still belonged to the confessional Lutherans.

6.

This was the end, in Germany, of the Lutheran Awakening. True, much of what had been wrought in more than two generations continued to endure. The Lutheran Confessions retained their legal status in the Lutheran *Landeskirchen*. But this was really little more than a judicial fact, which can attain practical implications only through an eventual new awakening. The Lutheran Free Churches continued in the various sections of Germany. But they almost ceased to grow. Least important is the longing for the lost church of their fathers that in small circles did survive in the Churches of the Union, with their false assurance that they guaranteed a continuance of the Lutheran confession.

But how is this fate to be explained? This is a question that calls for the most careful and unbiased reflection. Indeed, in all Lutheran Churches throughout the world the effort should be made to arrive at a clear understanding on this question. For up to this time the fate of Lutheranism in Germany has invariably been the fate of world Lutheranism. None of the Lutheran Churches of America would be what they are today were it not for the influence of the German Awakening and its Scandinavian counterparts (Schartau and the Readers in Sweden, Hauge in Norway, Grundtvig in Denmark, Ruotsalainen in Finland). Indeed, some of them, like the Missouri Synod and those bodies that grew together to form the American Lutheran Church in 1930, are daughters of the German Awakening, even as also the two Lutheran Churches of Australia. Even though these churches may in the meantime have undergone some changes, yet in many respects the fate of German Lutheranism has been reenacted in them, and can in other respects still repeat itself. Therefore they also will have a burning interest in this question.

First of all, without the least bias, the question must be answered whether the time is not really past when the Christian congregation, a congregation awakened to a new faith in the Gospel, will gather around the *Augustana*, or can indeed do so. Nor dare we shy away from the other question, namely, to what extent modern Lutheran churches like the Churches of Bavaria and Hanover, Sweden and Denmark, or the great Churches and synodical federations of America, are held together by the *consensus* of that faith which is confessed in the *Augustana*, and to what extent by other factors.

But were not those men right who at the end of the 19th century said that even though the *Augustana* might still have served as a congregational confession at about 1830, yet it is no longer such today? The members of our congregations are no longer able to comprehend its theological formulations. That is why one cannot expect them to fight for it. Theologians may perhaps understand the differences between Lutherans and Calvinists in Christology and the doctrine of the Lord's Supper, (even they are said to have their difficulties, particularly when the responsibilities of ecclesiastical office hinder them in their further theological development) but how can one expect that of a congregation! What a contrast to the Apostles' Creed! Everyone understands that. That can be confessed jointly with all believers over against an unbelieving world. And isn't it over against this world of unbelief that we must make our confession? Not Calvinism is the opponent today. Unbelief and atheism are the opposition, and against them Lutherans and Calvinists can certainly make a common confession.

All this has a most plausible sound. Indeed, all churches of today are carrying on a struggle with a common foe. The question is only with what weapons this should be done. Of course, with the unadulterated Word of God! Of course, with a confession of the Truth! As soon as we say this, the fallacy that is hidden in these arguments becomes evident. In common also with Catholics and Baptists we are indeed engaged in battle with the great foes of all Christian faith, all faith in God. Are we therefore to declare those things inconsequential that separate us from them? We share the Apostles' Creed with Catholics and Baptists. Does that mean that we have the same faith as they?

Rudolf Koegel and the members of his Positive Union were quite right when in 1877 they declared that most of the Evangelical Christians of Germany had little or no understanding of the difference between Luther's and Calvin's doctrine of the Lord's Supper. And the successor of Koegel, Otto Dibelius, and his *Bekennende Kirche* are right when they repeat this statement today. They were quite right when they declared that after 1870 they "who are in earnest about being Christians" were no longer going into the Lutheran Free Churches as they had during the generation after 1830. Indeed, how could they be expected to find the way, since they no longer were Lutherans? Instead, they flocked to the mass meetings of the American sectarian, Pearsall Smith, whose triumphal journey through Germany was lauded as being virtually the beginning of a new Reformation. No longer did the plain Christians believe that the Holy Spirit is conferred through the Word and Sacraments, particularly since their pastors had long since ceased to believe this. But Pearsall Smith and his Methodistic followers, they had the Spirit, one could practically hear the rustling, as with the Enthusiasts in the days of the Reformation. Lutheran Justification, —that was nothing. But this Methodistic Sanctification, by which in the following of the great Smith one could attain sinlessness, —that was something!

Certainly, by this time there were but few accessions to Lutheran congregations. Instead, people joined the newly established "Christian Societies" and celebrated a communion that was Reformed in doctrine and ceremonial. Naturally they now denied the Lutheran doctrine of the Lord's Supper with the same vigor as the Lutheran doctrine of Justification. Suddenly those same Christians whose pastors had either not dared or not been able to explain the doctrinal differences to them were very well informed. With great clarity and success Mr. Smith and all the sanctified prophets—Methodist and Baptist—from England and America expounded to the beloved brethren and sisters in Germany the points wherein Luther had erred.

All this because men had no longer dared to teach the Christian congregation. They had come with devotional material only. But they should have supplied sound doctrinal instruction.

The fathers in the days of the Lutheran Awakening had done this. And the Lutheran pastors of America and Australia had also done it, had been compelled to do it in an environment of Reformed enthusiasm. And their congregations had understood. Yes, Luther himself had done it, and for that purpose had given his Catechism to the Church, the School, and the Christian Home. Ever since the close of the 19th century the *Augustana* has been held to be beyond the grasp of a Christian congregation. But the Small Catechism surely was still to be endured. And among the Chief Parts of this Catechism there is the Fifth, with its clear teaching concerning the Sacrament of the Altar. If we can no longer cause this to be learnt, then we can also no longer hold fast to the explanation of the Second Article. The excuse that this mystery is too profound for children reminds one of the fatal pretext of the Rationalists, namely that prayer is too sacred to be taught to children, that they would misunderstand it, and that only as an adult could one understand and use it rightly.

No, it is not the children who are too immature for the Fifth Part of the Catechism, but the pastors, the professors, the ecclesiastical dignitaries (*Konsistorialräte*) who no longer believe it. There lay the tragedy of the Lutheran Church in those days. That is its peril today. Anyone who at the great Mission Festivals of Loehe's Mission Society in Neuendettelsau has once heard the Franconian peasants confess the Apostles' Creed together with the Fifth Part of the Catechism, knows that the Lutheran Confession belonged and still belongs to the people—until they are robbed of it by their theologians.

7.

No, if the Lutheran Awakening of the 19th century did not, as one might have duly expected, produce the fruit of a Complete renewal of the Church, if many of its achievements have been lost again, this is by no means due to the Lutheran Confession. But perhaps the responsibility does lie with the Lutherans!

Ever since the days of the Apostles Christendom has had ample opportunity to ponder the harm that human failing, human weakness, and human sin have done in the history of the Church. Because of the profound consciousness of sin that was granted them, the men of the Awakening together with their congregations have themselves said what is needed on that score. One may safely say that there has hardly been a movement since the days of the Reformation that has been so devoid of human arrogance. Their new life of faith was also a life of sanctification. Nor does the question that concerns us here deal with the conduct of

individual men, with individual mistakes that may have been made. The point is rather whether 19th century Lutheranism as a whole and, going beyond this, even the Lutheranism of all periods, reveals certain essential characteristics which might explain its failures—perhaps a lack of certain skills of administration and organization in the Church, or ethical deficiencies which, at least in the opinion of others, are constantly recurring among the representatives of a positive body.

One cannot deny that the old ineffectiveness of Lutheranism in the area of ecclesiastical organization accounts for a not inconsiderable part of the setbacks of the Lutheran Church in the 19th century. The Lutheran Awakening brought forth no corresponding reorganization in the affairs of the Lutheran Church. One may say that this was not the fault of the Church, but of the rulers of the land, therefore of the State. Under the conditions obtaining in Germany the resolutions of the General Synod of Bavaria and of the Jesberg Conference in Hessa, asking the State authorities to relinquish their control over the Church, could not be carried out, just as it is also impossible in the England and Sweden of today that the Church be liberated from its position as a ward of the State. No state will voluntarily surrender rights that it is still able to retain.

But if there was no escape from this status of an established Territorial Church (*Landeskirchentum*), then still the attempt needed to be made to unite the Lutheran *Landeskirchen* in such a way, and to formulate their statutes in such a manner, that they could act as a body, even though it were only as a free federation. The thought was expressed again and again, but never was there a determined fight for it. The Lutheran Church has always had a fine appreciation of law and order, shrinking from any violation of the same. But that a right may become a wrong, namely when it is upheld in its form even though its premises be no longer valid, this was not observed. It was indeed a remarkable demonstration of loyalty when after the conquest of 1866 the Lutheran *Landeskirche* of Hanover recognized the King of Prussia (of the Reformed wing of the Union) not only as the Lord of the Land, but also as its *summus episcopus*. But at the same time it was suicide. It was a most touching loyalty when this Church continued to have its pastors trained at Goettingen, even when the devastating consequences of the Goettingen theology were recognized and publicly admitted by the church authorities. But for the congregations, for the souls that these officials had to provide with pastors, it would have been better to have asked the State to remedy this situation and, failing this, to keep the budding theologians of Hanover from studying at Goettingen. Thus not merely the Church of Hanover, but the entire system of Lutheran *Landeskirchen*, died because of loyalty, because they did not or would not note that right had become wrong.

That is how this terrible condition arose that the Lutheran character of a church in Germany was and is recognized if the Lutheran Confession has a *de jure* standing, without considering what is actually taught. Thereby the Confession became a judicial entity, which means that it ceased to be a confession of *faith*. The great “We believe, teach, and confess” of the Formula of Concord had practically become a “We teach and confess, but this by no means implies that we believe.” Such Church Law must be the death of any Awakening. For here the Church of Christ is forced into forms of secular corporate law in which it cannot survive.

A parallel development was the wrecking of the pastoral office. When in 1852 one of the men who were fighting in the company of Loehe, the Bavarian Pfarrer Trexel, refused for conscience’ sake to perform a marriage, the President of the Supreme Council—the predecessor of Harless—issued the following directive: “When someone takes over an office, he is obligated to obey his superior; and when he obeys him, the moral responsibility does not rest upon the person who is obeying, but upon him who commands. To say that conscience does not permit one to obey is therefore not only a baseless evasion, but rests upon an overestimation of one’s own importance, upon the conceit that one counts one’s self to be more intelligent than the Superior” (according to N. Bonwetsch, *Aus vierzig Jahren Deutscher Kirchengeschichte. Briefe an Hengstenberg*, II, 1919, p. 99). We would not quote this if it would not correspond so exactly to the views expressed today concerning the official duties of the *Pfarrer*.

It is not to be wondered at that among those Lutherans who had left the *Landeskirche* and had been compelled to constitute their Lutheran Church as a Free Church, this same lack of organizational ability made itself felt with grave results. It was a huge task with which these men suddenly found themselves faced. For after all, for 300 years Lutheranism had existed in Germany in no other form than the State Church system. Where they suddenly were confronted with the need of building an ecclesiastical organization, it is

understandable that they did not escape the temptation, not only to search the New Testament for an order of the Church—which would be perfectly in order—but for an obligatory “Apostolic Church Order” (e. g., Kayel in Australia). Even when they recognized subsequently that the New Testament contains no law *de ecclesia constituenda*, the question still remained which doctrinal ideas of the New Testament concerning the Church at large and the individual congregation, concerning Church and Ministry, would have to be observed in constituting the Church.

It is not mere chance that Free-Church Lutheranism became divided over these issues. The breach between Loehe and Walther in 1853 over the question of Church and Ministry as well as the separation of the Immanuel Synod under Diedrich in 1861 because of differences concerning the essence and authority of church government, these are the tragedies in the history of this Lutheranism. The break between Loehe and Walther led to a serious cleavage between the conservative Lutherans of America. The split within the Prussian Free Church, which was not healed until 1904, and the controversies since the establishment of the Saxon Free Church have weakened the missionary potential of the Free Churches during the decisive years in the struggle for the preservation of Lutheranism in Germany. All other questions that still stood between the Free Churches are secondary.

It is certainly not by chance that in the final analysis the weakness which crippled the Lutheran Awakening among the Free Churches began with the same issue which had wrecked the Lutheranism of the *Landeskirchen*, the questions of Church Law and Church Order. Late in 1852 Loehe could still write to those Lutherans of Nassau and Baden who had left the State Church: “What the poor, sick, and dying *Landeskirchen* can no longer do, being paralyzed and almost destroyed by the masses of the world, that falls unto you and your kind.” (Plitt R. E. 11, 580, 37ff.) When ten years later Huschke’s decree of excommunication against Diedrich was proclaimed with obvious satisfaction, just as the Prussian authorities had done with the enforcement order of Frederic Wilhelm III, then the Free Church had lost its drawing power. In a metropolis like Frankfurt am Main there were, for example, in addition to the worldly-minded *Landeskirche*, three Free-Church Lutheran congregations: Breslau, Immanuel, and Saxon-Missouri. One is surprised today that in each of these congregations there were still people who would listen to the great Seventh Article (of the Augustana), that to the true unity of the Church it is enough to agree concerning the doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments, but that uniformity in human traditions and ceremonies is not necessary. It is not surprising that people who sought the Church of the Reformation in the spiritual wilderness of this city, who sought the Church of their Lutheran fathers, could no longer find it in this chaos, and told the Lutheran Free Churches what the Lutheran Church must hear ever again when it undertakes to inform Christendom as to what constitutes Church and Church unity: “Physician, heal thyself!”

8.

Thus a great solidarity of fate unites all those areas of Lutheranism that shared in the Awakening of the last century, but at the same time also a solidarity of blame. None of the great Lutherans of the previous century would have denied that if one looks behind those failures and defeats, one will also find men at fault. It was a fault, a grave fault, when men rendered obedience to secular government even where that government was not entitled to obedience, and where such obedience aided in the destruction of the Church of God and in the ruination of men’s souls. If the resistance of the Silesian Lutherans to the Union was theologically justified—and its propriety was subsequently recognized even in the Lutheran *Landeskirchen*—why were there not more to participate in the same?

When after a long confessional struggle similar causes in 1943 led to the Great Disruption in Scotland, more than 470 ministers, two fifths of the entire clergy, left the State Church, their kirks, manses, and livings, and were followed by the greater part of their congregations. And within a year there were 500 new churches in the country. Why was that not possible in Lutherdom? Why among the Lutheran Churches was it left to a few pastors to make this confession of deeds, together with a following that in the course of decades mounted to many thousands, and still was but a small minority? Later on Hengstenberg admitted that it was wrong that he

had not taken the part of the Breslau group in his *Evangelische Kirchenzeitung*, but excused himself by stating that in such case his periodical would have been suspended.

And if this obedience had only remained a silent one! But as always, so then also, Lutherans justified their timidity with theological arguments, and supplied the State with a good conscience for its transgression of divinely established limitations. There one might have learned from Luther and from the Gnesio-Lutherans how the Church is to speak to the Great of this World. By failing to do so they dug the grave, not only of the Church, but also of the Monarchy.

There is no need of demonstrating that this guilt of the Lutheran Church is not limited merely to the 19th century. Certainly we Lutherans do not want a theocracy. But if we will not consider what the division of powers means for the Church and the State, if we shall continue in our uncritical admiration of every passing authority, then our Church will share the responsibility for the catastrophe that is being brought upon mankind by the modern State which sets aside the commandments of God, and will together with such a State fall under the same judgment of God. Here lies the kernel of truth in the criticism that other churches and the unchurched world level at the political attitude of Lutheranism.

There are other points also at which the critique of outsiders has a message for us in our Church. Why in the 19th century did so many of those people in Germany who were earnestly seeking the Church of the Gospel fail to find the Lutheran Church? Why did many a one leave it again after he had found it? Many answers can, of course, be supplied. But we should not fail to note that answer which has been given again and again, not merely by superficial and uncharitable critics of the Lutheran faith, but also by observers who were favorably disposed and also well versed in history, yes, by men who stood very near to our Church. They became doubtful about the message of Lutheran faith because they failed to find it accompanied by the living testimony of deeds. They claimed—whether correctly or incorrectly need not be determined now—that Lutheranism was deficient in charity, without which, according to the word of the great Apostle of Faith, even he who has all knowledge, and a faith that could remove mountains, is literally “nothing.” In other words, they find in the Lutheran Church those faults which have ever been laid at the door of “orthodoxy.”

In so far as this critique is directed against orthodoxy as such, that is, the claim of teaching the true faith, true doctrine, it need not be considered here. The New Testament knows no other Church than “the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth.” Standing in constant struggle against false doctrine, constantly warning the Christians against heretics, even against human association with them¹⁰ (2 John 10), the Apostles were what modern man aggressively or pityingly calls “orthodox,”—which is also what all the great teachers of the Church wanted to be, and were. There is no other theology than orthodoxy. Nothing else warrants the name. Therefore orthodoxy belongs to the essence of the Lutheran Church and its theology. If orthodoxy as such is already to be counted as uncharitable—obviously charity is here being understood differently than in the New Testament—then we confess to the “uncharitableness” of Paul and John.

But we must distinguish between those who find fault with orthodoxy as such, and others who point to the errors and sins to which orthodox theologians are particularly prone. Every occupation has its own temptations, dangers, pet sins. Why should the occupation of theologians be exempt? On the contrary, according to all rules of human psychology and according to everything that we know from Holy Writ about the nature of sin we may well expect that the general sinfulness of theologians will work itself out in some particularly choice occupational sins. For Satan will not miss the glorious opportunity to discredit the preaching of the Gospel by causing the preacher to fall. Luther knew this, and therefore warned his followers constantly against vaunting themselves above the Papal Church in matters of morals. “*Vita mala est apud nos sicut apud papistas.*” (*Tischreden*, WA I, 294, 19.) A part of this *vita mala*, so we are assured by our critics, is how we contend for the truth and against error. The lack of charity that men detect in us becomes manifest not so much in the fact that there is a struggle, as in our manner and attitude.

¹⁰ We trust that our readers understand and have understood that by translating these letters of Professor Sasse we do not necessarily indicate our agreement with every particular statement—as above—but that we are offering them for the sake of the wealth of information and stimulation which they contain. —Ed.

There now is the picture that we have of ourselves. The orthodox theologian is the man who is right. He is truly right. But can a man always be right without suffering harm in his soul? What is more, the orthodox theologian knows that he is right. He must know it, else he could not speak up. Looking at it from the viewpoint of psychology, what self-assurance must grow out of this knowledge! What miracles must not the Holy Spirit perform in the hearts of such men if they are not to perish because of *superbia!* Consider furthermore the relationship to one's fellowmen, particularly to those who have the misfortune to be in the wrong. To declare to other men that they are errorists, that they do not belong to the Church (*sic!*), to renounce pulpit and altar fellowship: who is capable of doing that without suffering injury in his soul?

And yet all this must be done. It was necessary in the Church of the New Testament. "If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house, neither bid him God speed." Is this really the Apostle of Love who is speaking thus? Indeed, it is. And he speaks with the authority of Him who, if we have erred in such a matter, will say to us in the Last Judgment: "I was a stranger, and ye took me not in." That is how it happened—it was during the last great persecution in Alexandria—that Christians of different confessions sat together in the dungeon, and together were led to their execution. But to bid each other God speed, —no, that they did not do.

What miracles, by which the Church is preserved! What yawning chasms by the way! What temptations lurking even there where people of the same Church are disputing with one another about matters of doctrine!

The more serious a Church is in matters of doctrine and in its concern for purity of doctrine, the greater is the danger that it will sin in these points. Even Luther failed again and again in the language of his polemics, which is not to be excused by the greater excesses of his opponents and the fact that his generation was accustomed to such language. During the era of Orthodoxy there was much sinning, in the controversies between the various confessions as well as in theological polemic within the individual churches, particularly also the Lutheran. The swift and thorough collapse of the orthodox theology of all confessions at the end of the 17th century is explained in part by the fact that men were weary of this endless bitter wrangling.

In this connection it dare not be forgotten, however, that this orthodox theology also was acquainted with other methods of discussion. There is, for example, a document that was a real effort at a truly Christian discussion with another church body, namely V. E. Loescher's *Friedfertige Anrede* (Conciliatory Address) to the Reformed congregations of Germany (in Part Three of the *Historia Motuum* of 1724). Among Lutherans of the Awakening there was also an earnest striving for sanctification in this respect. Thus at the beginning of his "Confessions" A. G. Rudelbach admits, "I will not deny that I had to struggle lest I find in myself a fulfillment of that terrible symptom of the Last Days: the love of many shall wax cold." (C. R. Kaiser: *Rudelbach*, 1892, p. 20.)

But how many are not the fruits of which the movement of the Awakening deprived itself because this was not always remembered! It is not so much a matter of warding off the opposition—for in this the Lutheran theology of the 19th century seems to have been consistently objective and at the same time, as far as the men are concerned, superior to their unionistic adversaries and their brutal methods of controversy—as a matter of the struggle in one's own ranks. Here it must be recorded that even where a separation had become unavoidable, the dissolution should have been brought about in an entirely different manner. It was quite natural that there should be serious and far-reaching differences of opinion, say in one's judgment concerning certain happenings in the life of the Church. How far may a *Landeskirche* deteriorate before one can no longer recognize and acknowledge it as a Church of the Lutheran Reformation? When must a pastor refuse obedience to the authorities of his Church? There were profound differences of opinion on such questions in Bavaria, in Saxony, in Hanover, in Electoral Hesse. In part they involved decisions that can only be made by one's private conscience, and in which a certain measure of freedom must therefore be granted.

In other instances it was a matter of doctrine. Is it not to be understood that in a generation which was but gradually becoming aware again of Lutheran faith there should be differences of theological opinion about the meaning of the Lutheran Confession in certain questions? How painful for a generation that was just coming out of the revival of Pietism into Lutheranism, the effort to acquire an understanding of the Great Reformer and 16th century doctrine! There were only the old editions of Luther and of the Confessions, and none of these

were to be had in the bookstalls. Not until 1848 was there a new edition of the Book of Concord, the familiar work of the Franconian Pfarrer J. T. Mueller. Those theologians who were snapping up the documents of the Reformation and the works of the orthodox theology had all gone through Pietism, and some came from Schleiermacher's theology of experience. The Romantic view of man, of history, of society was working in them as in all educated persons of that time. So it was not to be avoided that for the time being they read the Confessions through the spectacles of their previous theology and worldview. It could not be otherwise. It was inevitable that different types of Lutheranism should develop.

But it should have been avoided that these theological tendencies be consolidated into set types of churches. Things would not have come to this pass had men spoken differently with each other, if each had made the effort to understand the particular slant (*die Brille*) of the other man as well as his own, if each had realized that he himself as well as the others were still but on the way of discovery as far as Lutheran doctrine was concerned. Then it would have been possible to arrive at a better mode of discussion.

Even in the days of Luther the *disputatio* still prevailed in theology as the scientific method for arriving at the truth. The idea of the disputation is that men who differ on a certain question, *e. g.*, in the interpretation of a passage in Holy Writ, come together so that they might jointly, as members of the Church of Christ, discover the truth by a careful examination of all arguments and counterarguments. Each of the participants is expected to think himself into the position of the other to such a degree, and to be so well versed in the subject matter, that he can undertake to present the arguments of the other. To use a fantastic illustration, it is as though the representatives of Missouri and those of Iowa had come together, and the Missouri theologians would have had to present all the arguments that speak for Chiliasm, and those of Iowa all the counterarguments.

We mention this here not in order to recommend the medieval method of work, lint only to point to the danger which threatened the Church, and to which the theology of recent centuries succumbed, namely that the theological differences within the Church were discussed in the manner of a secular controversy, perhaps some form of parliamentary debate. The purpose of the *disputatio* was to discover the truth. The aim in secular debate is by all means to prove that one was right in the first place. The debaters are opponents who belabor each other with arguments until one of them bows in abject defeat, —something which as a rule does not happen.

In these days Christendom is concerning itself with developing a new method of theological discussion, with what is called a "colloquy" (*Gespräch*) or "congress" (*Begegnung*, lit. "meeting.") How different would be the status of the Lutheran Church today if those theologians who identified themselves with the doctrine of the Lutheran Church, and who were determined to yield no part of it, would in the 19th century already have developed the great art of a Christian colloquy in which God's Word and nothing else shall prevail. Today, after the terrible catastrophes of World War II, men in all parts of the world are moving in that direction. There was and is no way of reconciling Loehe's and Walther's concepts of the Church with each other. But when both sides began to understand that Loehe's concept of the Church was to a certain degree determined by the non-Biblical idea of the social organism, and Walther's by the non-Biblical concept of the religious society, was it not possible then to recognize the real Church of the New Testament, of which through the spectacles of his own world-view each one had seen something that was true?

Just so it is with the other intra-Lutheran conflicts of those days. There is no doubt but that the doctrine that the Pope is the Antichrist is the teaching of the Lutheran Church, and that Vilmar and Loehe, with their untenable views concerning the Roman Church in the days before the *Vaticanum*, here simply failed to understand a part of Lutheran doctrine. But one could not refute them simply by repeating the formulas of the 16th century without considering that the view held by Luther (concerning the history of a world that would definitely come to an end before 1600 by the return of Christ) turned out to be wrong, and that the relationship of the Papacy and the Reformation with reference to the end of the world had to be rethought.

So we could go on through all of those controversies. In all these unhappy debates two types of Lutheranism, two types of Lutheran Awakening stood opposed to each other: a Lutheranism that was among other factors substantially influenced by Lutheran Pietism, and a Lutheranism influenced substantially by a return to the orthodoxy of the late 16th and the 17th century. Perhaps the Awakening of the Lutheran Church from the fatal stupor of Rationalism had to be, to begin with, an Awakening in the direction of the Lutheranism

of Spener or that of Quenstedt. But these two types of the Lutheranism of the Awakening could and can only be transitional stages toward an Awakening of the Lutheran Church in the sense of the Lutheran Confessions, which, as the Formula of Concord states explicitly, are to be interpreted according to the doctrine of Luther “as the leading teacher of the Augsburg Confession, ”—and not according to Quenstedt or Spener.

Will God grant us another such continuation of the Awakening? If it shall come, it can come only by this that all bow before the Word of God as the sole “judge, rule, and standard” of all doctrine of the Church, but which fulfills its function of judging, ruling, and directing only then when all who read, hear, and interpret it will let this same Word call them to repentance. Scripture helps us to recognize the Eternal Truth only to such an extent as in its judgment of doctrine we at the same time hear a judgment concerning ourselves and our lives, the judgment of Him who condemns the sinner and justifies the believer—the Judge and the Savior of the World.

* * * *

I need not say, dear brethren, what lessons for our ministry are derived from the chapter of Church History that we have considered. With deep concern we are all thinking about the future of the Lutheran Church in all parts of the world. To us it is not given, as it was to the Fathers of the previous century, to experience a Springtime of the Church. But in the Church it cannot always be Spring. God also sends to His Church the storms of Autumn and the seeming death-sleep of Winter. What He has allotted to us is simply that we faithfully administer His Means of Grace. It is certainly easier to preach in times when masses of men flock into the Church, than in times when only a handful of the faithful hold fast to the Word of God. But this latter is at least equally as important as the former. Even in the life of the Preacher of all preachers both occurred.

But to the Word that is preached faithfully, be it before many or few, is given the great promise that it shall not return void. The Holy Spirit is always at work, not only when it is Pentecost. And there are generations that work for a harvest that others will reap. One thing we know. If God will still give another Awakening to the Lutheran Church and to Christendom in general, then it will, like the Awakening of the 19th century and like every New Day in the history of the Church, begin with repentance. But this call to repentance we are already able and eager to hear, even today.

XXI

The Sesqui-Millennial of Chalcedon

(Translation by E. Reim)

Dear Brethren in the Ministry:

In all parts of Christendom, wherever this great Christian creed of the past is still a present force, we are these days commemorating the Fourth Ecumenical Council, which met in the year 451 from October 8 to November 1 at Chalcedon, that ancient city on the Asiatic side of the Bosphorus, opposite Constantinople. For the Eastern Orthodox Church this recalls the memory of one of its most splendid synods. As the Synod of the Six Hundred Fathers it is one of the largest in ancient times, second in importance only to the Council of Nicea in 325.

For the Eastern Church the important thing is the event of the Synod as such. For this body considers the Ecumenical Synod, representing the entire Church, as the instrument by which the Holy Spirit leads Christendom in all truth, bringing about the miraculous consensus of the participating Fathers. But for Rome Chalcedon is the great example of a council in which, as in solemn assembly of the Church, and for all the Church to hear, the truth is proclaimed by the Successor of Peter and Vicar of Christ with the full implications of his official doctrinal infallibility. Hence the festivities which will be observed in Rome during the coming weeks¹¹ will be particularly in honor of the great Pope Leo, through whom this Council became a triumph of

¹¹ This Letter of Dr. Sasse was written during September 1951.

the Roman Church, albeit not an absolute one - for it was Leo's doctrine which the Council accepted as the voice of Peter.

As for those evangelical churches that commemorate the event, particularly the Lutheran, neither the great Synod nor the great Pope will be invested with a halo. Just as this Synod at the gates of Byzantium stood in the aura of the Imperial Church policy, where concern for the unity of the Church was interwoven with concern for the preservation of the Roman Empire, so Leo was not merely the successor of Peter, but covertly also the heir of the Roman Caesars. So his church-political moves can only be understood.

What makes Chalcedon one of the outstanding events in the history of the Church for evangelical believers, and an event worthy of commemoration by the Church, is the single fact that in those days—*hominum confusione et Dei providentia*, despite all secular and ecclesiastical politicians—a doctrinal decision was achieved in one of the most important articles of Christian faith, one that has not been forgotten as are most of the other decrees of this Synod, and like so many doctrinal statements of other synods. It is rather an article still confessed by the greatest part of Christendom today; an article of which the Lutheran Church holds that it expresses the true doctrine of the Holy Writ, the source of life for the Church.

This doctrine of the Council of Chalcedon, as it is embodied in the *Symbolum Chalcedonense*, the Creed of that Synod, shall be the subject of the following discussion. We shall not try to analyze the history of this doctrine in all its intricate detail—that would lie beyond the scope of these Letters—but we shall try to see what this doctrine means for us today.

1.

What turbulent times those four generations were that lie between the outbreak of the Arian controversy (320) and the Council of Chalcedon, the era of the first four Ecumenical Synods, the era of the formulation of dogma in the Ancient Church. Upon the short-lived attempt of the Era of Constantine once more to unite the Empire with the aid of the Church, there followed midway in the fourth century a disintegration that was not to be stayed. When the Second Ecumenical Council assembled in Constantinople in 381, the Goths had crossed the Danube and other Germans the Rhine, and the so-called Migration of the Tribes had begun. At the time of the Third Synod, Ephesus in 431, the Latin Church had from Britain to Africa been partly destroyed, partly reduced to little isolated groups among the conquering Germanic-Arian nations. In the previous year Augustine had died during the siege of Hippo Regius. The year of Chalcedon was a year of new catastrophes. Shortly after Easter Attila had crossed the Rhine with an army of perhaps half a million Huns and made his plundering way through Gaul until he was brought to a halt in that bloody battle upon the fields of Chalons where Romans and Germans offered united resistance to the Asiatic hordes. But now Italy was endangered and in the following year visited by the "Scourge," as Leo put it, until there occurred the great miracle that the conqueror departed from Italy after negotiating with the Pope who functioned as a member of the Roman delegation. Do such recollections perhaps play a part in making the observance of the 1500th anniversary of Chalcedon—coming as it does at a time when Christian Europe and Roman Catholicism are endangered by another great threat from the East—into a jubilee of the great Pope of the Era of the Migration?

This broad historical background must ever be kept in view if one would understand the most profound meaning of the great Ecumenical Synods and their doctrinal decrees. The great political experiment of the Constantinian era, to preserve the existence of the Empire by means of the Church, had failed. The Church had not lived up to the expectations of Constantine. After the Sack of Rome Augustine had felt constrained to dedicate his great work, *De Civitate Dei*, to a refutation of the charge that Rome's transition to Christianity was the cause of its downfall.

But had the Church not really been found wanting? Did it have nothing better to do in those days of world crisis than to engage in theological controversy? Even before Nicea Constantine had warned the Church about this. Could the great synods of the Empire not have had something more urgent and practical to do than to forge theological formulas? Think of the gigantic mission opportunities with which it was suddenly confronted when Constantine placed a world at its feet. Think of the problems before which it was placed by the Great Migration. But at that time those resolutions by which modern churches and synods define their position on

world issues had not yet been invented. And so “nothing more” came out of the Synod of Constantinople in 381 than the timeless creed that confesses the *homoousia* of the Son with the Father.

But is this not actually more than anything else that this Synod could have achieved had it issued some timely statement dealing with the situation of the Church, or addressed a message to the world, to the Empire, and to the new nations? Is not the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed perhaps the very word, the very manifesto, the lack of which modern Christians deplore in the Church of that day? What greater, more important, more pertinent message could the Church have issued to the world, to nations old and new, and to its own members, than the message concerning the eternal Son of God, “begotten of His Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things are made; Who for us men and our salvation came down from heaven and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary and was made man ...”! This confession made by Christians in a dying world became the confession of the new nations and the confession of all coming generations of the Church. Is this not something much greater than any “relevant” and “practical” pronouncement made in the manner of modern church conventions can possibly be? What has become of the many statements with which the Ecumenical World Conferences have annotated the historical events of our day? The world has never heard them, and the churches have long forgotten them. Not even the textbooks of church history take cognizance of them. But the Creed of that ancient Synod is prayed in thousands of churches every Sunday, and probably more martyrs have died for this confession in the 20th century than in all the past centuries of the history of the Church taken together. And the same is true of the Creed of Chalcedon. Everything else that occurred in that eventful year of 451 belongs to the past, even though it may live in the memory of history. But the doctrinal pronouncement of Chalcedon is as vital today as then. As an interpretation of the Divine Word it shares in that immortality which is pictured by that word of Scripture: “The grass withereth, and the flower thereof falleth away: but the Word of the Lord endureth forever.”

2.

What Biblical truth was at stake at Chalcedon? The first two ecumenical synods had asserted the true deity of the Son, and thereby brought up the problem concerning the relation of the divine and the human natures of Christ to one another. Under the respective leadership of the schools of Antioch and Alexandria this question was debated by subsequent generations in grave controversies, profoundly affecting the Church. For thus it is the lot of Christendom, ever to have its understanding of the truth granted only at the price of a battle for the truth. The vital significance of these great discussions for the Christendom of today can be eliminated neither by the sins which were committed on all sides in this struggle, and particularly by the orthodox Alexandrians, nor by the fact that these controversies were carried on with the intellectual equipment (*Denkmitteln*) of ancient philosophy, Aristotelian in Antioch and Neo-platonist in Alexandria.

If Harnack—and with him the entire school of Ritschl—was of the opinion that the doctrine of the two natures could be evaded by ruling out the concept of the divine or the human “nature” as an inadmissible philosophical formulation (*Philosophumenon*), and sought to understand the divine-human quality in Christ ethically rather than as pertaining to the nature, then he is refuted by the fact that in the process he himself became a Nestorian. The Christology of modern Protestantism is Antiochene-Nestorian: Deity dwelling in the man Jesus as in a temple, and the man Jesus standing in an ethical relation to Deity. The difference is only this that the Antiochenes of old still were in earnest about the Divine in Christ.

One should consider the Hymn to the Nativity in the Nestorian liturgy, where the mystery of the incarnate Logos is proclaimed: “He was in the bosom of His Father from all eternity, before all the world, as true God; He came to us in the fulness of the time and, taking unto Himself our body, redeemed us as true man... For nine months He was in His mother’s womb, and was born true man. The angels glorified Him as true God. He was laid into a manger as true man. The Star proclaimed Him true God.” In this manner His entire life is reviewed and the statements of the Gospel concerning Him are allocated either to the true man or the true God. The true man increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man. The true God changed water into wine. He prayed as true man. He performed His miracles as true God. “He was nailed to the Tree as

true man. He rent the rocks as true God.” He died and was buried as true man. At this point the hymn has nothing to say about the Deity, but continues concerning the Resurrection: “He ate and drank with His disciples after the Resurrection as true man. He passed through doors that were shut and greeted the Twelve with the salutation of peace as true God.” ... (Quoted according to *Fr. Heiler: Urkirche und Ostkirche*, p. 430f.)

One need only omit the statements concerning the true God, and one has the liberal picture of Jesus, of the Christ who has been “rescued from mythology” (*des “entmythologisierten” Christus*). The unity of the person of the Savior which Nestorianism was unable to find is achieved by this theology of modern Protestantism when with the allegedly philosophical concept of “nature”—which appears in the New Testament in 2 Pet. 1:4—it also eliminates the concept of the divine nature and makes Jesus mere man.

This demonstrates clearly that one cannot get away from the concepts of the divine and the human nature. For nature here is not a physical category, but the word serves to designate the essence, about as the English expression, “the nature of the Church,” indicates the essence of the Church. The human nature of Christ is His being in substance true man, the divine nature His being in substance true God. According to His essence Jesus Christ is true God, and according to His essence true man. This, and nothing else, is meant by the Doctrine of the Two Natures. That is why no theology can dispense with it. This explains the relevancy of the old Christological issues. In new forms they turn up again and again. One need only recall how in the 16th century the old controversy between the Christology of Alexandria and that of Antioch broke out in new form between Lutheran and Reformed theologians, even on the basis of a mutually recognized Creed of Chalcedon, a controversy which really continues to this day.

If we are therefore constrained to speak of a divine and a human nature in Christ, then we cannot escape the question of their relation to each other. After the Council of Ephesus in 431 had condemned Nestorius and thereby rejected the separation of the deity and the humanity of Christ, it now became necessary to defend this truth of the distinction of the two natures against the Monophysitism arising out of the Alexandrian Christology. Monophysitism, which by very unspiritual means had prevailed at the “Robber Synod” of Ephesus in 449, solves the problem of the divine-human person of the Savior, which had proved too much for the Antiochenes, in a most simple and apparently Christian manner. It teaches that the human nature was absorbed by the divine, so that after the union of the natures in the Incarnation only a single nature remains, the divine, into which the human has been diffused like a drop of milk in the ocean.

This teaching comes very close to the Docetism of the ancient Gnostics and Marcion. It is incapable of understanding the praying of Jesus. Gethsemane and the “Why hast Thou forsaken me?” lose their meaning. The “flesh” of the Incarnation is no longer a true flesh. In modern form this Monophysitism was proclaimed during the German *Kirchenkampf* by members of the German-Christian party, for instance in this statement of the 28 theses of the Saxon People’s Church (*Volkskirche*) of 1933: “The debate whether Jesus was Jew or Aryan simply does not get at the essence of Jesus. Jesus is not a bearer of human nature, but reveals in His person the nature of God.” (*K. D. Schmidt: Die Bekenntnisse des Jahres 1933*, p. 101.) This is an indication that Monophysitism remains a danger for the Church, just as much as Nestorianism and Arianism.

The answer that Chalcedon gave to this question concerning the relation of the divine and the human nature in the person of the God-man is the simplest one imaginable. The Creed of 451 simply sets side by side the three truths that must be taught concerning the person of Jesus Christ, without attempting to explain them. Since the text of this Creed is not found in our Book of Concord—its doctrinal content has been incorporated in the Symbolum Quicunque and confirmed by the Augustana (Art. III) and the Formula of Concord (Art. VIII)—let the chief statements of this lengthy doctrinal decree be quoted:

“The holy and great Ecumenical Synod ... stands against those who seek to tear apart the mystery of the Incarnation into a duality of sons; and it excludes those from the holy fellowship who dare to declare the Deity of the Only-begotten to be capable of suffering; and it opposes those who invent a mingling and flowing together of the two natures of Christ; and it banishes those who foolishly maintain that the servant’s form which the Son received from us is of a heavenly substance (*ousia*), or one other than ours; and it anathematizes those who fable that before the union there were two natures of the Lord, but after the union only one.

“Following the Holy Fathers we all with one consent teach men to confess one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, the same perfect in deity and perfect in humanity, God truly and man truly, of a reasonable soul and body, of one substance with the Father in His deity, and of one substance with us in His humanity, in all things like unto us without sin; begotten before the ages in His deity, in the last days for us and our salvation born of the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God, in His humanity; one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, to be acknowledged in two natures, without confusion (*asynchytōs, inconfuse*), without change (*atreptōs, immutabiliter*), without division (*adiaretōs, indivise*), without separation (*achōristōs, inseparabiliter*), the distinction of the natures being by no means taken away because of the union, but rather the property of each nature being preserved, and concurring in one person (*prosōpon*) and one hypostasis (lat. *subsistentia*). We do not confess (a Son) divided and separated into two persons, but one and the selfsame Son and only-begotten God, Logos, Lord Jesus Christ; as from the beginning the prophets and the Lord Jesus Christ Himself taught us concerning Him, and the creed of the Fathers handed down to us. Since we have arrived at this decision with great circumspection and care, the holy and Ecumenical Synod has decreed that no one may set forth any other doctrine, or set it down in writing, or foster it or teach it to others.” (Then those who teach otherwise are threatened with removal from office and excommunication.)

This is the faith of the Fathers of Chalcedon: belief in the true divinity, the true humanity, and the true unity of the divine-human Person.

3.

Together with the Symbolum Quicumque and the Formula of Concord the doctrinal formulation of Chalcedon belongs to those confessions of Christendom that were by modern Protestantism considered as horrible examples of an irreligious dogmatism and theological hair-splitting. Especially “the bald negative definitions with which everything is supposed to have been said” (*Harnack: Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte II, p. 397*) have rather nettled the critics. Only the reawakening in our day of an appreciation of confession and formal doctrine (*Dogma*) in the Church has tempered this harsh judgment. It is understood once more that negation may have a most positive significance in the dogma of the Church, since there are truths that can only be expressed *via negationis*. Men understand again what the negatives (unconfused, unchanged, undivided, unseparated) mean by way of limitation. They are like buoys, marking for us the one channel of navigation within which a ship must keep if it is not to be wrecked. And the rediscovery of dialectic and paradox in theology has made the Creed of Chalcedon famous even as an example of genuine theological discourse.

Indeed, no serious theologian will today deny that just with its careful limitations against possible errors this confession safeguards the Biblical truths that Jesus Christ is true God and true man, and at the same time one person. For this reason, and not for the sake of some kind of traditionalism, the churches of the Reformation have declared their adherence. And in his explanation of the Second Article, “the most beautiful sentence in the German language,” Luther has succeeded in translating the Chalcedonian Creed into a language that even a child can understand and speak: “I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary, is my Lord ...” That is Chalcedon for the children, even as it is probably the criterion of every genuine dogma that it can be stated so plainly that the simplest person can understand it.

Our appreciation of the confession of 451 dare, however, not keep us from seeing also its limitations. From a purely formal point of view, it is not a model of confessional writing. It cannot be prayed¹² like the Nicene Creed. Nor does it want to be more than merely a commentary upon the Nicaenum, even as the Formula of Concord undertakes to be a commentary upon the Augustana. For the Fathers of 451 the Symbol of the 150 Fathers of Constantinople still remains the Creed—our Niceno-Constantinopolitanum, which has been

¹² It is difficult to give an adequate translation for the German idiom, *den Glauben beten*. It implies a reverent, worshipful confession, plus praise and adoration.

preserved for us in the records of Chalcedon. (Incidentally, this is the evidence that our so-called Nicene Creed is really that of Constantinople.)

Another deficiency must be noted. How is it that the Creed of Chalcedon did not attain the recognition that was achieved by the Nicaenum? It did indeed preserve the unity of the Greek and Latin Churches, but only a unity of the Church within the Empire. Everything that lay beyond the Empire, the churches of Armenia, Syria, Egypt, Ethiopia, did not accept it. The churches of the non-Grecian Orient remained Nestorian, like the East-Syrian Church that eventually reached out to China and East India, or they became Monophysites like the rest. There certainly were political reasons for this: These nations and churches wanted to have nothing more to do with the orthodox Christianity of Rome and the Hellenists. This awakening Asia declared its independence of the Church of the Empire because this represented “Western Christianity.” The Christianity of Asia, both Monophysite and Nestorian, was then either engulfed or overshadowed by Islam. Why? What has Islam in common with Monophysitism, what with Nestorianism?

There is certainly also an anti-Roman and anti-Hellenist spirit (in Islam), the spirit of Asia, which is antagonistic to the Western spirit. But the most important factor is that all three represent Christological heresies, particularly also Islam. And church history of every era teaches that the transition from one heresy to another is very easy, even though these heresies may contradict one another. Thus the fate of the Eastern churches was sealed when they refused to take the step which since the end of the 5th century was taken by the Arian churches of the West, one after another, namely the transition to orthodoxy. They (viz., the Eastern churches) wished to remain orthodox. The Nicaenum remained their confession. But their history shows that one cannot truly preserve the Nicene Creed if one rejects that of Chalcedon as its authentic interpretation—even as no one can hold fast to the Augustana Invariata who refuses to accept the Formula of Concord.

But there must be within the confession itself reasons why the Creed of Chalcedon did not achieve recognition in all parts of Christendom. It is not yet a weakness that within the limitations defined by the four negative terms there are several possible ways of understanding the Christology. Thus there is also the possibility of understanding the Trinity in the Eastern manner as the Triune God (*Dreieinigkeit*) or, like the West, as the threefold God (*Dreifaltigkeit*).¹³ But the question is whether more should not have been said on one certain point.

When at the beginning of the 6th century the doctrine of the enhypostasis was formulated, that is the doctrine that the human nature has its hypostasis in the divine, in other words that the person of the God-man is the person of the Logos, then this view came too late to win back the Monophysites. But what course would the history of the doctrine have taken had this thought already been included in the Chalcedonian Creed? This doctrine was meant to preserve what was true in the Monophysite contention, even as the concern of Nestorianism for recognition of the two natures had already been unmistakably safeguarded at Chalcedon. The fact that a hiatus remained—and perhaps still had to remain in view of the level of theological understanding of that city—is the chief reason why the Council of 451 was not able to bring the Christological controversy to an actual conclusion, but that the antagonism between Nestorianism and Monophysitism flared up in new forms again and again, even within that part of Christianity which recognized Chalcedon.

It is even quite probable that the profound difference between Lutheranism and Calvinism is to be regarded as a revival of the old Christological trends (*christologische Schulen*) upon the soil of the Reformation. That is how the controversy between the Lutheran and the Reformed churches concerning the Lord’s Supper became a controversy concerning the interpretation of the Creed of Chalcedon. For the question concerning the real presence of the body and blood of Christ in the Sacrament of the Altar leads to the other question, whether the human nature of Christ is united with the divine in such a manner that it partakes of its attributes. Lutheran Christology, continuing the Alexandrian emphasis upon the unity of the God-man, affirms this, while the Reformed denies it, in the sense of the Antiochene version of the doctrine of the two natures and its *finitum non capax infiniti*. That is why discussions between the Lutheran and the Reformed church of our day, even down to the practical issues of Liturgy and Canon Law (*Kirchenrecht*), still remain a discussion about the proper

¹³ We fail to follow the author. *Triplex Deus?* —Ed.

understanding of the Chalcedonian Creed which, together with the Nicaenum, has become the great common doctrinal basis of all Western Churches.

4.

About one thing we should be clear, no matter how painfully our review of these great interlocking issues reminds us of the calamity of a divided Christendom. The greatest tragedy is not that there are various interpretations of the Creeds of Chalcedon and Nicea, so that there are Christian confessions in the sense of the Orthodox, of the Roman, of the Lutheran, of the Reformed, of the Anglican Church. The real tragedy of modern Christendom is rather this that together with these ancient confessions it has to a great extent lost the common dogmatic foundation. The rift between East and West in the Middle Ages, the schisms of Western Christendom in the era of the Reformation were indeed tragedies beyond words. But they could not entirely destroy the unity of Christendom. How well were not East and West able during the height as well as toward the end of the Middle Ages to speak with one another! What profound understanding of the Eastern Church did not Thomas of Aquinas possess! And how constantly he kept all of Christendom in view in his great lifework of theology! And even during the 16th and 17th centuries the battling churches of the several confessions still constitute some kind of unity, over and above the chasms that divide them. Only because of their agreement in the great fundamental dogmas of the ancient Christian faith could the theologians of the Tridentinum and Martin Chemnitz, could Bellarmine and John Gerhard, could Jacob Andreae and Beza, could the Tuebingen Faculty and the Patriarch Jeremias converse with one another, even though polemically.

Nor is it mere chance that the same confessional document of the Lutheran Church which most emphatically voices the opposition to the Roman Church and calls the Pope the Anti-Christ, also in strongest terms declares its solidarity with this Church in confessing “the sublime articles concerning the Divine Majesty”: “Concerning these articles there is no contention or dispute, since we on both sides confess them.” (Art. Smalc. Part I.) Only he who takes this seriously knows what the Lutheran Church is, particularly also in its relation to the Churches of other confessions. Not until Pietism and Rationalism (*die Aufklärung*) disintegrated the understanding of the dogmas of the Ancient Church did the actual unity of the contending confessional churches, which was evidenced thereby, finally break down. Not the 16th century, but the 18th is the real century of church schism. Since then the confessions cease to converse with each other, to know one another, and to believe in their unity.

Now there is a grain of truth in the idea of Calixtus about the *consensus quinquesaecularis* as the basis for a union of churches, and in the Anglican counterpart about the Creed of the “ancient undivided Church” as a basis upon which the churches might unite. The point where the syncretism of Calixtus and where the Anglicans were in error is the thought that one could forget the Reformation, re-evaluate its doctrine, and declare the differences and conflicts of the 16th century non-essential.

Against this idea of union that today is again playing so important a role in the world, particularly since the Ecumenical Movement has carried it out into all the mission fields, the following is to be said. The Reformation was more than a division of Christendom that one may deplore and forget. It did result in a schism. But essentially it was a new understanding of the Gospel, an understanding that can be accepted, declined, or perhaps even modified, but which at all events calls for a decision. He who refuses to make this decision, who dares to say neither Yes nor No to the claim of the Reformation that it is the right interpretation of the ancient creeds with their *propter nos homines et propter nostram salutem*, he is really not taking these old confessions seriously.

In all the attempts at union, therefore, which consider the creeds of the Ancient Church a sufficient basis of agreement, these are actually not being taken as a binding expression of Christian doctrine, but rather as ancient and venerable liturgical and canonical texts, which one uses without breaking one’s head over what they may mean. Virtue is then made of necessity, and one states that the Creed is derived from the Liturgy, and that only as a liturgical text can it be used and understood, and one feels oneself at one with the Church of all the ages if it is but heard in the church. But one forgets that for the Fathers it was the expression of great objective

truths, for which they were ready to die, and that these great trans-subjective truths, as the Creeds of Nicea and Chalcedon testify, are what creates a unity of Christendom that transcends all confessional bounds.

Here lies the greatest tragedy of divided Christendom. During the last 250 years we have lost what was the common possession of all Christians, even during the times of religious wars and of the worst inter-confessional polemic. With shocking clarity this has been revealed by the Ecumenical Movement of the previous generation. It was a great moment when at Lausanne in 1927 the World Conference for Faith and Order in the Church confirmed the Nicaenum as the common confession of the Church. It soon developed, however, that most of the participating churches had no thought of taking this resolution seriously. The dogmatic foundation of the great Ecumenical Associations and the World Council of Churches which grew out of this conference of 1947 remained the confession which acknowledges Jesus Christ as "God and Savior." All churches accepting Jesus Christ as their "God and Savior" may participate, whatever this confession may mean for them.

This theologically inadequate and erroneous formula that can cover all kinds of false doctrine has been taken over out of the idiom of the American sects. Never can it take the place of that clear confession concerning the Trinity of God and the God-man-hood (*Gottmenschheit*) of Jesus Christ that would have to be the basis for joint church action and for doctrinal discussions between the churches.¹⁴ But it is deeply significant that all efforts of Lutherans and Anglicans to place the Ecumenical Movement on this basis have failed. For the Reformed churches of the world have long since done away with the confessions of the Church of antiquity, and the "Young Churches" which they have founded in all mission fields on earth have never possessed them.

But even for the Anglican and the Lutheran churches these creeds actually have largely lost their dogmatic significance, and exist only as historical, liturgical, and canonical documents. None of the well meant Protestant complaints, perfectly justified in themselves, about un-Scriptural new Catholic dogmas can change the fact that the Church of Rome has at least preserved the old Scriptural dogma, even though mutilated by the additions of a later day. One may well ask what would have become of this great heritage of the Church if during the last 250 years, even as in the days of Chalcedon, Rome had not been the guardian of the dogmas of the Ancient Church, constantly reminding the Evangelical churches of what they either had surrendered, or were about to surrender.

5.

In conclusion let me, venerable brethren, say a word concerning the mission (*Aufgabe*) of those who see this distress of the Church and to whom the memory of the Fourth Ecumenical Council is an occasion to declare themselves anew concerning the "sublime articles concerning the divine majesty," which constitute the great heritage of the Ancient Church for the orthodox Church of all time. For there are, praise God, still evangelical churches which know what constitutes true doctrine; and within such churches as have in general become weak in faith, or have fallen from the faith, there are also still Christians and, in particular, faithful servants of the Word who have not gone along in this apostasy and whose daily prayer is that God may preserve them from this temptation.

First of all, we must guard against placing too high an evaluation upon a confession like that of Chalcedon. In his "Concerning Councils and Churches" Luther upon one occasion speaks of the scant information which his times had about this Council, and goes on to say: "Whither have they gone, the dear saints and Christians who through so many hundred years knew nothing about what this council has decreed? For there must always be saints upon this earth; and when they die, other saints must live, from the beginning until the end of the world. Otherwise this article would be false: I believe one holy Christian Church, the communion of saints. And Christ would necessarily be a deceiver when He says, "I am with you unto the end of the world." Living saints there must always be upon earth, be they where they may; else there would be an end

¹⁴ Do these two things lie on the same level? And is "joint church action" not one of the chief causes of that unionism in mission fields of which the author complains so bitterly? —Ed.

to the kingdom of Christ, and there would be no one to pray the Lord's Prayer, to confess the Creed, to be baptized, to partake of the Sacrament, to be absolved, etc." (Erl Ed. XXV, 316.) One may be a Christian without knowing the Creed of Chalcedon and without understanding its technical terms. But one cannot be a Christian without confessing the faith which it sets forth, faith in the true Godhead and the true manhood of Christ, and the true unity of the person of the God-man. For that is the faith of the New Testament, to believe in the Incarnation, and earnestly to take to heart the saving message of the Gospel: "The Word was made flesh."

But as a testimony to this faith Chalcedon has a significance for the Church of all the ages. That is why its doctrinal content has in the second part of the so-called Athanasian Creed become binding doctrine for the Western Church, being subsequently confirmed by the confessions of the Reformation. The experience of Christendom teaches that wherever the authority of these ancient creeds was set aside, this also meant the lapse of the Biblical doctrine of the Incarnation of the eternal Son. It is impossible to maintain the authority of Scripture while rejecting the authority of the confessions. And this is so because the authority of the confessions is after all nothing else than the authority of the Scriptural content which is set forth in them. This is why with the *norma normata* of the confessions there invariably also falls the *norma normans* of Scripture.

This has been the sorry experience of Protestant Christianity during the recent centuries. The theory of the Reformed Church and of Reformed Biblicism has proved itself to be false, namely that the authority of the Bible becomes greater and more assured as one lessens the authority of the confessions. While invoking the *sola Scriptura*, Reformed churches from Switzerland to America and to the Far East grant equal recognition to deniers of the God-manhood of Christ, and of the Trinity, as well as to those who confess the old doctrines. When in a famed minster¹⁵ of Switzerland, alongside of a great preacher who as a friend and pupil of Karl Barth proclaims the Gospel in the sense of the Reformed Church, another can stand in the pulpit who declares himself to be an avowed opponent of the doctrine of the Trinity, and who demands of the Church that she be so "catholic" that she have room for Unitarians as well as Trinitarians, and if this condition is legalized by canon law and perpetuated by guarantees for the protection of minorities, then this is but an example for what is today possible and normal in all Reformed churches.

If the church authorities of Hesse-Nassau, under the leadership of Niemoeller, extend a cordial welcome through an official representative to the congress for "Free Christianity," thereby recognizing it, although at this congress the divine worship of Jesus is assailed as a violation of the First Commandment—what blasphemy toward our Lord Jesus Christ, who Himself asserted His deity! —and if (so that no flesh should glory) Lutheranism was also represented by a guest appearance of Paul Althaus as lecturer, then this is a sign of how little the "Confessing Church" was able to restore the confessions of the Church to their position of honor. The Church of Bremen, which at first declined to become a member of the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKiD) because it was not able to make even that minimum of confession which is required in the preamble to the constitution, has probably been effectively informed in the meantime that modern churches, even as modern theologians, need not stumble over such threads. Just as in the World Council of Churches, church bodies and theologians who do not share the doctrine of the God-man Christ are engaged in cheerful collaboration.

Now let no one come with the objection that formal confessions and the stipulations of canon law are unable to provide a guarantee of pure doctrine; that it is littleness of faith to seek thus to safeguard the state of the Church; that the Holy Spirit can work also under such circumstances and that it is unbelief not to have this confidence in Him; and that furthermore things are also no better in churches that are theoretically Lutheran. To this we reply that no theologian expects of confessional writings or church orders that they will save the Church. We know that the Holy Spirit moves where and when He will, and that the Means of Grace are effective wherever they are employed. We have confidence in the Lord of the Church that He who has raised the dead can also bring dying and dead churches back to life, even as He has quickened our hearts that were dead in sins to a living faith. But we declare it to be mere superstition if one thinks that God will by a miracle do what He has assigned to us ministers of the Church, and what in sloth and faintness of heart, in complacency or for fear of men, we fail again and again to do.

¹⁵ A monastery church or cathedral – WLS Library Staff

For the sake of the eternal truth, and for the sake of the souls that are entrusted to them, He has commanded the servants of the Word, the shepherds of His flock, to testify against false doctrine and to exclude it from the Church. We declare it to be blasphemous to expect the Holy Ghost to remove obstacles that we deliberately place into the way of His work. We know that no confession guarantees purity of doctrine—what errors have not crept into churches that, like the Eastern churches and Roman Catholicism, actually have preserved the creeds of Nicea and Chalcedon—but we also know that the doctrine of the Church must suffer complete corruption, that the Gospel must die, when men forget the confession of the truth.

To say this, to witness it to the Lutheran Church and to Christendom, that is the great mission of faithful Lutherans today. It is a thankless task; for the world, even the Christian world, even the Lutheran world, does not wish to hear this. Today there are only a few groups, and mostly small, who are still saying all this and who do not fear the reproach of confessionalism and orthodoxy. But more depends upon their faithfulness than most of us are aware. At all events, we do not want to be ashamed to belong to them.

I greet you all with the words that in the Liturgy of the Eastern Church introduce the Credo: “Let us love one another, so that we may confess in unity of faith! ”