

CHURCH ORGANIZATION AS THE EXPRESSION OF THE FUNCTION OF THE CHURCH

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The following article was one of the essays presented to the Theologians' Conference in Thiensville on Friday, July 29, 1960. It is the first of the three articles read to the Conference by pastors of our Wisconsin Synod to appear in our *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*.

—Ed.

Introduction

The Church is the communion of saints, the whole body of all those who trust in Christ's redemptive work alone for salvation. These believers in Christ have a purpose and a function on earth given them by their Lord and Savior: first, they are to continue in His Word so that they may remain His disciples indeed, know the saving truth, and by that truth be made and kept free (John 8:31–32); second, they are to proclaim that soul-saving truth to all the world, so that others may be brought to faith and to salvation. Thus walking and working in the truth, they as the children of light will show forth the praises of Him who has called them out of darkness into His marvelous light (I Peter 2:9).

In the Old Testament the Lord God Himself by express command and detailed instructions to Moses and Aaron effected the church organization in Israel as the Pentateuch amply shows. He instituted and regulated the forms of worship for the Old Testament. Our Savior himself, in His humiliation, recognized and respected these regulations where-ever they were serving their God-given function and purpose. He rebuked those in the church organization of His day who had corrupted these ordinances of God and were misleading the people by them, proclaiming the keeping of outward ordinances to be a way unto salvation.

For the New Testament the Lord of the Church has established no organization. He has instituted one office, the ministry of reconciliation. In II Corinthians 5:18–21 we read: "And all things are of God, who hath reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ, and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation; to wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation. Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God. For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him." He has charged His disciples with the work of going into all the world and preaching the Gospel to every creature, Mark 16:15: "And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature." They are to go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them and teaching them. Matthew 28:10, 20: "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world." They are to administer the office of the keys, forgiving the sins of penitent sinners, but retaining the sins of the impenitent as long as they do not repent. Matthew 16:19: "And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." Matthew 18:18: "Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." John 20:23: "Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained." They are to be witnesses unto Him and His Gospel unto the uttermost part of the earth. Acts 1:8: "But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth."

In carrying out this ministry they are to stand fast in the liberty wherewith Christ has made them free. Galatians 5:1: "Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled

again with the yoke of bondage.” They are not to become entangled with or enslaved under man-made ordinances which would rob them of salvation by grace alone and which would corrupt their message and their preaching, thereby making of their hearers slaves of human ordinances instead of free children and heirs of God (cf. The Epistle to the Galatians).

This brief review of the essence and purpose of the Church should serve to introduce us to our topic: Church organization as the expression of the function of the Church. Under this topic I should like to discuss several points:

- I. The work of the Church as witness unto Christ and His Gospel, just as the functioning of any other number of individuals forming one body, will for the sake of order require some measure of organization.
- II. All church organization must be effected in brotherly love if it is to serve the prime purpose of the Church, the edification of the body of Christ.
- III. All organization in the Church, which is the body, must remain subject unto Christ, its Head, whether on the level of the congregation, the synod, or a federation of synods.
- IV. Enlargement of the Synodical Conference to include all those who are one in faith and confession in this rapidly shrinking world could well serve to further the very purpose for which the Conference was founded.

Part I

The orderly function of any number of individuals as a group or body will require some measure of organization. A group of boys engaged in a game of ball must determine which player is to function in the respective positions on the team. The success of the team will depend on the functioning of each and every player in his respective role. Where a school is being organized, unless all those taking part agree to proceed strictly on a trial and error basis, there must be the person imparting information and instruction, as well as the person receiving information and instruction.

The very establishment by God of the human family with father, mother, and children, each having his respective position and function in the family unit, testifies to the fact that our God is a God of order and not of confusion.

In the Old Testament dispensation our God effected the orderly functioning of His people in their life of worship and praise by establishing and defining the offices and services of the priests, the Levites, and others in minute detail.

In the New Testament, the service and function of the congregation of believers is by no means less noble or glorious than that of the Old Testament. How glorious, noble, and exalted our position as believers in the New Testament is, becomes evident from the fact that we are called children of God (Gal. 3:26), heirs of God (Gal. 4:7), kings and priests unto God (Rev. 1:6), members of the body of Christ (I Cor. 12:27), and collectively, as the whole body of believers, the bride of Christ, our heavenly bridegroom.

But for this exalted and noble service our Lord has not spelled out any organizational details. He says: “Ye are the salt of the earth,” and He expects that His disciples will function as salt, the great preservative agent. He says: “Ye are the light of the world,” and as a city that is set on a hill cannot be hid, so the Church of Christ in its proclamation of the Gospel will bring light to sinful men sitting in darkness and the shadow of death.

The Church’s mission is the preaching of the Gospel. Its motive is genuine gratitude to God and love for all fellowmen. The chief gift of the believers is the gift of the Holy Spirit of whom Jesus said: “But when the Comforter is come, whom I will send unto you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, which proceedeth from the Father, he shall testify of me: and ye also shall bear witness, because ye have been with me from the beginning” (John 15:26–27). And again: “When he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth: for he shall not speak of himself; but whatsoever he shall hear, that shall he speak: and he will shew you things

to come. He shall glorify me: for he shall receive of mine, and shall shew it unto you. All things that the Father hath are mine: therefore said I, that he shall take of mine, and shall shew it unto you” (John 16:13–15). Their assurance was the promise of Jesus—“Lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world” (Matt. 28:20).

And yet, with all this apparent freedom from organization, the Church of Christ enjoys an organization, God-given and Spirit-wrought, which must not go unmentioned. In Ephesians 4, where the Apostle Paul speaks of the wonderful unity of the Church in the familiar passage that exhorts us to walk worthy of the calling wherewith we are called, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, he emphasizes that to every one “is given grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ” (Eph. 4:7). For our ascended Lord gave gifts unto men, that is, to His Church. “He gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ” (Eph. 4:11–12). Now Paul continues and speaks of the perfect unity which is wrought in the entire body of Christ. The many members in this body are “fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part.” Here in Ephesians 4 the emphasis is placed upon the unity of the whole body of Christ.

In another Chapter of Paul’s epistles, I Corinthians 12, the emphasis is placed upon the diversities of gifts, the differences of administrations, and the diversities of operations. Yet at the same time the truth is emphasized that these gifts are given by the same Spirit and are intended to serve the same Lord. “It is the same God which worketh all in all” (vs. 4). Paul now goes on to emphasize the importance that every member render the service it is intended to render to the entire body. He does this by employing the picture of the human body, the crowning achievement of the Creator’s wisdom, power, and goodness. In order that this body might rejoice and might not suffer, every member, whether it be a comely one or an uncomely one, must function in its intended manner and must render the service it was intended to render.

All this surely does more than imply that there will be effected also in a visible church body a measure of organization which will serve the good of all. For when Paul exhorts: “Let all things be done decently and in order” (I Cor. 14:40), and when he earlier in that chapter warns against and aims to correct the evil and confusion that reigned in the gatherings of the Corinthian Christians, he surely brings out the truth of our first thesis: that the work of the Church as witness unto Christ and His Gospel, just as the functioning of any other number of individuals forming a body, will require some measure of organization.

Part II

All church organization must be effected in brotherly love if it is to serve the prime purpose of the Church, the edification of the body of Christ.

Jesus, the Lord and Savior of the Church, intends that His disciples should be governed by brotherly love in all their relations to one another. In fact, the love of Christians for one another is to be the distinguishing characteristic by which all men should know His disciples. “A new commandment I give unto you, that ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another” (John 13:34–35).

Surely this love of the Christian for his fellow believer, which understands the need of each human soul and strives to supply that need through a faithful witness to Christ and His Gospel—this love will also be the motivating power that guides the Christians as they undertake any joint service of worship or witness. For Christians, drawn together by the Holy Spirit through their common faith and hope, will quite naturally worship together and witness together. If this is not to result in confusion, some organization, though ever so simple, and good order, will have to be effected. For, while in this life, the Christian still wrestles with the devil, the world, and his own sinful flesh, which are not the authors of order, but of confusion.

After the miraculous outpouring of the Holy Ghost on Pentecost, the disciples, all filled with the Holy Ghost, began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance. They proclaimed in the various languages of the many visitors at Jerusalem the wonderful works of God. But when this speaking with tongues had served its purpose, Peter arose as spokesman of the disciples and answered the question: “What meaneth

this?" Surely this was not done according to a prearranged plan, though Simon had often served as spokesman of the Twelve. Even though all the believers present found themselves endowed by the Holy Spirit with unusual and marvellous powers of speech, these disciples did not witness in utter confusion. They did not insist each one upon the right to use and exercise his special gift. Instead, guided by the Holy Spirit and ruled by love for one another, they witnessed unto Christ's death and resurrection and man's redemption in an orderly manner. They were "kindly affectioned one to another, in honor preferring one another" (Rom. 12:10). Peter, standing up with the eleven, lifted up his voice and spoke. Brotherly love and the desire that all might be edified, quickly and quietly effected a measure of church organization for an expression of the function of the Church. The Holy Spirit surely guided and directed the disciples also in this.

We mention briefly the election of the first deacons to oversee the work of ministering to the physical needs of especially the widows and the poor. This work had been done before. The disciples "had all things common; and sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need" (Acts 2:44-45). But as the congregation grew and more widows and poor people needed to be served, the company of believers or multitude of disciples chose men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom, whom they appointed over this business. Acts 6:3. Later on we read the blessed fruit of this decision and the organization effected. The deacons supervised the daily ministrations and the disciples gave themselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the Word. "And the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly" (vs. 7). Brotherly love and a concern for the edification of all had readily effected an organization that served as an expression of the function of the Church.

We could go on and consider the Spirit-directed commissioning of Barnabas and Saul as the apostles to the Gentiles in Acts 13. We could study the election of Paul and Barnabas as the delegates of the Christian church at Antioch to the Synod at Jerusalem, where the questions these delegates placed before the brethren in Jerusalem were considered and answered. At this Synod the reports of Peter, Barnabas, and Paul were heard, reporting the marvelous things that God had wrought through their witnessing among the Gentiles. Then James arose, when the others held their peace, and offered his judgment on the matter. This was adopted by all, and Judas surnamed Barsabas, and Silas were delegated to take the written report and counsel of the Synod of brethren at Jerusalem to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. This answer and counsel was intended to keep them free from new bondage and to order their lives as free children of God. Once again Christian love for the brethren had under adequate organization expressed the true function of the Church: to be the messenger of the gracious will of God. In Galatians 5:13 the Lord exhorts us through His Apostle: "By love serve one another." This passage sounds the right tone and theme for all church organization. Love, born in us by faith and nourished by the Word of God which constantly holds the grace of our God before us and increases our gratitude for all that the Triune God has done for us and still promises to do in the future, this love, I say, should be the motivating power also in any church organization. For we are to serve one another even as Christ humbled himself, took on the form of a servant, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross (Phil. 2).

The picture of Christ as head and of us as His members or, collectively, His body, shows the relationship into which we are placed. All members serve the Head, each member serves the body and thus serves every other member of the body. Again we think of I Corinthians 12 where Paul emphasizes the fact that each member has its special function and that the suffering of one member causes all members to suffer with it and that honor bestowed upon one member makes all members rejoice. "Now are they many members, yet but one body. And the eye cannot say unto the hand, I have no need of thee: nor again the head to the feet, I have no need of you.... That there should be no schism in the body; but that the members should have the same care one for another" (vss. 21 and 25).

Similarly the Savior warns His disciples against seeking positions of honor or lordship over others in the church. In pointing out the ambitious striving of the scribes and Pharisees He warned: "But be not ye called Rabbi: for one is your Master, even Christ, and all ye are brethren" (Matt. 23:3). After rebuking the ambitious sons of Zebedee and their mother for the request that in His kingdom these two brothers should sit the one on His right hand, and the other on His left, Jesus continues: "Ye know that the princes of the Gentiles exercise

dominion over them, and they that are great exercise authority upon them. But it shall not be so among you: but whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister (Greek: δίακονος, servant), and whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant (Greek: δούλος, slave). Even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many” (Matt. 20:25–28).

This truth that the disciples of Christ, no matter what their gifts or responsibility in the church, are to render humble service for the edification of all in the spirit of love is also emphasized by the Savior’s actions and words the night He instituted His Last Supper. Having risen from supper, He girded himself with a towel, took water in a basin, and began to wash the disciple’s feet and to wipe them with the towel. Later He said: “Know ye what I have done to you? Ye call me Master and Lord: and ye say well; for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you. Verily, verily, I say unto you, the servant is not greater than his lord; neither he that is sent greater than he that sent him. If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them” (John 13:12–17).

Thus we, His disciples, are to serve as the ambassadors of Christ, bearing not our own message, but His, and aiming through humble, grateful, and loving service to edify one another and to serve one another in the building of His kingdom and in the erection of that spiritual house of God, His Church.

Part III

All organization in the church, which is the body, must remain subject unto Christ, its Head, in carrying out its God-given function whether on the level of the congregation, the synod, or a federation of synods.

It may be well to emphasize once more the purpose of the Church in all its functions. This purpose is also expressed very well in II Corinthians 5:18–20: “All things are of God, who hath reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ, and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation (τὴν διακονίαν τῆς καταλλαγῆς); to wit, that God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation (τὸν λόγον τῆς καταλλαγῆς). Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ’s stead, be ye reconciled to God. For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.”

As ambassadors for Christ, called into the ministry of reconciliation, sent to proclaim the word of reconciliation, we are constantly pleading with men and saying: “Be ye reconciled to God!” And then we bring them the message of a completed redemption as a ready gift offered to every sinner in Word and Sacrament. That is our purpose and function in the kingdom of God.

This high and noble function, however, dare never erase from our minds and consciousness that we ourselves are His disciples and witnesses only by His boundless grace. Because of this grace of God, the Holy Ghost has called us by the Gospel, enlightened us with His gifts, sanctified and kept us in the true faith. Because of that grace and love of God, we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard. Thus the Lord’s new creation functions to show forth His glory and to proclaim the word of reconciliation to all men far and near. We render this service as the free children and heirs of God, but also, as the grateful and obedient members of Christ’s body.

In contrast to the Old Testament, during which the believers, as minor children, were kept under the law as under a schoolmaster, awaiting the coming of the Messiah, we in the New Testament are no longer under the bondage of the beggarly elements of ordinances, which have been abolished with the coming of Christ and the completion of His redemption. Whereas the Old Testament dispensation prescribed even to minute details the forms of worship, of purification, of sacrifices, of food, and of offerings, we in the New Testament are exhorted to stand fast in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free. We are to rejoice in this that we are children and heirs of God. We are to be guided by the Spirit of His Son in our hearts, which cries Abba, Father. We are to be motivated in our service in His Church by the constraining love of Christ, who died that we might have life abundantly. Any organization that is effected by a church body in carrying out our Gospel mission under our New Testament liberty, if it is to be an expression of the function of the Church, must actually serve the

preaching of the Gospel, show forth the praises of our gracious God, and be directed at leading sinners to the knowledge of salvation.

The Lord has instituted one office in the New Testament Church, the ministry of reconciliation (II Corinthians 5:18 τὴν διακονίαν τῆς καταλλαγῆς). This ministry of reconciliation is given to the entire Church, the communion of saints. The public exercise of this ministry of reconciliation on behalf of a group of believers, such as a congregation, is bestowed by the Holy Spirit through the Church. Acts 20:28: “Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood.” Acts 13:2–3: “As they ministered to the Lord, and fasted, the Holy Ghost said, Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them. And when they had fasted and prayed, and laid their hands on them, they sent them away.” Gal. 2:9: “And when James, Cephas, and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given unto me, they gave to me and Barnabas the right hands of fellowship; that we should, go unto the heathen, and they unto the circumcision.” This bestowal of the office of the ministry we, therefore, customarily designate as a divine call.

As the Gospel was spread and more thousands came to faith, gathering by the Spirit’s guidance about the Word and the Sacraments, sending out missionaries, and providing for the poor in their midst or the famine-sufferers in Judaea, they combined their efforts, delegating definite functions to definite men, all of them professing faith in Christ and ready to serve their Lord.

The proclamation of this word of reconciliation is the function of the Church whether this be on the congregational level, on the synodical level, or in a federation of several synods. Let us examine the church organization in these various phases of the Gospel ministry.

A. On the Congregational Level

After Jesus’ ascension into heaven it is said of His eleven apostles, of the believing women, and of His brethren: “These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication” (Acts 1:14). They were obedient to Jesus’ command that they should not depart from Jerusalem, but waited for the promise of the Father. On Pentecost, ten days after His ascension, the miraculous outpouring of the Holy Ghost took place, after which it is said of the believers: “They were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance” (Acts 2:4). Those who heard them were all amazed and said: “We do hear them speak in our tongues the wonderful works of God” (vs. 11).

When some began to mock and others asked, “What meaneth this?” Peter arose and bore witness of Christ, preaching repentance and forgiveness. Through this functioning of the Church, the Holy Spirit brought many to repentance and to faith, about 3,000 souls being baptized and added to the Church on that day. Of these it is then stated Acts 2:42: “They continued stedfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers.” Thus the newly founded Church was functioning, preaching the Gospel, administering the sacraments, and witnessing unto the risen Christ.

More is said in Acts 2. The new commandment of love was clearly demonstrated. “And all that believed were together, and had all things common; and sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need. And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart, praising God, and having favor with all the people” (vss. 44–47). Later, when the ministrations to the poor increased and murmuring arose, because some were being neglected in the daily ministrations, the first deacons were chosen and were charged with administering this phase of the congregation’s life and function under the Gospel (Acts 6:1–6). Still later, Agabus by the Spirit signified “that there would be a great dearth throughout all the world; which came to pass in the days of Claudius Caesar. Then the disciples, every man according to his ability, determined to send relief unto the brethren which dwelt in Judaea: which also they did, and sent it to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Saul” (Acts 11:28–30). Thus the early congregations, rejoicing in their new-found Savior, were active in deeds of love. Their church organization, though undoubtedly much less complex than ours today served as an

expression of the function of the Church, administering the means of grace and guiding the believers in Christian living.

As the Spirit gave them power, the disciples did many signs and wonders, among them miracles of healing. These miracles in turn offered further occasion for proclaiming repentance and forgiveness to all who assembled to hear. Thus Christ, the crucified and risen Savior, was glorified and men were invited to believe in Him to their soul's salvation. Think of the healing of the man, lame from birth, who asked for alms at the Beautiful Gate of the temple. After his healing Peter said: "Ye killed the Prince of life, whom God hath raised from the dead; whereof we are witnesses. And his name through faith in his name hath made this man strong whom ye see and know.... Repent ye therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out" (Acts 3:15–16, 19). Think of Tabitha, whom God restored to life in answer to Peter's prayer. After this miracle it is said: "And it was known throughout all Joppa; and many believed in the Lord" (Acts 9:42).

In the missionary activity of the early church, the Jerusalem congregation had its definite spokesmen to address the assembled gathering, in this case the leaders of the Lord's chosen apostles usually speaking, as for example, Peter, James, and John. In doctrinal discussions with the delegates from Antioch, James, Cephas, and John, who seemed to be pillars spoke in the name of the church at Jerusalem and carried on the discussions with Paul and Barnabas. Upon their advice the church adopted recommendations for the solution of the problems at Antioch, and perceiving the grace that was given unto them, gave them the right hand of fellowship, reaching also the agreement that Paul and Barnabas should go to the heathen, the Twelve, however, unto the circumcision, the lost sheep of the house of Israel (Gal. 2:6–9).

The church at Antioch, having in its midst "certain prophets and teachers," followed the Holy Spirit's command to separate Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto He had called them. Having fasted and prayed, they laid their hands on them and sent them on their missionary journeys.

Thus, also, Christian discipline is carried out as enjoined upon the Church in Matthew 18. Think of Peter dealing with Ananias and Sapphira, whom the Lord had revealed unto him as leading a hypocritical life. Think of Paul's dealings with the Corinthians and how he exhorts them to exercise Christian discipline over against the factious spirits in their midst and the man guilty of incest. No organizational form is mentioned in either case, no officials or boards that were to act, but the congregation of believers, guided by the Scriptural principles taught them by the faithful Apostle Paul, was to act in the fear of God.

Today church organization has become a much more complex thing. Several causes for this could be cited. But even in a complex organization all must be geared to support the preaching and teaching of the Word of reconciliation. All organization must be established out of brotherly love, for the sake of good order, and must remain the servant of Christ.

Since our God is a God of order who exhorts us through the Apostle Paul in I Cor. 14:40: "Let all things be done decently and in order," Christians today adopt a Constitution and Bylaws (*Kirchenordnung*) when banding together as a church. They are concerned about purity of doctrine and practice and therefore adopt a constitution which, to cite one that is at hand, speaks clearly on articles of faith, on membership, contributions, Christian education, suffrage, excommunication, removal, and dismissal, separation, the ministry, removal from office, books, officers and church council, duties of annual officers, meetings of the congregation, meetings of the church council, organizations, repeals and alterations. Their bylaws, to cite from the same document, may regulate the reception of members, election of officers, meetings of the church council, regular and special meetings of the congregation, and the order of business to be followed at congregational meetings. Other more elaborate constitutions may regulate the conduct of a Christian Day School, Sunday School, or other agencies of Christian education whereby the congregation aims to carry out the Savior's command: "Feed my lambs, feed my sheep!" The constitution may regulate the election and the functioning of a board of education, a stewardship committee, an almoner. It may define at greater length the duties of various boards and committees: the board of elders, board of trustees, board of deacons, or the finance committee. But all this is done with only one goal in mind: to help carry out faithfully the ministry of reconciliation for the members of the congregation and through them for others.

If any regulation or organization does not contribute to the orderly conduct of the ministry of reconciliation, or even hinders this work, it has no place in the Church's program, is not an expression of the Church's function and should be dropped or removed. It is an evil which has crept into the life of American congregations especially (I cannot speak for other countries—though surely Satan would bring the same temptations there), that many organizations and much outward activity have crept into the congregational program. Many of these organizations and much of this activity do not carry on the ministry of reconciliation. It is the social gospel type of organization and activity which aims at making life here on earth pleasant and secure, and thus forgets the purpose and function of the Church.

In contrast to this caricature let us recall that the Lord speaks of the Church as "his body, the fulness of him that filleth all in all" (Eph. 1:23). Surely the members of the body are to function according to the purpose which their divine Head has determined. This picture is carried out beautifully, also, in the twelfth chapter of I Corinthians, where we are told of the diversity of gifts distributed to the members of Christ's body, all of which are, however, given in order that the entire body may profit through the faithful functioning of every member. In verses 27f. the Apostle states: "Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular. And God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healing, helps, governments, diversities of tongues." All of these members, each one also coveting the greatest of gifts, Christian love, are to function in the Church in carrying out its ministry of reconciliation for the spiritual profit of all. And at the same time each member, also those endowed with the highest and greatest number of spiritual gifts, is to remain a humble servant of Christ. Paul says in II Corinthians 4:5: "We preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord; and ourselves your servants for Jesus' sake."

B. On the Synodical Level.

Let us examine now in what manner church organization serves as an expression of the function of the Church on the synodical level. Again we wish to keep in mind that also this organizational form must remain the servant and instrument of Christ in carrying out its God-given function.

Our Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, which is really an organic union of four previously independent synods, adopted a revised constitution last year. The purpose for organizing this synod quite a number of years ago is still expressed clearly in the preamble to its Constitution:

"For the purpose of establishing practical cooperation in the kingdom of God, the Evangelical Lutheran Synods of Wisconsin, Minnesota, Michigan, and Nebraska do unite to form one synodical body, to which body said synods convey all their rights and obligations." After Article I, which states the name of the Synod, Article II clearly defines the Confession of Faith. These synods had agreed to form one synod, to combine their resources and their efforts in the building of God's kingdom of grace, because they had found that they were of one mind and of one spirit, both in doctrine and in practice. In planning their joint work in the kingdom of God they considered the Confession of Faith of prime importance. Article II reads:

"Section 1. The Synod accepts the canonical books of the Old and New Testaments as the divinely inspired and inerrant Word of God, and submits to this Word of God as the only infallible authority in all matters of doctrine, faith, and life.

Section 2. The Synod also accepts the confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church embodied in the Book of Concord of 1580, not in so far as, but because they are a correct presentation and exposition of the pure doctrine of the Word of God."

Article III then defines membership in the Synod and limits it to those "who agree in doctrine and practice with the confession set forth in Article II."

Article IV defines the object and purpose of the Synod as follows:

"The object and purpose of the Synod shall be to extend and conserve the true doctrine and practice of the Evangelical Lutheran Church:

(a) By assisting and counseling in every appropriate way the pastors, teachers, and congregations affiliated with the Synod;

(b) By establishing and maintaining theological seminaries, colleges, academies, schools, and other institutions of learning;

(c) By establishing and maintaining home and foreign missions and such charitable institutions as it may deem appropriate to its calling.

(d) By printing, publishing, purchasing, selling, and disseminating literature which maintains Lutheran doctrine and practice; and by furnishing appropriate literature for parish schools, Sunday schools, missions, institutions, and churches.”

Thus, and in the remaining articles of the Constitution as well as in the Bylaws, provision is made for the orderly use of those gifts with which the Lord has blessed His Church for carrying on the ministry of reconciliation. It is quite natural that much will be said about duties and services laid upon individuals, upon boards, and committees. Yet the entire organization of the Synod has but one purpose and function: to carry on to the best of its ability the ministry of reconciliation wherever the Lord sets before us an open door.

In all this organization, which in a large synod can become very elaborate and complex, the true purpose and function of the Church as the body of believers in Christ, sent out to preach His Gospel in all the world, must be kept clearly in mind. Any department of church organization which does not definitely contribute toward and support that function of the Church ought to be abolished and discarded, not only because it would not be an expression of the function of the Church, but because it could even hinder a church body in its proper functioning.

Let us, for example, think of the matter of admonishing and winning an erring brother and of guarding other souls against his error. The Lord has told us how we should deal with those who fall into sin or into error. We think of Matthew 18, Romans 16, II Thessalonians 3, I Corinthians 5, Galatians 1 and 3, Titus 3:10, II John 10.11, Matthew 7:15 and other passages. In a highly organized and complex church or synodical set-up, such discipline, both the attempts to bring the erring brother to repentance and to guard others against his error, may be delayed and frustrated because of elaborate procedure and adopted protocol. In such instances, I believe, the welfare of souls, both of the erring and of those being misled, is of greater importance than the careful observing of long and involved procedure. For unless such organization and procedure truly functions in carrying out the will of our Lord without delay, untold and irreparable harm can be done to precious souls for whom Christ died.

We could cite other examples of where insistence on procedure would hinder the prompt and proper function of church bodies. But that could lead us far afield. Let us pray God for this mind and spirit that we may always look upon our ministry as a glorious service in which we stand by God’s grace alone. Let us remember the true purpose and function of the Church as God’s ambassadors bearing the word of reconciliation. Then conscious of the fact that we are Christ’s disciples only by grace, we will be eager to serve wherever the Lord calls us in preaching both Law and Gospel for the salvation of souls, and our fellow believers will count it a privilege to serve where they are called to hold up the prophet’s arms until God’s people have finished the task begun and continued in His name.

C. In a Federation of Synods

When several synods or church bodies band themselves together in a federation, such a further organization will be God-pleasing only if the purpose is truly to carry on the ministry of reconciliation. It ought to go without saying that such a federation can function in building the kingdom of God only if the member synods are fully agreed in doctrine and practice. If allowance is made for latitude of doctrine, if practice becomes a matter of indifference, the federation would cease to be an expression of the function of the Church. For as in the true body of Christ there is no disunity or division, so also in any church organization we dare not tolerate or condone disunity or difference in doctrine or practice, whether on the congregational level or in a larger body of many congregations.

In I Corinthians 1:10 we read: “Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.” Here Paul is writing to the church at Corinth, which he goes on to reprimand for the factions and divisions which had sprung up and divided the congregation.

Verses 11 to 13 continue: “For it hath been declared unto me of you, my brethren, by them which are of the house of Chloe, that there are contentions among you. Now this I say, that every one of you saith, I am of Paul; and I am of Apollos, and I am of Cephas, and I of Christ. Is Christ divided? was Paul crucified for you? or were ye baptized in the name of Paul?” In chapter three Paul pursues this thought and emphasizes the fact that the church at Corinth, being the work of God, is a unified creation of God. “Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers by whom ye believed, even as the Lord gave to every man? I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase. So then neither is he that planteth any thing, neither he that watereth; but God that giveth the increase. Now he that planteth and he that watereth are one: and every man shall receive his own reward according to his own labor. For we are laborers together with God: ye are God’s husbandry, ye are God’s building” (vss. 5–9). Here again the unity of the Church as God’s building is emphasized, just as in I Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4.

We are exhorted to strive for such unity in the church also by the exhortation in I Peter 2:1–5: “Wherefore laying aside all malice, and all guile, and hypocrisies, and envies, and all evil speakings, as newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby; if so ye have tasted that the Lord is gracious. To whom coming, as unto a living stone, disallowed indeed of men, but chosen of God, and precious, ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ.” Here again the function of the Church as a spiritual house of God, a holy priesthood, whose spiritual sacrifices are acceptable to God, would certainly tend to emphasize the unity and the oneness God seeks among those who as a church stand together in His service. Paul’s letter may have been directed to one congregation, the church at Corinth, but surely Peter’s Epistle is directed to many congregations, groups, or even individual Christians, “the strangers scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia” (I Peter 1:1). All this emphasizes the unity and one-mindedness which is true of the invisible Church, and for which we should strive in the visible church, in every assembly or organization of professing disciples of Christ.

When the Synodical Conference was formed, the synods making up this federation were agreed in doctrine and in purpose. There were differences of background and in church customs. There were even individual pastors who later proved to be unfaithful and not in agreement with the rest. But they were dealt with and the wrong was righted. When doctrinal differences occurred, those who clung to error after long and patient admonition were either suspended from membership or withdrew of their own accord. For the purpose of a God-pleasing church federation dare not be less than the purpose of a synod or of a congregation. Also the larger body is active in the ministry of reconciliation.

Thus the Constitution of the Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference of North America, as revised in August 1944, states in Article 4, Purpose:

“The purpose of the Synodical Conference of North America shall be:

1. to give outward expression to the unity of the spirit existing among the constituent synods;
2. to encourage and strengthen one another in faith and confession;
3. to further unity in doctrine and practice and to remove whatever might threaten to disturb this unity;
4. to cooperate in matters of mutual interest;
5. to strive for true unity in doctrine and practice among Lutheran church bodies.”

These functions which the Conference would strive to carry on are the functions of the Church. All five of these points are essential if a federation of synods is to serve as an expression of the function of the Church. To drop point one, “to give outward expression to the unity of spirit existing among the constituent synods,” or

to form a federation without establishing full agreement in doctrine and practice, would be to surrender one's right to the designation of Church. "Can two walk together, except they be agreed?" (Amos 3:3). Truth and error cannot stand side by side. We are to "mark them which cause division and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned and avoid them" (Rom. 16:17).

Point 2, "to encourage and strengthen one another in faith and confession" can hardly be carried out if from the outset no definite standard of faith and confession is agreed upon.

Point 3, "to further unity in doctrine and practice and to remove whatever might threaten to disturb this unity," is today the chief purpose and assignment of our Synodical Conference. Differences have arisen which did not divide us nor disturb our fellowship in the past. A return to the old paths is imperative if our beloved Synodical Conference is to continue as an expression of the function of the Church. We cannot, unless the differences in doctrine and practice, which have arisen and have divided us, be removed, continue to cooperate for any length of time in matters of mutual interest, as mentioned in Point 4 of the Constitution: the work of Negro missions in North America and Africa, institutional missions in our larger cities, student missions, and the various endeavors of Christian love and charity; and we certainly cannot, as a body divided and disagreed among ourselves, without exposing ourselves to ridicule and derision, lay claim to the distinction of being the advocates of "true unity in doctrine and practice among Lutheran church bodies" (Point 5).

Our very disagreement would brand our efforts to establish true unity elsewhere as hypocritical or as a surrender of the doctrinal principles which we in the past found clearly taught in God's Holy Word. For all organization in the church, which is the body, must remain subject unto Christ, its Head, in carrying out its God-given function, whether on the level of the congregation, the synod, or a federation of synods.

By the grace of God the Synodical Conference, aside from human and personal frailties and shortcomings, was once "perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment." Though despised by the world and ridiculed and denounced by other church bodies, some of whom went out from among us because of our uncompromising stand upon God's Holy Word, we confessed our oneness of faith, preached the Gospel in truth and purity and, though rather loosely organized, we carried on the ministry of reconciliation which was committed to us by our God and Lord. Thus the Synodical Conference as a church organization served as an expression of the function of the Church.

May God grant through a miracle of His grace that we continue to do so to His glory and in the service of Christ, our Savior.

Part IV

Enlargement of the Synodical Conference to include all those who are one in faith and confession in this rapidly shrinking world could well serve to further the very purpose for which the Conference was founded.

In the early history of the Synodical Conference the constituent bodies were all found in North America. Hence the name as it was then adopted. Since that time, entire districts of the Missouri Synod have been organized in Canada, Brazil, and Argentina. Large mission fields have grown up through the work of these churches under the blessings of the Holy Spirit. Free churches in other lands have been recognized as sister churches in doctrinal agreement with the member synods in the Conference. With the phenomenal acceleration in the modes of travel our respective countries have been brought closer together, and the Lord has permitted us to gather during two successive years in conferences of representatives from our several church bodies.

The great need of the world for a faithful stewardship in the ministry of reconciliation must certainly remind each one of us of our call to be an ambassador for Christ. Our daily encounter with reports of death and disaster ought to remind us that the hour is late, and that, we, too, will be called to give account on the day of judgment of the manner in which we employed the talents placed at our disposal. The world needs above all faithful stewards of the mysteries of God. In this ministry all who are agreed in doctrine and practice ought to encourage and exhort one another, and to provoke one another to love and to good works.

Also in the removal of that which threatens the unity in the present Conference our confessional brethren can be of service to us, admonishing us, exhorting us, encouraging us, and strengthening us through a joint study of the Word of our God. It is for that reason we have invited them to this conclave.

Though membership in a federation of church bodies is not essential for truly confessional brethren to serve one another, membership in a federation can serve as a further expression of unity in doctrine and practice. Some federations and mergers of church bodies today do not require full unity in doctrine and practice among their members. Thank God that we still consider full unity a prerequisite for such membership and for such cooperation.

As such a federation of confessional brethren throughout the world we could serve each other in many ways, each contributing of his special gifts to the welfare of the sister churches in the federation. For one church will show a special zeal for missions, another for purity of doctrine and practice, a third will place emphasis on deeds of Christian charity and mercy, a fourth will emphasize the doctrine of the justification of the sinner before God, a fifth will by word and by example exhort all others to steadfastness even in the face of persecution.

Meanwhile, as we await the Lord's guidance in joining us more closely in an organization of confessional brethren throughout the world, let us continue to pray that our exalted Savior and Lord would graciously grant through the power of His unifying Spirit that our present Synodical Conference may be preserved as a faithful expression of the function of the Church, that it may retain its precious heritage of bowing to God's clear Word in all matters of doctrine and practice, that it may be enlarged according to His will for diligent and faithful service in the soul-saving ministry of reconciliation throughout the world.

I shall close this paper with the words of Revelation 3:7-13: "And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write; these things saith he that is holy, he that is true, he that hath the key of David, he that openeth, and no man shutteth; and shutteth, and no man openeth; I know thy works: behold, I have set before thee an open door, and no man can shut it: for thou hast a little strength, and hast kept my word, and hast not denied my name. Behold, I will make them of the synagogue of Satan, which say they are Jews, and are not, but do lie; behold, I will make them to come and worship before thy feet, and to know that I have loved thee. Because thou hast kept the word of my patience, I also will keep thee from the hour of temptation, which shall come upon all the world, to try them that dwell upon the earth. Behold, I come quickly: hold that fast which thou hast, that no man take thy crown. Him that overcometh will I make a pillar in the temple of my God, and he shall go no more out: and I will write upon him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, which is new Jerusalem, which cometh down out of heaven from my God: and I will write upon him my new name. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches."