

"WOULD THE DOCTRINE OF THE CHURCH BE DEVISIVE
TO CHURCH FELLOWSHIP TODAY?"

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Debates concerning the doctrine of the Church and Ministry were present when some of the first Lutherans settled in Perry County, Missouri. The discussion became necessary after Pastor Martin Stephan was deposed from office. Stephan had false views regarding the doctrines of Church and Ministry and tried to impose his views on the people. He held that the visible Lutheran Church was the only Church in which salvation was possible. Therefore, anyone who wished to be saved would have to join and emigrate with him. His false teachings were repudiated by men who insisted on the spiritual priesthood of all believers and upon the rights and privileges of a congregation. Some men maintained that by leaving congregations in Germany, people separated themselves from the Church and therefore could not establish the office of the ministry.

Again and again efforts were made to solve these problems but to no avail. The views of Rome and Donatism were prevalent and others also doubted whether they were Christians or a Church. For about two years these questions were tossed about and were unsettled until the appearance on the scene of Dr. C. F. W. Walther.

Dr. Walther's family ties go back to a family of Lutherans in Saxony. His father and grandfather were pastors. During his early years he had a very minimal knowledge of the Bible. After college his desire was to study music but the reading of a biography led him to the study of theology. Pietistic literature was at a premium and was read by many students. During a time of spiritual distress he gained help from Stephan who later on in America would oppose Walther. Sickness and its recuperation brought him in contact with the writings of Luther. It was the study of these writings that gave Walther "his living convictions of the Scriptural character of the doctrine of the Lutheran Church and the necessity of its positive confessions." Walther came to America with Stephan but was held under suspicion by Stephan. But it was Stephan who fell into disrespect and was removed from the colony. Walther became the spiritual leader for two Christian congregations in Perry County.

One of the questions which still bothered the congregation was, "Are our congregations Christian Lutheran congregations?" Another stubborn illness provided opportunity for Walther to study Luther and other sound theologians with the result that he knew well the doctrine of the Church.

Walther's study of Scripture and of Luther's writings helped him in acquiring an answer to: What is the Church? Some men felt that the churches in America were still part of the State Church in Germany and therefore had no right to exist. Others spoke of dissolving the congregation, not having public worship, but to worship in the home. Because of European thought and practice concerning the church, Dr. Walther wrote nine theses concerning the doctrine of the church.

A brief summary of these theses follows:

1. The Church, in the proper sense, is the communion of saints. These saints have been called, gathered, enlightened, and kept in the true faith by the Holy Ghost.
2. Only a true believer, i.e., one who has the Spirit of Christ, is a member of the church.
3. The Church is invisible.
4. The true Church of believers has the keys of the kingdom. This church has all the rights made available to the Church of Christ.
5. The marks of the true Church include the pure preaching of the Word and the administration of the sacraments as instituted by Christ.
6. The visible church is made up of good and evil persons. Congregations are called churches (particular churches) because of the presence of the invisible, true Church of believers.
7. If only two or three persons are

members of the invisible Church, the power given by Christ to the church if still present.

8. In spite of the fact that God gathers the elect to Himself from places where the Word is not taught in its truth and purity, Scriptures advises that we flee from false teachers.

9. Fellowship in the invisible Church is the only requisite for obtaining salvation. "In Walther's polemic against the European thinking about the church, and his resistance to the practice resulting from it, he sometimes overstated his case. He never asserted categorically that only the congregation can excommunicate. He did assert, in the strongest possible terms, that the local congregation does have this ultimate authority, and laid down the manner in which it may best execute it in his RECHTE GESALT EINER CHRIST LICHTEN ORTSGEMEINDE." (Sola Scriptura-Dec. 1971)

Walther contributed much to the understanding and practical application of the doctrine of the Church. His understanding of this doctrine reflects the understanding of the Confession. The Smalcald Articles and the Formula of Concord do not restrict their discussion on the Church only to local congregations. They speak of the "congregation of God," "the Church," or quote Matthew 18: 20 which says, "Where two or three are gathered

together in my name, there am I in the midst of them."

The men who succeeded Dr. Walther stated that: 1) only the local congregation can excommunicate, and 2) the local congregation is divinely instituted and other groupings are human arrangements. Edward Koehler states, "The local congregation is the visible church. Synods and similar organizations--do not possess the prerogatives and powers of the local congregations." Dr. Pieper said, "The command Tell it to the church," according to the context, pertains to the local church, or congregation, and it must be restricted to the local church." These statements are not in line with Dr. Walther's statement, "A local congregation also has the keys." The word also leaves one with the impression that it is not only the local congregation to which God has given the power of the Keys but to those of whom He can say, "Where two or three are gathered together in my name." Walther's problem was peculiar to his time in history. His mission was to prove that the two, three, or more people gathered for worship in Perry County were also a church and were not bound to European ideology.

The limiting of Dr. Walther's view of the church has led to a controversy between the

Missouri and Wisconsin Synods. Although the Synods were in fellowship until 1961, there were different views on this doctrine. The Missouri Synod position of the local congregation was stated by Dr. Pieper in the words, "The local congregation is the congregation of believers who in a definite locality have gathered around Word and Sacrament." The two main thoughts stressed in this definition are: 1) the local congregation is made up of only those who believe in Christ, and 2) the believers are gathered in a definite locality. The second thought suggests that a congregation exists only when Christians live in a certain locality and have formed a local congregation in their midst. From this description, the joining together of Christians for various occasions such as a Synodical convention or conference, etc. would not be a church because it isn't held regularly and these Christians haven't settled in one place. Dr. Graebner said, "Nowhere in the New Testament is the Lord's Supper celebrated by groups who gather only occasionally in a certain locale. The sacrament is always associated with the congregations as such."

"The Missouri Synod has always taught that the local congregation is a divine institution, while the synod is a human organization that has

only advisory powers. This distinction between congregation and synod may be observed in five different areas. FIRST, the local congregation is a divine institution because it preaches the Word of God, administers the Office of the Keys, and distributes the sacrament publicly according to God's will. The synod, on the other hand, is a human organization because various congregations unite to form a synod for practical reasons. SECONDLY, because of this important distinction between congregation and synod a person may not resign from a local congregation; but a local congregation may resign from a synod. (TRY THIS SOMETIME!) In this connection Pieper comments that we do not accept resignations from a local congregation; because no one has the authority to grant a dispensation from a divine ordinance; but we do not regard the union of a number of congregations in a synod as a divine ordinance. THIRDLY, the phrase "tell it to the church" is a divine precept; whereas the phrase "tell it to the synod" is a human precept. FOURTHLY, the local congregation possesses the Office of the Keys; the synod does not possess this authority. FIFTHLY, the local congregation has authority to administer the sacrament; a synod has no such authority. From the above

presentation it is clear that the Missouri Synod insists on a clear line of demarcation between the local congregation and the synod." (Abiding Word, Vol.III);

The Wisconsin Synod position has been stated by Prof. Meyer with these words, "For the purpose of mutual edification and for more efficient work in the kingdom of our Lord, Christians will organize congregations." (Dog. notes) God does not demand any particular organization but says, "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them." This gathering together can be done in a field, in a hall, under a tree, in a garage, in a home, literally anywhere, and yet we have a congregation if there are two or more believers present.

The Wisconsin Synod position has been presented in the W.S.Q., April, 1970. Some of the pertinent facts are: "1) The Church is the communion of saints, brought to faith in Christ by the Holy Ghost, to form one congregation, one body, one blessed fellowship. 2) The Church, because it is the communion of saints, is of necessity invisible. 3) The Church of believers, though invisible, is a blessed reality. 4) The Church, is present

there where the means of grace are in use, where the Gospel is rightly taught and the Sacraments are rightly administered. 5) The specific forms in which believers group themselves together for the fellowship and work of the Church, have not been prescribed by the Lord to His New Testament Church. 6) God in His Word merely bids them to gather together and through their faith prompts them to do so. 7) In essence the various groupings in Jesus' name for the proclamation of His Gospel all lie on the same plane. 8) The right use of the Word and Sacrament are the true marks of the Church." These brief statements along with the Scripture texts are presented in the W.S.Q. and have expressed the position the Wisconsin Synod holds today and has held in the past.

In order to eliminate the difference, the two Synods' representatives proposed a solution in their statements known as the "Thiensville Thesis." Prof. Koehler's observation of the thesis states: "The Thesis are evidently just an intersynodical modus vivendi, a compromise, whether intended so or not, that leaves matters unclear and both sides free to put their own construction on them and to pursue the even terror of their ways." (History of Wis. Synod) Neither one of the respective Synods took

official action in respect to the Theses. The Theses became a historical document which didn't solve the problem. It seems to indicate that Scripture hasn't given a detailed or definite answer in respect to the form of grouping believers are to establish. If God's Word would be very specific, without leaving the form of a congregation a matter of choice, I trust that the learned men at the Thiensville meeting would have agreed. I have the impression that it is the form of a congregation that is questioned and not whether believers should join together in groups and worship. So, if someone insists that the local congregations is the only church, we should ask him for a passage from God's Word.

The newly formed church body FAL has presented itself to WELS and has been found in doctrinal agreement with us, even with our stand on the doctrine of the church. They agree, as we do, that the church was ordained by God and given the power of the Keys, but that the form this church takes is left up to the individual believers making up the congregation. Paul C. Neipp, who writes articles for the newspaper, Through to Victory, seems to be working at putting a wedge between FAL and WELS. By recalling past historical discussions on

the doctrine of the church, Mr. Neipp accuses FAL of adopting a new view toward this doctrine, a view which he claims is not "old Missouri."
(This could be questioned)

The question remains, "Would the doctrine of the church be divisive to church fellowship today?" All would agree that the "doctrine of the church" is ordained by God. If anyone claims, "only the local congregation has the Keys," he is then making something a doctrine which isn't one. Dr. Walther said, "A local congregation also has the keys not only a Minister, etc." This leaves one with the impression that there are other groupings that might also possess the power of the Keys. The form a church takes is not spelled out in Scripture and, therefore, would not be divisive of church fellowship unless someone or some group states that Scripture only allows the form of a local congregation.

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