

"THE CONGREGATION'S RELATIONSHIP TO THE SYNOD" (With Special Reference to the Doctrine of the Church)

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[Presented to the Wisillowa Pastoral Conference, Urbana Illinois – October 4, 1976]

That a relationship exists between one's congregation and the synod is quite obvious. While the synod's name does not appear in our congregations' constitutions under "Synodical Affiliation", it usually appears with the name of our congregation on our bulletins and outdoor signs. The synod's name also appears on much of the material that is distributed and used in our congregations (i.e., bulletin inserts, stewardship materials, Christian education materials, etc.). And virtually everyone who has been in one of our congregations during the past two years know there is a relationship between the congregation and synod, because only the synod's name appeared on the "Grace 125" logo that was so much in sight during that time.

But just exactly what is the relationship? Because the congregation is a member of the synod, many people conceive of it as a "them-us" or a "they-we" relationship, and often express it as such (i.e., "They ask us to make an annual pre-budget subscription; we send mission money to them each month ", etc.). In mission congregations the congregation-synod relationship is even more apparent with things like synod subsidies loans, and the like. But even there people still tend to think of it as a "they-we" relationship (i.e., "They assigned us a pastor; we file semi-annual reports with them" etc.).

This, however, is not the area our Conference Program Committee had in mind in assigning this paper, if for no other reason than this, that it is a practical problem with which we are already able to deal. We simply point out to people that, through delegates, elections, conventions, resolutions and the like, "we" are actually "they" and vice versa.

So far, so good - we have no problem with the congregation-synod relationship. I enter something like the 1977 pre-budget subscription/stewardship material, with its system of individual congregation goals, sent out from Milwaukee. Suddenly the congregation-synod relationship gets a bit involved and sticky, even among pastors. The statements like these are voiced: "No one has the right to come in and tell our congregation how to run its stewardship program, much less presume to set the amount of our financial stewardship for programs outside the congregation. Not even the synod has that right. That's for our congregation decide and set. That's the trouble with our synod today. It's getting too many men behind desks in Milwaukee trying to tell us what to do and how to run our congregations. So we just take mail like that from Milwaukee and deposit it in our circular file!"

The essayist respectfully declines at this point to make comment whether such statements are right or wrong; justified or unjustified. They are mentioned here merely to show that, even within the ranks of our synod's pastors, there is some difficulty with the congregation-synod relationship; and that therefore inclusion of the subject on the agenda of a conference such as this is very much in order.

At the suggestion of the program committee, this essay on the relationship of the congregation to the synod will be divided into three main parts. Part One will be an historical consideration of the relationship from the standpoint of its having been a controversy in our own synod and the Synodical Conference, and its still being a controversy in some segments of conservative Lutheranism. Part Two, which will be the longest portion of the essay, will be a doctrinal consideration of the congregation-synod relationship. Then, on the basis of our conclusions there, Part Three will be practical consideration of the relationship.

Part One: An Historical Consideration of the Relationship as a Controversy in the WELS, the Synodical Conference, and Conservative Lutheranism Yet Today.

In many instances, things like reason for or time or origin help determine the exact relationship between two parties. In determining the relationship of a congregation to a synod, Lutherans have traditionally viewed it as a matter that can be determined only by examining the Bible's teaching and Doctrine of Church and Ministry.

But that has proven to be more easily said than done. As we all know, there are two different schools of thought on the subject. One side is headed by the LC-MS and generally supported by the Lutheran Churches of the Reformation (LCR). The other side is the position taken by our own synod and the Evangelical Lutheran Synod (ELS).

Before going any farther, two things should be made clear: 1) A doctrinal study of the ministry does not lie within the assigned scope of this paper; 2) There is unanimity between the aforementioned "sides" on the doctrine of the invisible Church and on the matter of a local congregation's having the divine authority and privilege of administering the keys. Therefore these two matters will not be taken up, as such, in the body of this paper.

What will primarily concern us is the real area of difference: what group or groups exist on the ecclesiastical scene by divine institution and right (*iure divino*). Or, as the July, 1913 issue of the *Quartalschrift* (p. 101) asked: "Is the... synod church or congregation in the strict sense of the Word?" Once we have answered that question, we can then begin to determine the relationship of the congregation to the synod

At the suggestion of the program committee, we begin looking for the answer just after the turn of the Twentieth Century in this country. The question of congregation-synod relationship didn't achieve "controversy status" until 1902-03. Prior to that, it seems, the question was seldom - if ever - raised in that form. The place from which it did arise was Cincinnati, Ohio. According to the Rev. Harold W. Romoser ("The Church and the Ministry", *The Faithful Word*, Vol. 7, No. 3-4, pp. 30-68), a Missouri Synod congregation there excommunicated a man who failed and, apparently, refused to comply with the congregation's demands that he withdraw his son from a public school. A committee of the district reviewed the case and found in favor of the excommunicated individual. The committee's recommendations were rejected by the congregation and its pastors, whereupon the congregations and pastors were suspended from membership in the Missouri Synod. The congregation then applied for membership in the Wisconsin Synod.¹ Action on the application was deferred by our synod because the Missouri Synod was still in the process of dealing with the situation in Cincinnati.

Here is where the question of the congregation-synod relationship arose. It seems that some Wisconsin Synod pastors urged and even extended fellowship to the suspended parties. Others, among them Professor August Pieper of our seminary "opposed this procedure on the grounds that synodical discipline is church discipline and must be respected by all sister synods until it can be shown that it has been in error in one respect or the other... Synodical suspension based on Matthew 18 is essentially the same as excommunication" ("Concerning the Doctrine of the Church and of its Ministry, with Special Reference to the Synod and Its Discipline", a 1929 essay by Professor Pieper translated by Professor H. J. Vogel for the *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol. 59, No. 2, p. 81f.). But the others maintained that, because a synod is merely a human arrangement - whereas the local congregation is the divinely instituted gathering of believers entrusted by Christ with the Office of the Keys - the synod's action was not binding and valid. They said what must be respected is the action of the divinely instituted local congregation. Furthermore, according to Professor Pieper, they held that "suspension from a synodical body is not excommunication, but temporary withholding of synodical membership and is in itself not the suspension of church fellowship" (*op. cit.*, p. 82).² Professor Pieper as such, had not made the latter statement. He had conditioned it by including "according to Matthew 18".

1 - Other accounts indicate the disciplinary action and subsequent membership application involved only a pastor of the congregation. Your essayist was unable to find anything definite on the matter.

2 - This latter contention was also at variance somewhat with that of Professor Pieper. Because the contentions do not, as such, lie within the scope of this paper, they will not be discussed here, at least not in detail.

Quite obviously, unanimity on the entire Doctrine of the Church, especially as it applies to the congregation-synod relationship, did not exist in the Wisconsin Synod. As a result, literally volumes of material were produced by both sides. Articles appeared in print everywhere. Many were written by members of the seminary faculty and were published in the *Quartalschrift*. The position of the seminary faculty was very clearly defined in the July, 1911 issue of that publication:

"The synod, as sum of all its member congregations and Christians... is a Christian confessional church and in fact a communion of saints, and the Lord is in its midst according to His promise with all the blessings He has gained for the salvation of sinners. Therefore it has all ecclesiastical authority, the power of the Word, the power of the Keys. That is not lacking" (p. 140f.).

"Also the synod is church as set forth above and as such... has all spiritual possessions and powers which it needs for its purposes. With this statement, the error... is opposed that one suppose that the Church has the Gospel, the Sacraments, the Office of the Keys, church discipline, the power of excommunication only in the form of a local congregation" (p. 145f.).

"The Church has in every form, whether it be divine or human, all the gifts of Christ..., not for non-use, but for use, for application... Therefore a synodical convention, as a true congregation of Christ in its own, innate, original right, given it immediately by Christ and not lent it by a local congregation, may arrange preaching in its midst for the benefit of the group and all who will listen, use the means of Grace, Sacraments, power of the Keys, just as well as the local congregation, and no local congregation is permitted to forbid it" (p. 146f.).

And in the July, 1913 issue:

"The presence of a number of called saints in a locality constitutes the presence of a congregation in a locality"(p. 99).

"Is the Wisconsin Synod church or congregation in the strict sense of the Word? According to the preceding the answer can only be Yes"(p. 101).

But this was not the end of the matter, even within the Wisconsin Synod. When statements such as these appeared, and when statements on the ministry (especially its historical development as traced by Professor J. Schaller) appeared, much discussion and more study ensued. Pastor Im. P. Frey describes the situation in the July, 1963 issue (Vol. 60, No. 3) of the *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* ("Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, 1863-1963"):

"The Seminary faculty, particularly professor Pieper at first, published in the *Quartalschrift* what it regarded as the Scriptural teaching on the subject... A number of prominent men in our own circles took exception... Gradually the position of the Seminary faculty was widely accepted and has now become the recognized doctrinal position of the Wisconsin Synod" (p. 217f.).

While all this was going on within our own circles, discussions were begun between the faculty of our seminary and the faculty of Concordia Seminary in St. Louis. These discussions ended in the spring of 1932 when both faculties signed "The Thiensville Theses". Those theses read as follows:

1. It is God's will and order, as we understand from Holy Scripture, that Christians living in the same locality also enter into outward communion with one another in order jointly to exercise the duties of their spiritual priesthood.
2. ...It is furthermore God's will and order that such local congregations of Christians have shepherds and teachers who in the name of all perform the ministry of the Word in their midst.
3. It is God's will and order that local congregations of Christians give expression of their unity of faith with other congregations and perform the work of the kingdom of God in fellowship with them outside of their own circle also, as for example, it is done among us in the free form of a synod.
4. Since every Christian is in charge of the keys of the kingdom of heaven, a judgment expressed by a single Christian or by a number of Christians in any kind of a combination, if expressed in agreement with the Word of God, has validity also in heaven. Still, as we understand from Holy Scripture, it is God's will and order that action against a sinning brother cannot be regarded as having been concluded until a local congregation has acted. The disciplinary action of a local congregation and of a synod will not come into conflict with each other, if matters are handled correctly, because the local congregation excludes from the local congregation and not from the synod, and synod excludes from synod and not from the local congregation. Note: The exclusion as put into action by the local congregation we call excommunication, in agreement with ecclesiastical usage.

(Emphasis mine)

Some hailed these theses as an end to the controversy and misunderstanding, while others called them "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 tenor of their ways" (Koehler, *The History of the Wisconsin Synod*, p. 239). It would appear the latter, rather than the former, were right. For when these were presented to a convention of the Synodical Conference, the floor committee in charge stated that these theses, "as presently formulated, do not resolve all the difficulties that still exist among us... There is still no basic agreement within the Synodical Conference when these concepts of the doctrine of the Church and Ministry are translated into the practical life of the church and its ministry..." (1952 Convention in St. Paul, Minnesota). That fact is not disputed any more today and hasn't been for some time. Consequently "The Thiensville Theses" are little used today, being deemed, "inadequate" for-use in inter-church relations. But they did prove rather conclusively that unity on paper does not automatically translate into unity in application and practice.

There, for the most part, is where the matter still lies. In summary, we might state it the way the 1971 November-December issue of *Sola Scriptura* (Vol. 2, No. 3, p. 14), the official publication of the now disbanded Federation of Authentic Lutheranism (FAL) put it:

"Some controversy on this matter has always existed between the Wisconsin and Missouri Synods, though the authors never considered that divisive of fellowship or a hindrance to the formation and continuance of the now deceased Synodical Conference."

In other words, it was generally treated as a difference in exegesis, not doctrine. In 1964, however, the pastors and congregations that now make up the LCR resolve this was and is sufficient reason for severance of fellowship and acted accordingly. They speak of our position as a departure from Scripture, the Lutheran Confessions, and the positions taken by Drs. Adolf Hoenecke, Franz Pieper, August Graebner, C. F. W. Walther and others. Among the men the LCR mentions as largely responsible for the "neo-Wisconsin position" are men like Professors A. Pieper, J. Schaller, J. P. Koehler, Max Lehninger and J. P. Meyer of our seminary. Anyone

interested in an in-depth presentation of the LCR position and its refutation of the WELS position should read the aforementioned paper by the Reverend Harold W. Romoser.

Part Two: A Doctrinal Consideration of the Relationship

A. The Missouri Position

Anyone who has ever read and used the adult instruction manual by Riess (*What Does: the Bible Say?*) knows what the Missouri position is:

"What do the Scriptures teach of visible Christian congregations? The Scriptures speak of churches or congregations, established in certain localities for the preaching of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments" (pp 57).

To expand on that, we turn to the 1948 "Majority Report of the Interim Committee of the Synodical Conference". We do so, not because the LC-MS has ever formally adopted it as an official position paper, but because it has never been repudiated by that church body, and because it appears to be the way the matter has been taught and explained in the LC-MS. We quote from it here, not in full, but in part:

I. A thorough study of the question of Church and Synod on the basis of Scripture and the Confessions compels us to the following conclusions:

- a. That a congregation is a group of professing Christians who by God's command regularly assemble for worship (Col. 3:16) and are united for the purpose of maintaining the ministry of the Word in their midst (Rom. 1:7; I Cor. 1:2; 16:19; Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5f., Matt. 18:17; I Cor. 11:20ff.);
- b. That the congregation is the only divinely designated body or unit of the visible Church (I Cor. 16:19, Matt. 18:17f.; Acts 20:28);
- c. That the congregation exercises its powers (i.e., calls pastors, uses the Keys, etc.) only by virtue of the believers in it (I Cor. 3:21; Col. 3:16; Rom. 16:17; Matt. 18:17f.; John 20:22f.).

II. Synods and other co-operative organizations (pastoral conferences, etc.) may be formed for carrying out specific commands of the Lord (Mark 16:16; Matt. 28:19f.) which the individual congregation... may not be able to carry out by itself (Gal. 6:2). But such organizations are an outward growth of Christian love and liberty. The work so done is both divinely appointed and God-pleasing (Matt. 28:19) so long as it does not violate the authority vested by God in the local congregation (eg. Matt. 18:17f.; I Pet. 4:15).

Synod is not a congregation as defined in Paragraph I, but an association of such congregations, Synod, therefore, has and exercises only those rights and powers which are delegated to it by the constituent congregations, which, in turn, possesses these rights and powers by virtue of the believers in their midst (I Cor. 3:21; I Pet. 2:9).

III. The formation of a congregation or the exercise of its functions does not deprive the individual believer of any of the inherent rights, duties, or privileges of the royal priesthood. However, the Scriptures clearly indicate that, those rights may be exercised publicly (i.e., by order and in the name of the congregation) only by the authority of the local congregation (Tit. 1:5; Matt. 18:17; I Cor. 7:24).

While the local congregation may delegate the exercise of some of its functions (or work, eg., mission work outside its parish, etc.) to such groups as it may designate (eg., Synod, mission societies, etc.), the exercise of the final step of excommunication can never be so delegated

because of the specific command of Christ in Matt 18:17: "Tell it unto the church" (the *ekkleesia*, i.e., the local congregation).

(Emphasis mine)

As previously noted, this is also the LCR position. Therefore it does not seem necessary to go into their official statements. Suffice it to say they have no quarrels with the LC-MS on this particular point. They also maintain the local congregation is the only grouping of Christians divinely established and authorized for public administration of the Keys. Thus we can readily understand why LCR people and their sympathizers (among whom the Reverend Paul Neipp identified himself in his now defunct *Through to Victory* tabloid) are somewhat upset, as they were a few years ago when they are referred to as the Lutheran Church (singular) of the Reformation. We might also mention in passing here that the LCR also maintains the pastoral office in a local congregation is the only divinely ordained form of the ministry, and that it includes all phases of the ministry, including the training of pastors and teachers.

The practice of the LC-MS is, or at least was, somewhat intriguing. Very simply, the LC-MS contends the only rights of the synod and its workers are those formally conferred by the local congregation or congregations. They are not seen as rights derived directly from the individual priests who in good order engaged them in their positions. So the practice was, when pastors accepted professorships, they were also extended a call by a congregation in the locality of the institution. This was not to necessarily retain them as pulpit assistants but to, according to former LC-MS pastors, enable these men to retain their "clergy status"!³

This practice has since changed somewhat. Today professorships and other synod positions are filled by calls from boards of control, executive committees, etc., much the same way they are in our synod. But the contention still is that the divinity of these calls and their authority to administer the Keys depends solely on the fact that the right to call has been delegated by the congregations by formal resolution.

With the exception of this latter contention, it has been suggested that in practice the LC-MS and WELS really indistinguishable from one another. Even former LC-MS pastors have agreed with that. And perhaps it explains why this matter was left as it was in the Synodical Conference. But LC-MS practice is really inconsistent with its position on paper. Here, too, former LC-MS pastors agree. The Reverend A. T. Kretzmann, in a paper entitled "Church and Ministry" writes as follows:

"This 'Missouri Position' in practice differs from the 'Missouri position' is theory in this respect: the claim that only congregations may carry out the functions of the Office of the Keys in the name of others is not carried out when the work of the church is done in the Missouri Synod. If it were true that God has entrusted these matters only to the local congregation, then the local congregation would be forbidden by God to delegate it to other groups of professing Christians, such as synods, mission boards, etc. Theoretically, the congregations are described as delegating some of these functions to groups of Christians outside of themselves which continue to function in these respects without any direct action of the congregations themselves. (Missionaries are sent out, professors are called and Holy Communion is distributed at pastoral conferences, synodical seasons almost always without any specific authority given to them for this purpose by the individual congregations.) Thus, in practice, the Missouri Synod is the opposite of that which has been assumed in the theoretical position. Synods, Mission Boards, and pastoral conferences are functioning as a church in certain areas of the Ministry of the Word." (p. 7 - emphasis his)

³ This practice helps us understand things like 'tenure', hiring, and firing-words that came up rather frequently in the turmoil that lead to formation of Seminex. It also explains why discipline was not brought to bear (who should do it?) and why there was hardly any talk of simply terminating a professor's call.

B. The Wisconsin Position

Our remarks here will be brief. Some of our previous remarks have already presented the Wisconsin position. Our Gausewitz Catechism (Ques. 245) asks:

"Why do we call any visible assembly or a denomination in which the Gospel is preached and the Sacraments administered church? Such an assembly, or denomination is called a church because in its midst there surely are members of the invisible Church, even though we do not know them (The visible Church)" (emphasis mine)

That position is defined in greater detail in a booklet entitled: "Doctrinal Statement of the Wisconsin Ev. Lutheran Synod, 1970". Here again we quote in part:

A. The Church is the communion of saints, the entire number of those whom the Holy Spirit has brought to faith in Christ as their savior and whom through this gracious gift of a common faith He has most intimately joined together to form one "congregation" (A.C. VII, VIII), one body, one blessed fellowship.

(Note: Parts B and C deal with the fact that the Church is invisible, but is nevertheless a blessed reality.)

D. The Church, the communion of saints, is present there where the means of grace are in use, where the Gospel is rightly taught and the sacraments are rightly administered. (Marks of the Church)

(Note: Parts 1 and 2 emphasize that it is through the Holy Spirit working by the Gospel that the Church receives and retains its life. Acknowledging that not all who hear believe the Gospel, it is noted that God's Word will not return to Him void without having accomplished His pleasure.)

3. Hence Scripture bids us look for the Church there where the Gospel is in use, where people are gathered together both to receive its blessings and to bring them to others. Matt. 18:20. Scripture designates such gatherings of people who profess faith in Christ and manifest it in the use of the Word and Sacrament as churches, because of the believers found in their midst. Acts 4:32; 8:1; 5:1-11... Hence, when the New Testament speaks of the Church or of churches, the reference is either to such as are known to God as believers (*ecclesia stricte dicta*, the communion of saints or a part of it present at any locality) or to such as are acknowledged as believers by us on the basis of their confession (*ecclesia late dicta*, the empirical church as we encounter it).

4. The specific forms in which believers group themselves together for the fellowship and work of the Church, the specific forms in which they arrange for use of the means of grace...(and) in which they establish the public ministry, have not been prescribed by the Lord to His New Testament Church.

a. It is the Holy Spirit who...leads the believers to establish adequate and wholesome forms which fit every circumstance, situation, and need. I Cor. 3:21; 14:33,40. God in His Word merely bids them to gather together, Heb. 10:25, and through their faith prompts them to do so. Since believers ordinarily live at some local place, where they will desire to nourish their faith regularly through means of grace, the local congregation will usually be the primary grouping of Christians,

b. It is likewise the Spirit who... draws Christians together in Jesus in other groupings..., such as a synod, that they may share their mutual gifts and gain

strength for certain phases of the great task of the Church, such as the training of pastors and teachers, the establishment and maintenance of mission fields. Acts 15:1; 1 Thess. 4:9-10; Acts 9:31 (the Greek text: the church in Judaea, Galilee, and Samaria); I Cor. 16:1 (the churches of Galatia); II Cor. 9:2 (Macedonia and Achaia); II Cor. 8:18-19 (Macedonian churches had a common worker and jointly elected a traveling companion for Paul); Acts 16:1-2 (Timothy's work praised by Derbe, Lystra, and Iconium).

c. In essence the various groupings in Jesus' name for the proclamation of His Gospel all lie on the same plane. They are all church in one and the same sense... that on the basis of the marks of the Church the Lord lets us apprehend the presence of the "*una sancta*" (the Holy Christian Church) in each such grouping of people and thus enables us to acknowledge them as gatherings of believers possessing the Ministry of the Keys with the right of exercising this ministry in accordance with the considerations of love and order

(Other than Latin underlining, emphasis mine.)

In the essayist's opinion, our Wisconsin Synod position is the same on both paper and in practice. Both the synod and the local congregations function and otherwise act as a church to a greater or lesser extent in mutually agreed upon areas and at times likewise agreed upon. One seeks out the consent of the other, not to receive delegation of certain divine rights or privileges, but in the interest of harmony, decency and order. Pastor Kretzmann remarks in this respect (*op. cit.*, p. 10):

"It is as Jesus said: 'One is your Master, even Christ, and all ye are brethren.' Matt. 23:8... The Wisconsin Synod is ever conscious of the fact that organically the Synod as a part of the visible Church is a creation of the local churches which formed it and also for this reason has no right the lord it over the member congregations... (and) is never permitted to usurp functions in competition with the local congregation, the primary groupings of Christians..."

Much more could be cited and said here, but we will reserve it for a later section of this paper.

C. The Evidence from Scripture and the Fathers

For the sake of the true believers (*una sancta*) we trust are in their midst, we call that group of people in a locality "church" that professes faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, that gathers for edification, fellowship and worship around the Word and Sacraments and proclaims and administers the same. As we look at our Synod's Constitution and practices, we see the same thing. We see a group of many individual people - in many places, to be sure. But those many individuals profess faith in Jesus Christ. They have banded together in order to express their oneness of faith, to preach the Gospel and to administer the Sacraments. For the most part, they have the same essential motives, objectives, marks and functions as a local congregation. Why should this not be called "church"?

These similarities are noted by Professor Joh. P. Meyer in a paper ("synod and congregation") that was reprinted in the October, 1964 (Vol. 61, No. 4) issue of the *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*: He noted that the congregation and synod have essentially the same membership qualifications; that they minister to essentially the same needs (i.e., the need for instruction, admonition, brotherly support, worship, etc.); that they carry out essentially the same special assignments (i.e., brotherly love, confession of faith, preaching, teaching, etc.); and that they have essentially the same identifying marks (i.e., the Gospel in Word and Sacrament). This was consistent with a view professor Meyer had had for many years - that in essence the synod and congregation are the same; they differ only in form.

LC-MS and LCR people will agree that a synod has all those marks and characteristics of the Church and of that group in a locality we call a church. But their contention still remains this is all by human arrangement; that it is not of divine institution, but a voluntary thing established in Christian liberty. The local congregation, they say, is of divine institution. Therefore synod and congregation cannot be called church.

To support their contention, they cite everyone from Walther to Luther to Jesus Christ; and everything from the Lutheran Confessions to Greek lexicons to the New Testament Scriptures. Let us begin with Walther and Luther, then move on to lexicons and finally to what Jesus and the rest of the New Testament have to say.

As we know, men's words can be made to say a lot of things, especially after the men who spoke them have died; or if their words are taken out of context or not weighed against other things they said and wrote. Anyone who has read Walther or Luther on the subject knows they emphasized the rights and powers of individual Christians and congregations. But the times in which they lived must be taken into consideration. Both men live at times when there were abuses of ecclesiastical authority. Luther had to contend with the Pope and bishops; Walther with the powerful influence of the German territorial churches. In championing the cause of individual Christians and congregations, they did so "without, however, falling into independentism and without denying the essence of the Church and the authority of the Church to the larger church body, even though it be administered by representation" (Pieper, *op. cit.*, p. 82f.). In other words, they nowhere stated categorically that the larger body was not a church. Much of the same historical background is true of the Lutheran Confessions. They, too, refrain from ever restricting the area in which the name "church" can be applied. An example of this in Walther's case, consider the following:

"In an improper sense, Scripture calls those visible communions 'churches' which, though consisting not only of believers or such as are sanctified by faith, but having also hypocrites and wicked persons, nevertheless teach the Gospel in its purity and administer the holy Sacraments according to the Gospel" (Thesis III, *The Visible Church*, p. 12 - emphasis mine).

The underlining here is simply to show that this statement of Walther is certainly wide enough to allow inclusion of a synod. There is no reference here to locality, form of organization or frequency with which these visible communions meet. Professor Pieper (*op. cit.*, p. 87f.) raises a point once touched on by Luther. Pieper wrote:

"For all who are initiated, the sentence: 'Today the church in Corinth had church in its church and elected a church man', contains nothing wrong. For the uninitiated it is striking and unclear because the word 'church' is used, four times, each time in a different sense. All lack of clarity would disappear if the sentence were to read: 'Today the Christians in Corinth held a worship service in their meetinghouse and called a pastor'. The word 'church' - not in the Scriptures - but in common language usage has gained such divergent meanings that it is easily possible for us to become involved in a confusion of terms and thus to confuse the doctrine of the Church

Luther's original remarks were these:

"Thus the word *Kirche* (church) means really nothing else than a common assembly, and is not German by idiom, but Greek (as is also the word *ekklesia*)... In genuine German... In it ought to be called a Christian congregation or assembly (*eine christliche Gemeinde oder Sammlung*), or, best of all and most clearly, holy Christendom (*eine heilige Christenheit*). So also the word *communio*...ought not to be rendered communion (*Gemeinschaft*), but congregation (*Gemeinde*)... To speak correct German, it ought to be *eine Gemeinde der Heiligen* (a congregation of saints), that is, a congregation made up purely of saints, or, to speak yet more

plainly, *eine heilige Gemeinde*, a holy congregation" (*Large Catechism* as quoted by Professor Pieper, *op. cit.*, p. 96).

Luther's point was that the concept of the word 'church' is one that is so often physically localized, when it should be more spiritualized than anything else. He spoke of that again in his "Councils and Churches ". He said that if instead of "the Holy Christian Church", the Creed had been formulated to read

"I believe that there is one Christian holy people', all trouble could easily have been avoided that had resulted from the blind, unclear word 'church'. For the word holy Christian people would clearly and mightily have brought with it both the understanding and the judgment as to what is or is not the Church" (quoted by Pieper, *op. cit.*, p. 97).

Consequently Luther used the word for 'church' less than 20 times in his translation of the Old Testament and then, according to Pieper (*op. cit.*, p., 98)

"only to designate places or meetings where idolatry was practiced, never as a designation of the Old Testament believers and their gatherings. In the New Testament he uses the term only in... compound nouns... Elsewhere he translates the word for church, *ekkleesia*, exclusively with the German word: '*Gemeine*' (*Gemeinde*); and if we had continued to use this term strictly, we might have been spared from many an error. We have become accustomed to use the expression "*Gemeinde*" exclusively of the organized local congregation and designate as 'church' (*Kirche*) - a part from the application of this term to the house of worship of Christians and their worship services - almost exclusively the larger church body. This further contributes to the confusion. The words '*Gemeinde*' and '*Kirche*' must be used as synonyms if unclarity and error are to be avoided."

Professor Pieper is here saying essentially what Luther did. He is saying it is something of a matter of semantics. There is a difference between congregation and synod in the minds of many because they use two different words to refer to them, when they can be referred to with the same words.

Finally, lest there be any question as to where Luther and Walther stood, consider the following remark of Luther in "Concerning the Papacy in Rome against Alveld":

"Christendom is a spiritual gathering of souls in one faith, and... the natural, proper, real and essential Christendom rests on the Spirit, and not on any external thing, whatever it may be called." (p. 98 of Pieper's essay - emphasis mine).

In much the same vein Walther wrote (*Lutheraner*, XI, p. 59)

"Just from this (I 'believe' a holy Christian Church) can be seen how necessary it is in the doctrine of the Church ... to proceed from the concept of the invisible Church (the communion of saints), but also to hold this concept fast in the entire development of this article of doctrine and faith, if one wishes to avoid falling into confusion and self -contradictions." (quoted by Pieper, *op. cit.*, p. 98 - emphasis mine).

To which Pieper adds this as a sort of "amen":

"From the invisible Church we necessarily arrive at the visible church, from the communion of saints at the congregation of confessors, from the church in the proper sense at the church in the

improper... sense. Whoever has not a clear concept of the essence of the Church and holds it fast is immediately in error. From this source arise all the false views concerning the so-called local congregation and the synod. And they are strengthened by our custom of calling the local church congregation, and the larger body church. If we called both congregation or both church, the way would be opened for a correct understanding (*op. cit.*, p. 99).

The meanings assigned to the word *ekkleesia* by the Greek lexicons could fill up the rest of this page. The Reverend F. G. Kosanke does that in his paper (p. 2), "Principles of Sola Scriptura with Special Emphasis on Church and Ministry (Part 1 and 2)". Suffice it to say the lexicons give a variety of meanings and applications for this word: "assembly; gathering; the congregation of Israelites, especially when gathered for religious purposes; a church meeting; the church or congregation as the totality of Christians; those who, hoping for eternal salvation through Jesus Christ, observe their own religious rites, hold their own religious meetings, and manage their own affairs according to regulations prescribed by the body far order's sake; those who anywhere, in city or village, constitute such a company and are united into one body; all who worship and honor God and Christ in whatever place they may be; house churches". For still more meetings, consult Thayer or Bauer-Arndt-Gingrich.

Without going into it in any detail, the word "synod" comes from a Greek word that has essentially the same meanings (i.e., a coming together, a gathering, a group that comes together from their houses, etc.). With that in mind, let us now turn to some of the passages most often used by the LC-MS and the LCR to support their contention that only the congregation is divinely instituted and authorized to use of Office of the Keys.

Mt. 16:18: "Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."

As far as recorded Scripture is concerned, this is the first time Jesus used the word *ekkleesia*. While the LC-MS and the LCR do not use this as a "proof passage", it does indicate what Jesus wants us to primarily think of when we hear the word "church". He wants us to think of something held together by faith, confession and the Word, not by constitutions, councils, etc. He wants us to think of the *una sancta*; the communion of saints, the invisible Church above and before anything else. This was the contention of Walther and Luther before him, as we have already noted. In writing this passage today we would capitalize the word "church".

Mt. 18:17: "If he will not hear thee, tell it unto the church."

Much has been written on this passage. Surely "church" here can and very likely will most often refer to a local gathering in our present organizational framework. But it need not and cannot be restricted to such a gathering. For one thing, there was not yet in existence a "local congregation" as we use the term today. There were synagogues, but as Pastor Kosanke points out (*op. cit.*, p. 3) synagogues in Jesus' day were invariably made up of people who were either undecided about Jesus or else opposed to Him (cp. Jesus' synagogue experience in Nazareth and His remarks about how His disciples would be expelled from synagogues). Proclaiming Christ in such local, organized gatherings was a hazardous occupation. On the other hand, when the New Testament uses the word "church", it invariably means something good, because it means called of God" (Kosanke, *loc. cit.*).

Finally, it is only true believers who are meant in this passage too. Christ did not give the Keys to any external group or form. Hypocrites and unbelievers, who may belong to an external group, do not have the authority to use the keys. Jesus Himself said He would give them and their exercise to those to whom the Spirit (not flesh and blood) had revealed Jesus Christ as the Christ and Son of God and by whom such a confession was made. Pieper, using some examples borrowed from Luther says:

"It is self evident that the church in any external form does not have the office of the keys, because or inasmuch as wicked persons are mingled with it. As little as the chaff has the qualities

of the wheat, the weeds have the nature of the stalk of grain, the mice dung the quality of pepper, or the filth the life of the body, so little do wicked people enjoy the privileges of the Godfearing among the Godfearing... Externally they administer God's Word and the Sacraments, but unjustly, without and contrary to any divine call... They are 'in' the Church, or 'among' the believers only as chaff among the wheat, as mice dung among the pepper, as filth in the human body, which is not actually included when such things are spoken of, but whose presence is disregarded" (*op. cit.*, pp. 104, 103 - emphasis his)

To claim divine institution of the local congregation and its forms as we know it today is to say God has ordained a special place for hypocrites here on earth!

To say "thee" ("Let him be unto thee..." vs. 19) is collective to include all believers everywhere does no injustice to the text. In fact, "thee" must be understood to include all believers. It would be a gross inconsistency if all believers everywhere did not deny the rites and privileges of a Christian to an individual who has rejected due admonition when they came into contact with him. Take the situation at Corinth. Paul addressed his first epistle not only to the people assembled at Corinth, but to "all that in every place (i.e., where this letter might be passed on and read, as seems to have been the custom and intention Paul had in mind with his address) call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord" (1:2). So then his divinely-inspired advice regarding the fornication case among the group at Corinth (5:1-5) applied to the entire Christian Church then on earth. In fact,

"Had it refused to excommunicate an unrepentant offender, Paul would have had to condemn the Corinthian church; and not only Paul, but all the other congregations, in fact the whole church on earth at that time - if they wanted to 'remain in my words'. Do we not then have a kind of synodical action? Paul, who was no longer a local Corinthian pastor, takes a direct hand and even initiates the action... This shows most plainly that the power of the keys to excommunicate resides not in any person or group, but in the Word. And it shows that, to claim the right of excommunication for the local congregation only, is going too far" (*Sola Scriptura*, Vol 2, No. 3, p. 17).

Finally, Professor Koehler (*op. cit.*) has this to say on this passage (p. 236):

"The present-day distinction between the local congregation (*Ortsgemeinde*) and the synod has to place in the Lord's discourse at Matth. 18... Matth. 18:17 refers to all the believers affected by the sin that is under consideration. They are affected in two respects: the sin is an offense to them, and they want to help the erring brother. As a matter of Christian course, the larger body will consider the smaller group that is involved by further ties with the erring brother. But that cannot mean that a righteous judgment pronounced by the larger body, say a synod, is not honored in heaven until the smaller has had its say. And it is the effectiveness of heaven around which Matth. 18 revolves, not outward organization membership here on earth." (p. 236).

Mt. 18:20: "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them."

Here again, there is no denying that this refers to a local gathering. But there is no mention or even a hint of any organized external form or frequency with which they gather. The bond that unites them is clearly stated as Jesus' name. Here *Sola Scriptura* (Vol. 2, No. 3) has a most interesting comment:

"Could the two or three or 50 or 100 or 1,000, etc. conceivably gather by letter or telephone or telstar? The point is this: is the "gathering together" a quasi-legal requirement for a local meeting, or is it equivalent to an agreement in the Spirit? Certainly the term 'in My name'

requires the latter. And Comparison of I Cor. 5:3 ('as absent in the body, but present in the spirit,' etc.) forbids making local presence a requirement in cases of excommunication. Christ is in the midst of His whole Church everywhere with the same presence as in the local congregation" (p. 16).

Finally, outward church organization at every level (i.e., congregation or synod, officers, boards, meetings, etc.) is

"the external arrangement through which and by which the public office of preaching and administering of the keys is practiced and administered with which God has endowed it through the faith of the saints, without any exercise of it!" (Pieper, *op. cit.*, p. 107; emphasis - mine)

More on this in connection with a subsequent passage.

Acts 2:47: "And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved."

Certainly this passage appears to speak of a geographically and defined group. And yet, did all those present remain within Jerusalem? From the various dialects and languages mentioned in Acts 2, we generally conclude that some of these people were pilgrims, many of whom would return to their homes scattered throughout the Mediterranean world. Yet they were added to the church. And since they were such as should be saved, here again the emphasis is not on a local group, but on the communion of saints, even as it was when Jesus used the word in Mt. 16. It might also be noted here that there is some question as to the authenticity of this reading ("to the church") and it is omitted in some translations.

II Cor. 1:1: "...unto the church of God which is at Corinth with all the saints which are in Achaia."

Again, the passage may speak of a geographically defined and contained group as the church. But this is only part of the passage. Paul also addressed this to all the saints which lived throughout the region of Achaia. Perhaps they also gathered in a local situation. But nevertheless, Paul equates these saints with the "church of God" at Corinth. So the emphasis is not on the local group, as such, but on the believers.

So it generally is with all the greetings in Paul's epistles. Words like "brethren" and "saints" are equated with the church at one place or another. Certainly Paul is not thinking so much of the outwardly organized group (i.e., including hypocrites and unbelievers), but the believers in his use of the word "church". As Pieper says (*op. cit.*, p. 92), "that ought to be sufficient proof that the expression 'church at ____,' local congregation, in Paul's writings is equivalent to 'the saints at ____'." There is evidence for the same conclusion in the other New Testament Epistles.

Acts 8:1: "...There was a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judaea and Samaria, except the apostles."

The "local" element is certainly present in this passage. But to say there was only one gathering of Christians in Jerusalem at this time does not have a good basis. If it was a time of persecution, would it not seem likely that these people met in smaller gatherings, say in homes, so as to escape detection? And even without, persecution, there would almost of necessity have to have been a number of groups, as believers in Jerusalem now numbered in the thousands. Yet, in either case, they are referred to as "the church...at Jerusalem"! Another consideration is the fact that this verse does not say the church was scattered. It says they (i.e., the individuals who comprised the church in that location) were scattered. Yet, is not the sense that the church was scattered? Not destroyed, but scattered. It brings to mind Jesus' words in Mt. 16:18. The gates of

hell may unleash their fury and scatter the individual members. There may come a time when there is no formal localized group, but Jesus says the gates of hell will not prevail against the Church. Once again, the church is shown to be first and foremost believers, with or without a precise form of external organization.

On the matter of external organization, we have already heard some remarks of Professor Pieper. Let us here elaborate on it some more. We shall do so with the help of Pastor Kosanke (*op. cit.*, p. 4). After noting that when we hear the word "church" we tend to think of things like a building with its furnishings and/or a group that has regular business meetings, issues annual reports, and the like. Pastor Kosanke writes as follows:

"Are not both pictures wrongly transferred to the early church? Traveling missionaries, wandering tradesmen like Priscilla and Acquilla, visiting delegations from Jerusalem, a persecuted and homeless diaspora, can these facts of early church history be forced into our pattern of '*Ortsgemeinde*'?... Let us not read into these churches our concepts of organized congregations... Most of these groupings were in certain localities... but... they were the elect of God, at that period of history in that area concerned with that area... The ministry of the Keys was not given to the churches, plural, but to the Church, that is, to all believers. The body of concerned believers acting together may be an organized congregation, a group of servicemen meeting in a hotel room in Vietnam, a body of students at a school, a Synod, a District, a conference... 'Church is *ekkleesia*, the body of Christ, unrestricted by forms, creating its own forms as occasion demands in reflection of glorious New Testament liberty' ('Church and Ministry in the Light of I Timothy 1-3 " by Theo. Hartwig)."

Acts 20:28: "Take heed therefore unto yourselves and to all the flock, over the one which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers."

In this passage, the geographical place in question is Ephesus, a clear indication, it is said, that a local congregation is meant. There is no denying that. But it cannot be so restricted in its meaning. Read on in this verse, and you will find the flock is called "the church of God"(Again here, for obvious reasons we would capitalize the word, would we not?). Quite evidently, what we have said before applies here. The "Church of God" is not confined to Ephesus or any other locality. The Ephesian faithful were and certainly are included in it. But does not the insistence that church must mean local congregation get one into serious trouble here again? It does indeed, for it claims divine institution and ownership of a mixed group (believers, along with hypocrites and unbelievers).

I Cor. 12:19: "And if they were all one member, where were the body?"

This passage has reference to the fact that the Christian Church is made up of many individuals of different backgrounds, talents and abilities. It does not refer to any local congregation, other than the fact that the believers in its midst are members of the body of Christ. It is your essayist's guess that this verse has been used by some to maintain all groupings of Christians cannot be the same ('one member!') in essence, otherwise there would be no body. Paul is here talking on a much higher plane. He is explaining to the Corinthians that variation in personal gifts and abilities should not be alarming to them, but comforting, as this enables them to complement one another.

I Cor. 16:19: "The churches of Asia salute you. Acquilla and Priscilla salute you much in the Lord, with the church that is in their house."

In the first sentence, "churches" would certainly seem to refer to various local gatherings. On the use of the word in the second sentence, Thayer has the following under definitions of the word *ekkleesia*:

"The church in one's house = the company of Christians belonging to a person's family; others less aptly understand the phrase of the Christians accustomed to meet in the house of someone - for as appears from I Cor. 14:23, the whole Christian church was accustomed to assemble in one and the same place."

Other passages might be cited, but these should suffice to show that the church cannot be spoken of exclusively as being the local congregation. And, as was mentioned before, we would not want to speak of a local congregation as being divinely ordained in its outward (improper) organizational sense. In Revelation 3, the group at Sardis is indeed referred to as church. John explains that (3:4): "Thou hast a few names even in Sardis which have not defiled their garments." It was for the sake of the believers that the group was called church and only for their sake, for God does not divinely ordain or claim as His in its entirety a group that includes hypocrites and unbelievers,

It is certainly divinely ordained that believers should gather together, that they should fellowship with and strengthen one another, that they should join one another doing the Lord's work. But it has been said, and rightly so, this would happen even if there were no explicit demands from the Lord. For it is the nature of faith to seek out its own kind and to join itself to them, and with them to join in Gospel proclamation and edification. And it is in that sense, more than any other, that a gathering of believers is divinely ordained, be it two or three or 300,000. For faith, the thing that brings and gathers believers together at any level, is of God's doing. So the synod is not really of human arrangement at all (with the exception, of course, to the formal consent and organization). For a synod grows out of the same desire to fellowship, preach, edify, and the like on the basis of God's Holy Word. The desire is born of faith, and faith is certainly divine. So what is human about a synod is its form. Its essence is divine, for the sake of the believers comprising it, even as is the essence of a gathering of Christians in a certain locality.

As far as any form or forms being divinely ordained, Scripture does not allow us to go beyond things like faith, the means of grace, witnessing of and sharing the Gospel - spiritual "forms". While it can be proven otherwise in the Old Testament, it is not the case in the New Testament:

"So much is clear: the Christians living in a certain place were joined together in some form of organization and held divine services with singing, reading, preaching, and the Lord's Supper, the arrangement apparently not at all being uniform everywhere, but differing: according to circumstances, and as the special spiritual gifts which God had given them made possible," (Joh. P. Meyer, *op. cit.*, p. 256)

The New Testament Scriptures are virtually silent when it comes to forms at all. However, they do give indication, and that rather conclusively, that gatherings other than local congregations have the right to administer the keys. In Acts 15:22 we are told: "Then please it the apostles and elders with the whole church, to send chosen men of their company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas..." The group acting and called church here was the council that convened at Jerusalem, and not a local congregation. Likewise we read in II Corinthians 8:19 that Titus "was also chosen of the churches to travel with us," We know Titus was more than a mere travel companion or butler to Paul. He, too, as to preach and teach God's Word. Yet, this was also the joint action of two or more local groups. Or, we might say, these were the actions of various gatherings acting as one group. They are, as they so gather and function, called church.

To summarize very briefly: the Scriptures do not prove conclusively that the Greek word *ekkleesia* must refer to a local congregation. In some instances that may be the intended meaning and interpretation. But in most instances it is perfectly permissible and even demanded that we read the Greek word to refer to true believers, with little or no reference to what outward organizational form they assume. As for divine institution

of form, we can only say the only divinely ordained forms are things like faith, the Word, the means of grace. And it is these things that lend divinity to any forms that may arise from or around them.

Part Three: A Practical Consideration of the Relationship

In view of what has preceded, this section need not be of the same length. From a purely organizational point of view, the congregation's relationship to the synod is that of membership. This membership is independent of the congregation's pastor, and it is a voluntary thing. But just how does it – or how should it – come out in practice? On the basis of what we have seen, our synod's Commission on Inter-church Relations is described it quite well when it says that, while all groupings of believers are essentially the same and on the same plane, it must be borne in mind that the congregation is the primary grouping of believers and the synod is a secondary grouping.

At the same time it must be remembered that any time we join or otherwise become a part of some group or organization, we commit ourselves to certain things that pertain to the group or organization. This is usually accompanied by our receiving certain rights or benefits. Perhaps *The Shepherd Under Christ* says it all here when it presents this summary to Chapter 15:

"Membership in a synod has definite benefits for both pastor and congregation. At the same time it brings with it certain obligations for each if synod is to fulfill its purpose in the Lord's Kingdom" (p. 362).

We form and join a synod for a variety of reasons. One is primarily spiritual and has been at least alluded to in the previous sections. Spiritual reasons for forming and joining a synod would, include the following: it enables us to provide and have the opportunities for and benefits of fellowship to an extent that is more full than with our congregations; it enables us to testify to the bond of faith that exists between us and people everywhere; it gives us a source of qualified pastors and teachers and provides us with access to help, counsel, admonition and the like in preserving unity of Christian faith and practice.

Another reason is purely practical in nature. Formation of and membership in a synod enable local groups of Christians to do things they could not do by themselves, or could not do as effectively and as widely. Here we are thinking of things like foreign mission work, establishing and subsidizing home missions, training of pastors and teachers, providing good Christian literature for the instruction and edification of their members and prospective members, benevolence work, and the like.

We will not cite them for you verbatim here, but these are the expressed objectives of our Wisconsin Synod as stated in its constitution. They also appear in *The Shepherd Under Christ* (p. 354f.).

But official statements, constitutions and clearly worded objectives and ideals don't automatically make for a good and proper congregation-synod relationship. Be we synodical official, parish pastor, or person in the pew, Christians at all levels have their sinful flesh with which to contend. In this case, it is the pride of our flesh that can cause the problems. It's not always easy to think of ourselves as being on the same plane as others, and it's extremely difficult for us to submit to someone else or certain occasions.

We aren't about to deny that synodical officials cannot be at fault here. They can be. And they must guard against pride and becoming dictatorial in their dealings with the synod's constituency, even if they are "in the right" by virtue of their duly elected or appointed position. But that is not material for discussion in a paper on the congregation's relationship to the synod.

Ever since the days of the Reformation, Lutherans have been zealous about, retaining their autonomy, especially as congregations. And well they might, for the congregation is still the primary gathering of Christians, and it is autonomous. By virtue of the believers in its midst, it has full authority to preach the Word, administer the Sacraments, call pastors and teachers and to make such other arrangements as it may deem necessary in this respect. The congregation and only the congregation can set its budget, schedule its regular

and special services, arrange for baptizing and instructing the young and others, minister to the sick and dying, supervise its doctrine and practice, etc. These are things the synod does not do and, in many instances, cannot and may not do, because it lacks the wherewithal to do them or is otherwise restricted (i.e., by Christian love or synodical guidelines, objectives, etc.).

In one sense, the synod's role is largely advisory and of a service nature as far as the congregation is concerned. In rendering it service and giving its advice, the synod must avoid even the appearance of "legislating" or "forcing" its service and advice on the congregation. In certain cases, however, congregational autonomy must be forfeited. An obvious case would be where the synod has taken a doctrinal stand that is in full agreement with Scripture. There neither synod nor congregation are real authority. There the Word of God is the authority, regardless of who may speak it.

But there are other areas, apart from doctrinal matters, where a congregation's fulfillment must be forfeited in favor of the synod, and that is in the area of synodical resolutions and other decisions arrived at in proper order. For example, a congregation may feel the place to expand synod mission work is in Central Africa. However, synod, either in convention or through the World Mission Board, may decide to expand in South America. Or a congregation may feel that a certain action should be delayed until the next convention, but the synod decides to act on the matter at its current convention. Congregational autonomy must be forfeited in such cases. Not because the synod has spoken, but because the secondary grouping of Christians to which the congregation voluntarily belongs and gives its assent to making such matters its business, has spoken by majority vote!

Such decisions are no longer advisory. They become binding - unless, of course, a doctrinal error is involved in these decisions. If none is involved, and the congregation insists on its autonomy; if the congregation refuses to go along with the decisions arrived at, then the congregation should, in the order of honesty and decency, disassociate itself from membership in the larger body. For did it not affiliate with the synod of its own choice? And did the congregation not, in joining, agree to abide by and acknowledge such procedures of decision making and the like? It did indeed!

Congregational autonomy or rugged individualism is one thing. And it can be a beneficial quality. But it can also become detrimental, because it can actually become dictatorial. By insisting on or otherwise making an issue of its rights in matters that are adiaphora, a congregation is in effect setting itself up over other congregations. The congregation may be entitled to its opinions and actions, but at the same time, a congregation "cannot dictate to other congregations or church bodies that they must respect its actions without any further ado or without any further examination. That would be papacy" (Pieper, *op . cit.*, p. 131). And that would be the case, even without formal synod affiliation.

Paul addressed himself to a matter of this nature in Corinth. In the address of his first epistle to them, he reminded them they were not an entity unto themselves, but had been "called ... with all that call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord". Later in his letter he reminds them they must consider the situation in other churches (e.g. 7:17, 11:16; 16:2). In 12:27 he says: "Whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honored, all the members rejoice with it. Now ye are the body of Christ and members in particular." And in 14:36 he becomes quite emphatic when he asks: "What? Came the Word out from you? or came it unto you only?" It is, in fact, a rather frequent subject in Paul's epistles: a member-body type of relationship exists between all believers. One individual or one group of individuals cannot imply isolate themselves from others in the church.

This relationship is of divine origin. But needless to say, it will not and cannot accomplish its divine purposes if members or even groups of members choose to isolate themselves from or to in some other way become independent of the body. In this connection Professor Meyer notes, after citing several instances (e.g., II Cor. 9:2; Acts 16:1; II Cor. 8:18f.):

"If the New Testament we find that there were local congregations and groupings of local congregations; although about their organization nothing is said... No divine institution is ever

hinted, although neglect of cooperation both in a congregation and between congregations is sternly reprimanded" (*op. cit.*, p. 258).

In other words, Scripture indicates that a relationship exists between believers. Be it formal (synod) or informal (no precise form or organization), no Christian or group of Christians is autonomous. They have a relationship, a tie with others that cannot be denied or ignored. What involves other believers involves them and vice versa.⁴ To say and act otherwise is to judge and put oneself or one's group above another, and that is contrary to the very spirit of Christianity!

But let's take something really practical. What about the pre-budget subscription and stewardship procedures of our synod? Here several things must remain in the foreground. One is that this system is not mandatory. It is encouraged - even stressed - but it is not forced on any congregation. Here we must remember the synod's advisory role. Financial stewardship is a requirement of and privilege for believers as far as our Lord is concerned. And it's certainly up to the believers who gather together in a locality to determine to what extent they will choose to meet this requirement and exercise this privilege. Certainly they will want to do so as well as they can and as properly motivated as they can. Hence, they will humbly - yes, gladly - welcome the efforts, suggestions, programs, etc. of the synod as not only something the secondary gathering of Christians requested by majority vote, but as something that is being offered in brotherly love and concern for the total Ministry of the Keys.

Hence we must be indeed careful of making charges our congregational autonomy is being taken away from us when, in fact, we are merely being provided with certain suggestions, outlines and other aids to help us make and live up to the decisions and efforts that are within our autonomy. We are especially sensitive about this in money matters. And it appears there is some sensitivity in matters pertaining to evangelism. These, it is frequently charged, intrude on a congregation's autonomy when they come down from Milwaukee.

Yet, when the synod's Board for Parish Education produced the current Sunday School materials, charges of synodical invasion of congregational autonomy were not heard - at least not by your essayist! The production and promotion of this material was interpreted as the synod's attempt to "tell me how to run my Sunday School"? No, the material was welcomed, and not only because the secondary grouping of believers had requested or approved the material by majority vote. It was welcomed because it covered an area in which congregations feel inadequate to operate on their own; because it filled a need in an area where most congregations feel they will take all the reliable help they can get.

If congregations took the same attitude about financial stewardship, evangelism, and the like (and why shouldn't they, since none is truly self-sufficient?); if believers in Milwaukee and Middletown, U.S.A approached such things with the attitude that we are on the same plane in so many respects, then nothing would be offered as "absolute" or "sure-fire" (if, and it's doubtful, any recent programs, etc. really have been) and we would welcome any help or suggestions from any reliable source. And we would be a good long way along the road of a good congregation-synod relationship, of humble and loving give and take! Humble and loving if we're doing the giving, and humble and loving if we are doing the taking.

Perhaps that is the key - give and take. As a congregation, we must remember the benefits we derive from affiliation with a synod. Time does not allow us to mention them at this point, but they are many (cf. pp. 359ff. in *The Shepherd Under Christ* for a general list to which any number of specific items might be added). When that is done, then the congregation will be more able to see its obligations and more willing to meet them. When a congregation is aware of just how much it is freely receiving, it will also be more inclined to freely give - whether it is individuals for conferences, conventions, boards and committees; whether it is financial support

⁴ cp. the attitude taken by some in the LC-MS internal doctrinal struggle of recent years (i.e., that what was going on in the synod didn't concern or involve them, as the church stopped at their front doors; and that, although they were members of the LC-MS, they shouldn't be counted as supporting abnormalities and aberrations in synodical doctrines, practices, etc., because it wasn't thus in their congregation!

or allowing its pastor to serve in synodical functions outside the congregation (cf. *The Shepherd Under Christ*, p. 361f. for a more complete list of a congregation's obligations).

Another key to a good congregation-synod relationship is congregational awareness. This is done, not only by referring to it as "our synod" and "your synod" instead of "synod" - or, worse yet, "people in Milwaukee". This is also done by engaging synod speakers, filmstrips, and other presentations. There are other ways of disseminating synod news and other information in the congregation. Among them we might mention subscribing to *The Northwestern Lutheran*, using synod bulletin inserts and other material that is sent out, sharing parts of "The President's Newsletter" and correspondence from other synod offices with the members of the congregation.

The pastor, of course, is the "central receiving agency" for synod information to the congregation. Let him faithfully pass it on. But let him not be the only distributor that information in the congregation. That is the easiest and most natural way to go about it, but it can also be the least effective. Over a period of time, it can even have some adverse effects on the congregation-synod relationship. For it can make the pastor begin to appear like a local "agent" for "them" to "us"! And that concept of the congregation-synod relationship is so naturally arrived at by people, that we don't want to actually reinforce it for them by something like this.

That can be guarded against with some degree of effectiveness by using our members. Let the congregation's delegate to the district convention give a report on the convention to the congregation. Let the treasurer pass on any noteworthy information that comes from the office of the Stewardship Counselor. Sit down with the congregation president and help him decide what portions of "The President's Newsletter" would be of concern, interest and benefit to the congregation.

And then let these people pass on the information, from the lectern after a service or in a bulletin insert they have drawn up. These people can inform our congregations about our synod. For they are an integral part of our synod! And their reporting of synod news and information will also do much for enhancing among our people a proper understanding of and appreciation for the congregation's relationship to the synod. It will quite possibly do it better than we pastors can. And if it does that, it will better enable both our congregations and their pastors to receive and meet all the benefits and obligations of this relationship in a spirit that is truly Christian - humbly, loving, as brethren, gladly and thankfully.

Conclusion

There are many aspects of the congregation's relationship to the synod into which this paper has not gone and will not go. But virtually any aspect of the relationship can be answered and dealt with properly and successfully if we remember that local congregations and the synod are essentially the same. They are both church, being so called for the sake of the believers in their midst. Their forms may be different, but their essence is the same. Their spires of activity may be different but their objectives within their respective spheres are the same. Both are gatherings of believers, worshipping, witnessing, and otherwise working together to preach the Gospel to every creature as efficiently, effectively, and as selflessly as they possibly can. We must bear that in mind, and we can bear that in mind. For such is the divinely promised power of the Gospel as it is preached and works among men. It will take many and make their minds one:

"As the Holy Spirit leads Christians to group themselves together in Jesus' name... He always constrains them to do so in an orderly manner (I Cor. 14: 33,40) and in the spirit of love (I Cor. 6:14). The Holy Spirit never leads Christians to group themselves together in Jesus' name for a competitive purpose, so as to duplicate, hinder, or disturb that scope of the ministry of the keys which is already effectively provided for by a previously established grouping of Christians. Every added grouping... effected by the Spirit... will be for the purpose of assisting the primary groupings in exercising certain phases of the ministry or the keys more fully and more efficiently in keeping with the great commission of the Lord... or for the purpose of providing needed

strengthening through Word and Sacrament which, because of special circumstances, is not adequately offered or cannot well be offered through already existing groupings (e.g., worship services at conferences and synodical conventions, ministry to students, to the handicapped, to the institutionalized, etc.)."

"The more fully also the secondary groupings of Christians remain conscious of their essential character as Church, the more keenly will they feel their responsibility of functioning in accordance with love and good order and thus carefully restrict themselves to those passes of the ministry of the keys which would otherwise fail to receive the attention that they deserve" (from "Doctrinal Statements of the WELS, 1970" - Emphasis not mine)

Yes, finally, the essence of a good congregation-synod relationship is the same as that of a good intra-church relationship. Which is really not at all surprising, since the two relationships are essentially the same. This ideal relationship is fostered, built and strengthened by the Holy Ghost, working by the Gospel. It is a relationship that operates on humility, love, selflessness, concern.

May we therefore continue to preach the humility, love, selflessness and concern of Jesus Christ for us sinners. And God the Holy Spirit will graciously take care of preserving and increasing this same relationship in our church - both on the local congregation and synod level!