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E. CLIFFORD NELSON

The One Church and the Lutheran Churches

“At Lund we learned to walk together ; at Hanover we learned to pray together ; at Minneapolis we learned to think together.” Thus President Fry at the Third Assembly (1957) summarized the history of the Lutheran World Federation. At Helsinki we have continued to walk, pray and think together, but in this atmosphere of devotional walk and thought we face issues which were not explicitly and jointly addressed in previous Assemblies. Two of them are the subject of this lecture : 1) The Lutheran Churches and World Lutheranism and 2) The Lutheran Churches and World Christianity. These issues I have sought to subsume under the topic : “The One Church and the Lutheran Churches”.

I. The Lutheran Churches and World Lutheranism (The Self-Understanding of the LWF)

A. *The Setting of the Problem*

The roots of our twofold problem of self-understanding and ecumenical relationships may seem at first glance to lie in the proposals which came before the Second Assembly in Hanover (1952) and the Third Assembly in Minneapolis (1957). On second glance, however, it becomes clear that world Lutheranism has been directly or indirectly involved in these questions from the days when it first sought organizational expression.¹

Between 1936 and 1952 world Lutheranism was caught up in the agonies arising from the Third Reich and the carnage of World War II. There was little time for

¹ The churches in Europe and America brought with them into the Eisenach conference (1923) the memories and heritage of the 19th century ecclesiological debate among the various parties within the churches. By 1923 self-conscious *world* Lutheranism was asking itself about the significance of its own self-awareness in relation to the emerging ecumenical movement. The formation of the International Missionary Council was already a fact, and preparations for the world conferences on “Life and Work” and “Faith and Order” were under way. The delegates at Eisenach heard addresses on such themes as “The Ecumenical Character of the Lutheran Church” and “That They May All be One — What Can the Lutheran Church Contribute To This End ?” And as they pondered, they listened to the voices of such men as Bishop Ludwig Ihmels, Archbishop Nathan Söderblom, Prof. Dr. Alfred Jørgensen, and President Friedrich H. Knobel, all of whom were grappling with the ecclesiological problem inherent in Lutheran confessionality over against the existence of other historical churches and the Biblical and creedal concept of *Una Sancta*, the one church of Jesus Christ. The problem which was addressed in 1923 continued to attract the attention of the Lutheran World Convention in its 1929 Copenhagen conference and in the meetings of its Executive Committee, especially that at New York in 1936. Cf. “Lutheran and Ecumenical Movements”, *The Lutheran World Almanac and Encyclopedia 1934-1937* (New York : The National Lutheran Council, 1937), pp. 36-38.

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theological reflection. Every action — even the formation of the Lutheran World Federation — had a note of emergency about it. And it was not until after the Hanover Assembly (1952) that we caught our collective breath and said to ourselves: “What is this thing that God has thrust upon us?” Before that time there had been precious little opportunity to reflect. Today, however, world Lutheranism has reached a definite and, I may say, even crucial turning point in its life. Remembering President Fry’s summary of the LWF’s history at the Minneapolis Assembly, we at Helsinki may perhaps help Dr. Fry to enlarge that statement by some such words as: “At Helsinki we learned not only *what* the church of Christ is but *where* the church of Christ is.” Perhaps we will learn that the *ekklesia tou theou* finds expression globally as well as locally, and just as the *ekklesia* locally has found in the organized congregation a form appropriate to its nature so globally the *ekklesia* will find a form appropriate to its nature, that is, the form of a servant. After all, there is a significant analogy between the person of Christ and the nature of the church. This is not to say that the church is itself an incarnation or an extension of the incarnation. It is to say, however, that “the being of the church is analogous or congruous with the person of the Lord”,² as is indicated in Phil. 2: 5-11. The apostle says that the “mind” of the church at Philippi should be as the mind of Christ who 1) took the form of a servant and 2) became obedient unto death. Only then has God “highly exalted him”. It is my conviction that to find any other form for the church will work only to frustrate the grace of God as it is ministered through the *ekklesia*. But to this we shall return later.

B. *The Lutheran World Federation and the Nature of the Church*

1. A Survey of the Ecclesiological Debate

To reflect on the nature of the Lutheran World Federation is to be led immediately into the ecclesiological problem: What and who and where is the church? It is rather strange that after nineteen hundred years the church is still wondering what it is.³

One hundred years ago the great ecclesiological debate began, chiefly among Protestants. That the debate occurred among Roman Catholics also is witnessed by the First Vatican Council and the promulgation of the dogma of papal infallibility (1870). Among the Protestants, the discussion was carried on simultaneously in

² Claude Welch, *The Reality of the Church* (Scribners, New York, 1958), p. 79, note 5, and p. 81.

³ Over a hundred years ago a German Lutheran theologian predicted that one of the chief concerns of the modern church would be ecclesiology. The Early (Greek) church found itself occupied with theology and christology; the Western (Medieval Roman) church was preoccupied with anthropology; and the Reformation with soteriology. But the Modern (19th century) church, he said, would raise questions regarding the nature of the church itself. Theo. Kliefoth, *Einleitung in die Dogmengeschichte* (1839), pp. 65 ff.

several countries without much apparent intercommunication.⁴ Despite the intelligent and consecrated concern with what has been called "the recovery of the church", many questions still remain unsolved. So much has been written and spoken about the subject since 1817 and 1910 (using the Prussian Union and the Edinburgh Missionary Conference as pivotal points) that one almost despairs of saying anything new or helpful in the matter.

Moreover, despite all the scholarly erudition and Christian devotion which has been manifested during the great discussion, much confusion persists to plague the righteous and to amuse the cynical. In fact if we are candid, we must admit to something less than unity in the reasons advanced for calling our various ecclesiastical bodies "churches". Sometimes the word "church" means a denomination, sometimes a national or regional organization of a denomination, sometimes a congregation, sometimes *Una Sancta*. Some answer the "church" question by pointing to a visible papal institution and saying "There is the church!" Others, when pressed for an answer, say there is no visible church, and promptly retreat into some kind of invisible reality, which Melancthon properly described as "dreaming of a Platonic state".⁵ Or to approach the confusion from another direction: What constitutes the church? Is there a historical phenomenon known as "The Lutheran church"? If so, where is this phenomenon? What constitutes the Lutheran church? The Lutheran confessions? But the confessions say that only the word and sacraments constitute the church. Is the Lutheran church perhaps the sum of all its parts: The Church of Finland, the Church of Saxony, the Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod, etc.? Or perhaps the only true church is the local congregation and all the rest is machinery developed to assist the local congregation?

Thus, the problem is not simple. In fact, perhaps not so simple as Luther made it in the Smalcald Articles⁶ when he said a child seven years old knows what the church is. If so, after reading and debating and worshipping, many of us may say: "Would that I were that seven-year-old child!"

Aware of the difficulty and also aware of some of the circumstances which have led to confusion, it may be good to remind ourselves how we use the word "church".

⁴ In Germany it was occasioned by men and events such as Schleiermacher, Claus Harms, the Prussian Union, etc. In England it centered in the Oxford Movement. In America it took new form among the Reformed, for example, through the so-called "Mercersburg Theology" associated with the names of Philip Schaff and John Nevin. Among American Lutherans the issue was faced by such theologians as S. S. Schmucker, C. P. Krauth, C. F. W. Walther, Georg Sverdrup, Wilhelm Loehe's American associates, et al.

After a temporary lull — during the period of liberalism and during World War I — the ecclesiological debate was resumed. Beginning in the twenties several movements provided a new and different impetus to the discussion. Both dialectical theology and liberalism, alongside the missionary movement, contributed to the great ecumenical and confessional gatherings in which the doctrine of the church soon came to the surface. The post-Holl Luther renaissance and, not least, the Swedish theology, also led men into the ecclesiological question. Moreover, the break-up of the 400 year old state-church system in Germany after World War I also forced men to reflect on the nature of the church, an activity that was sharpened in the German "church struggle" under Naziism. Since World War II, the published writings and the numerous theological conferences devoted to the discussion are witnesses to the fact that interest has not slackened.

⁵ Apology, VII, 20 (The Book of Concord, Tappert edition, 1959, p. 171).

⁶ Smalcald Articles, Part III, Art. XII (Tappert edition, p. 315).

Today it is clear that among Lutherans the word "church", when not used as a referent for *Una Sancta*, is applied to : 1) a local congregation and 2) a regional or national organization.⁷

Beyond the national level, Lutherans do not apply the word "church" to any ecclesiastical organization. There is a Lutheran World *Federation*, but no Lutheran World *Church*. It is felt inappropriate to use the word "church" of any ecclesiastical organization which transcends national boundaries. The theological reasons are not clear but the attitude is unmistakable. Why the "churches" as regional or national ecclesiastical forms arising out of historical circumstances in particular areas should continue in perpetuity as the ecclesiastical ultimate has not been explained. Surely such national or regional "churches" are not what is meant when the Augsburg Confession says *ecclesia perpetuo mansura sit!* Nevertheless, somehow we are quite willing to allow regional or national configurations to apply the word "church" to themselves, while we hesitate to apply it to a global configuration. Just at this point, it seems to me, we must be prepared to admit a basic inconsistency and seek carefully to remove it.

2. Some Ecclesiological Guidelines for Our Situation : The Church, Its Nature and Authority

a) *The Church of God (ekklesia tou theou) according to the New Testament is manifest only to faith ; it belongs in the Credo ("I believe") as an article of faith.*

This is not to say that there is an "invisible church" and a "visible church". There are not two churches ; there is only one church. For Luther "invisible" and "visible" are not separate entities ; rather they interpenetrate one another. In part, Luther's aim was to give visibility to the church of God.⁸ It is, however, an a priori ecclesiastical heresy to equate or identify the *ekklesia* exclusively with a particular administrative structure. This applies to such constitutional structures as the Roman Catholic hierarchy, the officers and the secretariats of the LWF, the WCC, etc., the College of Bishops and the Department of Church Affairs in Scandinavian countries, or the constitutionally structured corporation, St. Anthony Park Lutheran Congregation, St. Paul, Minn., to which I happen to belong. Nevertheless, where

⁷ *In America* the local congregation means a *constitutionally organized corporation* with authority to govern itself, to call its pastor, and to limit its own autonomy, if it desires. *In Europe* the local congregation is more frequently a *parochial unit* within a diocese, a *Landeskirche* or a district thereof, with a somewhat different understanding and practice of "local rights" or authority. *Elsewhere* the idea of the local congregation usually reflects either American or European influence.

In America the regional or national organization has taken the form of church bodies, organized on a synodical pattern. The word synod is used in a twofold sense : a) The assembly or convention of representatives at a national or regional level (the emphasis is on the "gathering", the "assembling"). This is the traditional meaning of the word from the early church. b) The constitutionally organized corporation, or church body. This may be at either a national or district level. The Missouri Synod illustrates the first usage ; a district *synod* of the Lutheran Church in America illustrates the second. *In Europe* the term "synod" has the former connotation ("assembly") rather than the latter : for example, the General Synod of the VELKD. *Elsewhere* the tendency is to follow the European rather than the American usage.

⁸ Cf. "The Papacy at Rome" (1520), WA VI, pp. 277-324.

such structures have the *notae ecclesiae* (word and sacraments), we can be assured by faith that the *ekklesia* is indeed present.

b) *The ekklesia is constituted only by God, the Holy Spirit, through the word in sermon and sacrament.*

Luther's characteristic statement was "The church is the creature of the word" (*ecclesia est creatura verbi*).⁹ Therefore, no polity or even confession is constitutive of the church. This is not to say that externals are insignificant. Article VII of the Augustana does not atomize or dissolve "human traditions"; it merely says that uniformity in them is not necessary for the unity of the church. The Lutheran Church seeks to preserve "Luther's concrete and empirical view of the working of the Holy Spirit, in visible and living and tangible matters".¹⁰

c) *The church, like the Lord of the church, Jesus Christ, is divine-human in its nature ; at the same time, there is a clear distinction between Christ and his people who are a fellowship of forgiven sinners.*

The parallel between Christ and the church is really more than a parallel because it does not have an accidental similarity but has its basis in the vital inner connection between Christ and his body.¹¹ In its manner of existence (not only in its nature) the church is like Christ in the days of his flesh ; the church is manifest solely to faith, hidden with him in God and yet revealed as a city set upon a hill. "God's work in the church is all of a piece with the incarnation ; his use of the weak vessels of our community is intelligible in the light of his assumption of humanity in Jesus Christ."¹² The church, like the word and sacrament, is "in, with and under" the human, earthly, historical appearance, but in such a way that the historical appearance is, and is rightly called the church.¹³

d) *The church, because it is both divine and human and because it lives in the world, needs and seeks organizational structure, for without organization order is replaced by anarchy.*

The church as a spiritual body is an organism which from its very beginning has carried within itself the conditions for its external organization. This organization

⁹ WA VI, pp. 560 f. ; cf. Aug. Conf., VII, Apology, VII, 5 (Tappert edition, p. 169).

¹⁰ Martin E. Marty, "The Church and Its Polity", *Theology in the Life of the Church*, ed. Robt. Bertram (Philadelphia : Fortress Press, 1963), p. 238.

¹¹ Apology, VII, 16-20 (Tappert edition, pp. 170 f.).

¹² Welch, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

¹³ Just as we can be sure to meet the word of God "in, with and under" the earthen vessel of the Bible, just as we receive the body and blood of Christ "in, with and under" the earthly elements of bread and wine, so we experience the reality of the church in its human and earthly appearance. Just as the Bible is, and is rightly called, the word of God because of the word of God "in, with and under" the outward form, just as the bread and wine are, and are rightly called, the body and blood of Christ because of the body and blood "in, with and under" the earthly elements, so the outward form, the *externa societas* is, and is rightly called, the church, the *ekklesia*, because of the *ekklesia*, the body of Christ, "in, with and under" the outward form.

Cf. Theo. Harnack, *Die Kirche, Ihr Amt, Ihr Regiment* (Gutersloh, 1947), p. 36 ; Schlink, *Theology of the Lutheran Confessions* (Philadelphia, 1961), p. 198, note 1 ; Kinder, *Der ev. Glaube und die Kirche* (Berlin, 1960), p. 45.

is not merely an accessory but a needful expression of its reality as church in the world. Its organizational, constitutional structure, though not separated from, must be clearly distinguished from the church as the body of Christ. It is no more a contradiction of the church's nature to be involved in the structures of the world than it is a contradiction for the word to become flesh. "The Spirit yearns for corporeality."¹⁴

e) *The church must seek only those historical, earthly, organizational structures which are appropriate to its nature, i.e., the form of a servant. Whatever the form, it stands under the judgment of the word.*

Just at this point we must see the significance of Phil. 2: 5-11, where we discern some outlines of the analogy of Christ and the church. Faith affirms Jesus to be the Christ not merely in spite of his form of a servant, but precisely in it and because of it. Jesus is the Son of God not in spite of the historical form of his humanity, but exactly in it. "The form which hides is at the same time the form of revelation."¹⁵ The form of the servant relates to the being of the church "both as a statement and as a command". As Christ assumed the form of the servant and became obedient to death, so also the institutional structure of the church. It must be prepared to die in order that God may "highly exalt" his church. This means any other form than the form of the servant will be inappropriate to the grace of God as it is ministered congregationally or in the whole inhabited world, the oikoumene. This also means, by definition, that any concept of a "super-church" is forthwith denied and eliminated. "It means, furthermore, that the church can order itself as an external commonwealth without harming its nature. It fashions forms in doctrine, worship, discipline, polity, and mutual aid so that its twofold relationship" — to Christ and to the world — may be enhanced. Therefore, the ekklesia in local assembly at the *congregational* level, in local assembly at the *national* level, or in local assembly at the *international* level must find organizational structure appropriate to the ekklesia at these levels.

f) *The tension between particularity and universality in the nature of the church is transcended in the worshipping assembly "in which the saving acts of God are proclaimed and glorified, and the Lord's Supper celebrated".¹⁶*

"It is through the presence of Christ that . . . every local worshipping congregation is in the full sense ekklesia, soma tou christou, naos tou theou. This is so, not with regard to the total number of believers, for these are scattered throughout the world and belong to geographically separated congregations, but with regard to Christ, who is wholly present in every local congregation of believers. So the Church comprising all the believers in the world should not be conceived as the sum of local churches; rather she is a koinonia in the sense of a common participa-

¹⁴ P. Brunner, "The Realization of Fellowship" in *The Unity of the Church* (Rock Island: Augustana Press, 1957), p. 17.

¹⁵ Welch, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

¹⁶ Schlink, "Christ and the Church", *Scottish Journal of Theology*, X (March 1957), p. 4.

tion in the one Christ, who is present whole and undivided in every local congregation.”^{16a}

g) *The church (ekklesia) is present not only in the fellowship of the local worshipping congregation, but also in the fellowship of the representative congregation or synod of congregations at other levels.*¹⁷

If a representative synod of churches is held, the synod or assembly, whether it be regional, national or global, is the people of God (ekklesia) gathered at a locally circumscribed, particular place, as for example at Helsinki, July 30 - August 11, 1963. The church is present in the assembly (congregation) of believers from Tanganyika and Texas, Oslo and Australia. The church is present not only existentially in the moment of worship or in the event of proclamation, but also ontologically in the hearts of believers. The church is persons, men and women, called to be the people of God by the word, sustained as the people of God by the word, and acting as the people of God by serving the word. Whether the people of God assemble as local congregations or synods in specific localities (obviously they can congregate only in one place and thus have the local dimension), they are the ekklesia, for the one Christ is present whole and undivided in every assembly of believers who are served by and who serve the word and sacraments.

h) *All authority in the church belongs primarily, properly, and exclusively to our Lord Jesus Christ, true God, true man, the head of the church.*

This means that the real “magisterium” resides solely in Christ and his word. The authority of the church is a derived and *ministerial* authority, not an *independent* and *magisterial* authority. It is always the authority of ministry, made concrete in persons according to the word of our Lord and his apostle, Paul : “He who hears you hears me” (Luke 10 : 16) ; and “So we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us” (II. Cor. 5 : 20). The authority of Christ is given to persons in ministerium. This ministry, like Christ and the church, must be expressed in the servant-form. Thus, the authority of the ordered ministry is “functional and relative”.¹⁸ The authority of the church, therefore, is to be seen solely in terms of this ministerial relationship to Christ and the word. This means that the ekklesia as a local assembly or as a representative assembly of believers has authority not by virtue of its organization or its constitution but only by virtue of its having the word and the sacraments. The word and the sacraments do not belong to the local assembly (congregation) or to the geographic representative assembly (national or international synod) as legal corporations, but solely to the ekklesia as the body of Christ.

^{16a} *Ibid.*, p. 5.

¹⁷ “The decisions of synods are decisions of the church . . .” (*Judicia synodorum sint ecclesiae judicia, non pontificum.*) Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope, 56 (Tappert edition, p. 329).

¹⁸ Welch, *op. cit.*, p. 238, note 5. Cf. Augsburg Confession, XXVIII (Tappert edition, pp. 81-85).

i) *Ministerial authority is present on the ground that Christ is present through word and sacrament in any group of believers ; on no other ground is it correct to say that authority resides in the church.*

This means that Christ does not give authority to a local congregation which in turn delegates some of this authority to other ecclesiastical structures, be they national or international. The practice of delegation of so-called authority through selected representatives arises not from Biblical or confessional norms but from human and political traditions (especially from 18th-century Enlightenment), traditions which are not always and everywhere the same in Lutheranism, traditions which are not constitutive of the church. This is not to say that the assembly of believers has no authority ; but it is based not on so-called democratic or delegated "rights", but on the presence of Christ, his word and sacraments. Therefore, any fellowship of believers (local, regional, global) has full authority in its realm to minister the means of grace, to call and ordain ministers, if necessary, and to order its institutional life in the world.¹⁹

C. *Is There a Lutheran World Church ?*

It is my judgment that we ought not get bogged down here at Helsinki in a furious debate about whether the LWF is a church or not. Nevertheless, on the basis of the foregoing it is clear that we should at least ask the question : Is there a Lutheran World Church? This question is prompted not only by the elemental facts of living in the twentieth century (the world has become small ; the structures of society are being altered, in some instances violently ; no nation or national organization can live unto itself), but by profound theological considerations. Are we not in danger of canceling out by abstractions the reality we face in world Lutheranism ?

If we say "no" to this question on Biblical and confessional grounds, then we should quickly dismiss it from further discussion. But, I might add, when we return home we had better re-examine the theological rationale whereby we call the bodies to which we belong "churches".

If we say "yes" to this question, a number of other questions immediately come to the fore. If we really do have a Lutheran World Church, what justifies calling it a church ? If the ekklesia is essentially present in the Assembly and the other arms of the LWF whereby it carries on Christian work, is this organization the adequate or appropriate "form of the servant" for world Lutheranism ?

¹⁹ This ministerial authority of the church (congregation or geographical synod) ought, therefore, to be defined or delimited in constitution and polity taking into consideration historical and sociological factors. But such definition by the church, done in the freedom of the gospel, must nevertheless always be in a manner appropriate to its nature and vocation as the ekklesia of God ; that is, definition in accordance with the word of God. Cf. *Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope*, 67 (Tappert edition, p. 331) : "For wherever the church exists, the right [authority] to administer the Gospel also exists. Wherefore it is necessary for the church to retain the right of calling, electing, and ordaining ministers. This right is a gift given exclusively to the church. . . ." Cf. also *Formula of Concord*, II, Article X, 9 (Tappert edition, p. 621) : "The community of God [the church] in every place and at every time has the right, authority, and power to change, to reduce, or to increase ceremonies according to its circumstances. . . ."

Moreover, if there is such a thing as a Lutheran World Church, we must for practical reasons, to say nothing of theological, face certain other questions :

1. First of all, there is the undeniable historical fact that the founders of both the Lutheran World Convention and the Lutheran World Federation deemed it wise to speak only in terms of a world "convention" or "federation", i.e. an "agency" of already established and "autonomous" churches. Whether this arose from a settled theological conviction or prudential churchmanship may be a matter of question. But at least two things should be remembered :

a) In 1923, 1929, and 1936 leaders of the Lutheran World Convention were sensitively aware of the ecclesiological significance of the phenomenon of world Lutheranism. As I have mentioned earlier, the Executive Committee in 1936 addressed the ecclesiological question from the already burning ecumenical interest of the churches. Earlier — at Copenhagen in 1929 — Dr. Alfred Jørgensen, Danish member of the Executive Committee, addressed the assembly on "a world-wide Lutheran church". He proposed, among other things, an international Lutheran theological faculty to help actualize a world church. Said he : "the Lutheran church of 1929 is not like a motley collection of stones that are trying to assemble in a mosaic. The modern Lutheran church, insofar as its members are true to the confessions, is a unit. It is a church."²⁰ No doubt the leaders of the Lutheran World Convention and the Lutheran World Federation felt they were acting wisely in making disclaimers of intentions to being or becoming a "church" in a constitutional sense. But that organized world Lutheranism was an expression of the *ekklesia* had already been recognized (Jørgensen : "It is a Church"). Nevertheless, a prudential concern dictated then that haste be made slowly, in order to dissipate anxieties and to avoid shattering by precipitous action what had already been achieved.

b) But it must also be remembered that in 1923 when the Lutheran World Convention first met, very few were thinking in global organizational terms. Chief among the global organizations were the Vatican, the Kremlin's "Comintern" and the League of Nations. The closest Protestant approximations were perhaps the International Missionary Council (1921) which sprang out of the great movement for world missions and evangelization in the 19th century, and the World Presbyterian Alliance and the Lambeth Conference. In 1963, however, the world and its problems are not the same as they were in 1923. On August 6, 1945, we were suddenly ushered into a world which made previous politics and polities dangerously old-fashioned, and since the churches are also socio-political organizations, this statement applies to us as well. We are forced willy-nilly to think of the church in *global* terms.

²⁰ *The Second Lutheran World Convention. The Minutes... June 26-July 4, 1929* (Philadelphia : The ULC Publication House, 1930).

2. The second question which we ought to face in all candor is the question of what some call “a super-church” with its concomitant fears, real and imagined. I do not think these fears are removed by ridiculing them. The fears, it seems to me, are best met by seeking to understand as clearly as possible the Lutheran doctrine of the church. It is for this reason, in part, that I have taken pains to address this in the above guidelines. Nevertheless, I know that fears are present and they are likely to persist. It may be that the term “super-church” ought to be eliminated from our universe of discourse, or failing that, to be demythologized or re-interpreted. What is at stake, I presume, is the right to exercise freedom, however that may express itself; theological freedom or ecclesiastical freedom or political freedom.

Those who know something of American church history, not least American Lutheran church history, are aware of the deep-seated fears of a “super-church” which have existed — and, thank God, have been mitigated with advancing years. For example, the first General Synod (1820) of American Lutherans was charged with being a “super-church”, and as such was preparing the way for antichrist.²¹ In the church body to which I belong there was a time when some congregations referred caustically to the general body as “store samfundet” (the Norwegian equivalent at that time for “super-church”). One might add that where the church is misunderstood as a sort of “ecclesiastical General Motors Corporation in which congregations are stockholders”,²² this ecclesiastical giantism may properly lead to fears of a “super-church”. But if the Lordship of Christ and the authority of the church-creating word are foremost in the church at every level — local, national, global — the fears of autocratic organization should evaporate. In fact, the antinomies of autocracy and autonomy would, by definition, be ruled out. There can be no more man-centered talk of “autocracy” or “autonomy”. “In the Body of Christ, all members suffer and rejoice together once autonomy (self-rule) has been replaced by theonomy (God-rule)” (William Lazareth). In terms of our problem in world Lutheranism, this means that no group of Christians, whether in a local congregation, in a national synod (assembly) or an international assembly can think of itself as autonomous — or autocratic. No group — and here the application is particularly to local congregations and regional (national) churches — by virtue of an unevangelical view of “autonomy”, may limit the use of the word “church” to itself or engage in action (or inaction! — as Lazareth says) which might destroy the apostolic authority of the very word which has created and sustains it. It is the message, not the messengers, which constitutes the church’s authority. There simply can be no “super-church”, if the doctrine of the church is rightly understood.

²¹ It was said in reference to the General Synod: “Anti-Christ will not, nor cannot get into power, without a general union, which is effected . . . by common temporal interests and the power of a majority.” (R. Fortenbaugh, *The Development of the Synodical Polity of the Lutheran Church in America to 1829* [Philadelphia: 1926], p. 175; quoted in C. Bergendoff, *The Doctrine of the Church in American Lutheranism* [Philadelphia: 1956], p. 77.)

²² Warren Quanbeck, “What Lutherans are Saying”, *American Lutheran*, April 1963.

3. The third question that must be faced in thinking through the ecclesiological nature of world Lutheranism is the problem of church fellowship, expressing itself primarily as pulpit and altar fellowship and implying the recognition of one another's ministries. One of the chief differences between the World Council of Churches and the Lutheran World Federation is that the former is an association of churches of differing confessions and the latter is an association of churches of the *same* confession. The historical fact, regrettable as it may be, is that not all the churches of the Lutheran World Federation are in church fellowship. For churches to have the same confession and to withhold fellowship from one another is not only a self-contradiction but a *scandal*. Here I fully agree with Professor Prenter that this becomes "an intolerable situation".²³ Or, as Dr. Conrad Bergendoff has said : "Rejection of such fellowship is a public witness to other standards than those which have been the norm of faith of the Lutheran church, and raises the question whether the confessions alone have been the decisive formulations of that Church".²⁴ Some of the anguish in Professor Peter Brunner's comment should be in the heart of every one of us :

"I was deeply shaken when for the first time I encountered the fact that Lutheran churches refuse one another pulpit and altar fellowship although they are bound by the same Confessions. I have been, and still am, of the opinion that this fact should cause us some sleepless nights, for at the Last Judgment our Lord Jesus Christ will ask 'Why have you done this?'. "²⁵

The only answer that those Lutherans who have rejected fellowship with other Lutherans can make, must be something like this : "Yes, Lord, we know they claim to be Lutherans, but we do not believe them. Their actions demonstrate their insincerity." There are two dangerous reactions (dangerous because they are superficial) to this : 1) one is that of hasty applause, an action that may betray a soul-destroying Pharisaism ; and 2) another is that of hasty denunciation by pointing to the satis est of Augustana VII, forgetting, as Bergendoff says, that these words imply a "too little" as well as a "too much" in the requirements for unity and fellowship. Nevertheless, having said this, it is my judgment that the time has arrived for the various Lutheran churches simply to *declare* themselves to be in fellowship. In fact, such a declaration is long overdue. Almost thirty years ago (1934), Dr. L. W. Boe, an American member of the Executive Committee of the Lutheran World Convention, published a paper ("God's Moment") in which he appealed to his fellow Lutherans in America to declare church fellowship. His plea fell on deaf ears. On his deathbed (1942) he wrote to one of his friends, "Have you and the men who will represent us... the courage... to state that *we are in pulpit and altar fellowship... with every Lutheran body in this country?* My article, 'God's Moment', is more to the point today than it was in 1934. The 'crisis' is upon us."

²³ "The LWF as an Ecclesiological Problem" by Peter Brunner, plus comments by others and concluding remarks by Brunner, in *Lutheran World*, Vol. VII, No. 3 (December 1960), p. 257.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 272.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 289.

Once again Boe's call fell on deaf ears. That was over twenty years ago. How much longer must God wait? To delay is not only scandalous, but dangerous. One of the sad facts of Lutheran history is that we have more often been drawn together by common disaster than by common doctrine. In other words, God has overruled our indolence and suspicion of each other and has denied us the smug satisfaction and the luxury of isolated existences through the terrible experiences of war. My question is: Why must we wait for disaster to bring us together? Why can we not listen to the voice of God in peace-time and move on in the questions of cooperation and unity with the same or an even higher intensity of purpose? Or must the order of events always be: First, catastrophe; second, united action; and third, theological substantiation? Is this the only way God can lead us, who affirm Augustana VII, into *koinonia*? I am afraid that if we do not redeem the present, there may be no opportunity to pick up the pieces as we did in Lund, 1947.²⁶

Certainly I have not exhausted the questions which are crying out for answers as we seek together to understand the ecclesiological problem which faces world Lutheranism. If the reality which we encounter in the Lutheran World Federation is in fact an expression of the *ekklesia* of God, we must move on to the next question: "Is the present organization an adequate expression for a Lutheran World Church?" I cannot answer the question; only those who are faced day by day with the global problem can do that. My concern is that the answer arise out of *theologia crucis*, namely, that any structure must have the form of a servant, standing always under the word of judgment and grace.

II. The Lutheran Churches and World Christianity (Ecumenical Movement)

At the present juncture we must seek to draw the consequences of our argument as they apply to the relation of Lutheranism to the rest of Christendom, that is, to the question: "What is the role of Lutheranism in the ecumenical movement?"

A. *The Persisting Problem of Christian Disunity*

The deep cleavages in Christendom which came to the surface in the East-West split of the eleventh century (1054) and the Reformation of the sixteenth century have left the world with a heritage of at least two stubborn, undeniable facts: 1) the

²⁶ Closely related with this matter, of course, is the question of mutual recognition of ministries. Pulpit and altar fellowship can hardly be thought of apart from the office of the ministry to which has been committed the public proclamation of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments. It seems only sensible that where there is ecclesiastical fellowship there should also be ministerial fellowship. To be sure, the church must exercise discipline over its ministry. After all, certain lines need to be drawn: belief and unbelief are not the same; light has no fellowship with darkness, nor Christ with Belial. Recognizing this necessity for discipline (which must not be confused with God's judgment), Lutheran churches in fellowship should mutually recognize the legitimacy of each other's ministries. Cf. Peter Brunner, "Koinonia: The Basis and Forms of Church Fellowship", *Lutheran World*, Vol. X, No. 2 (April 1963), pp. 129 ff. In the ever-expanding, global task with which World Mission and World Service particularly are involved, the problem and the necessity of mutual recognition is increasingly met. This fact alone serves to underscore that here is one of the imperatives laid upon us.

historical existence of many divided Christian groups : Rome exists, Orthodoxy exists, Protestantism exists ; and 2) none of these groups has been able to overcome the others, either by persuasion or force. And both have been used ! After years of separation, as Prof. Brunner has pointed out,²⁷ the conflicting churches have not realized their original expectations. The reformers expected the conquest of the papal church through the power of the evangel. The Roman church was surprised that the Reformation “heresy”, far from dying out, or being overcome as older heresies were (Gnosticism, Arianism, Albigensianism, etc.), continued to grow in vigor and vitality. Something of permanent validity must have occurred in 1517 ! Although most Christians agree that it cannot be God’s will that Christendom be divided, nevertheless, God has not permitted the Roman church to break down nor has he willed that the churches of the Reformation disappear.

Parallel to the growth of the ecumenical movement there has occurred a revival of confessional interest, not least among Lutherans. I think it is a self-evident fact that we are today more self-conscious about being Lutheran than we were fifty or seventy-five years ago. There are some attendant dangers, chief of which is that we may become a “monological” church, content to talk to ourselves, limiting our ecumenical concern to the dictum : The way to reunion is for all others to become Lutherans. This we recognize at once as the other side of that questionable ecumenical theory, “unity by unconditional surrender”, which the papacy, before Vatican II at least, advocated in the words : “Return to the Mother Church !” The question which faces us is : Will the neo-confessional concern lead to a “monological church”, an ecumenical impasse, or to a renewed theological encounter on a deeper and more fruitful level than in the past ? It is the conviction of Lutheranism represented in the Lutheran World Federation that the latter is true, the evidence being the association of most of our member churches in the World Council of Churches and our acceptance of the invitation to send official observers to the Second Vatican Council. We believe that the church is one even as Christ is one ; we take our Lutheran confession very seriously at this point, and therefore as confessional Lutherans we reject the monolog in favor of the dialog with “the other one”.²⁸ The task, quite clearly, is to find the relation between confessional loyalty and ecumenical responsibility.

B. *The Ecumenical Character of Lutheranism*

Literally scores of articles and statements have been written by Lutheran theologians and churchmen on this theme since Eisenach, 1923. As stated at the beginning of this paper, one of the earlier formulations of the ecumenical character of Lutheranism came from the LWC’s Executive Committee, meeting in New York in 1936. I quote a few lines to indicate the ecumenical conviction and vigor of its authors :

²⁷ In K. E. Skydsgaard, ed., *The Papal Council and the Gospel* (Minneapolis : Augsburg Publishing House, 1961), pp. 175 ff.

²⁸ K. E. Skydsgaard, “From Monologue to Dialogue”, *The Ecumenical Review*, July 1962, pp. 428 ff.

“Recognizing that there are true Christians in every Church of whatever name, the Lutheran Churches of the world should approach the question of their relationship with general (ecumenical) movements in the spirit of catholicity and without hostility or prejudice. While they should make no effort to gloss genuine difference they should nevertheless proceed in the sincere and humble desire to render service and cooperate in works of Christian love.”²⁹ “They are ready to recognize true Christians under whatever name or organization they may be found. The universal appeal of the Lutheran interpretation of the Gospel, the elemental quality of the Lutheran doctrine of the Church, impart to Lutheranism an ecumenical quality. . . In the truest sense Lutheranism is itself an ecumenical movement.”³⁰

Jumping across two decades (to 1957), one would have to search diligently to find a better statement of this same theme than that which appears in the message of the Third Assembly, the section on unity in the so-called “Minneapolis Theses”.³¹

Thus one could go on marshaling one statement after another, each insisting that at its confessional heart, as well as in its constitution, world Lutheranism is committed unequivocally to the ecumenical movement. Yet, somehow, despite the clarity of our statements and the active participation of some of our greatest theologians and churchmen in the ecumenical conversation with Roman Catholics on the one hand and other non-Lutheran Christians on the other, there seems to be a suspicion in some quarters that Lutherans are not genuinely interested in the ecumenical movement. Despite all the nice statements and the display of ecumenical interest by its leaders, Lutheranism, it is judged, can only be a “monological” church, which looks upon the confessional problem as having been solved in 1580 for all generations to come. Therefore, the Lutherans cannot be accorded the position of genuine partners in the ecumenical debate — at least, until they are willing to leave the Book of Concord at home when they travel to ecumenical conferences !

We may find ourselves reacting sharply, and even angrily, to such attitudes. But before we *show* our displeasure at least, we should perhaps ask ourselves if we have been altogether guiltless in this matter. In our concern to avoid syncretism and union without unity, we may have grasped the confessions so hard that we have almost squeezed them to death. “Confessionalism” — which I define as an absolutistic and legalistic attitude towards the confessions — can be quite as inimical to genuine unity as syncretism, because “confessionalism” ultimately displaces God and his word. I, for one, have seen this attitude on occasion among some Lutherans. It is not strange, therefore, that other Christians may have seen it too, and have tended consequently to paint all Lutheranism with the same brush.

²⁹ *The Lutheran World Almanac... 1934-1937*, p. 37.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

³¹ *The Proceedings of the Third Assembly of the Lutheran World Assembly...* (Minneapolis : Augsburg Publishing House, 1958), pp. 84-91.

On the other hand, there is among some of us a serious question whether our friends in other churches understand what we mean by the "confessionality" of a church.³² This is evident in the attitude of some communions which say quite emphatically that they do not look upon themselves as "confessional". In fact, a few claim to have "no creed except the Bible". This, in our judgment, betrays a completely erroneous conception of what it means to be confessional. A "confession" is, contrary to some rather widely held opinions, not something divisive, but rather something unitive. At least in the Lutheran understanding, a confession of faith makes *concordia* possible. A "confession" is an event in the life of the church in which the gospel as proclaimed in sermon and sacrament is identified as the heart of the Biblical message, and as such draws all men to itself. At the same time, it is a witness to the gospel as the touchstone of truth over against every falsification and distortion of God's word. "No church, not even one supposedly without a confession, can escape this 'confessionality' of her preaching and her life, unless she were to cease to be a church."³³ Any church which reaches the point, in relation to other churches or the world, where it says, "Here I stand ! I can do no other !" has in that moment become a confessional church, whether the affirmation is written or oral. True churches always make a confession *sub specie aeternitatis*. Therefore, to pit "confessional" against "non-confessional" or "confessional" against "ecumenical" is the result of fuzzy thinking or bad communications. The Lutheran confessions are ecumenical documents which do not self-consciously call attention to themselves ; rather, in as clear and unmistakable language as possible, they call attention to Christ who is the gospel of God.

Thousands of words have been written about the ecumenical heart of the Lutheran confession in Augustana VII, and I do not intend to belabor you with a summary of the literature. All I care to do is to make the statement that I belong heartily with those who see the *satis est* as pointing to the possibility of "too little" as well as "too much". The gospel and the sacraments are enough (*satis est*) for the unity of the church (this to avoid the "too much"). That is, where these means of grace, the Biblical gospel and the Biblical sacraments, are actually in operation, *everything* is present for the unity of the church or fellowship (*koinonia*) between the "churches", and ultimately the establishment of an organizational expression of that fellowship, if the gospel will thereby be more effectively served.³⁴

C. *The Achieving of Unity*

Having said this, we have not achieved unity. That task lies before us. In working toward this goal I wish to make the following suggestions, the order of their arrange-

³² V. Vajta, "Confessional Loyalty and Ecumenicity", *The Ecumenical Review*, Oct. 1962, pp. 26-38.

³³ Kurt Schmidt-Clausen, "Die lutherische Kirchenfamilie", *Lutherische Monatshefte*, April 1962, p. 182.

³⁴ It is in this sense that Prof. Schlink's words should perhaps be understood: "... the Lutheran Confession, correctly understood, enhances in a special way the ability to recognize brethren also in the other churches. For all its statements are concentrated on the Gospel." Preface to the American edition, *Theology of the Lutheran Confessions* (Philadelphia : Muhlenberg Press, 1961), page v.

ment in no way indicating a temporal sequence in their realization. They may all very well be carried on simultaneously.

1. As I have said above, Lutheran churches throughout the world, not presently in communion with one another, should give themselves without let or hindrance to the establishment of fellowship. When churches "believe, teach, and confess" the same content of the gospel and the sacraments, there can be no obstacle to fellowship. To withhold or to abrogate fellowship is a very serious matter, for it means that the excluded "church" is considered a false or pseudo-church. Such exclusion of other "churches" must be done only with fear and trembling in remembrance of Romans 14 : 4, "Who art thou that judgest another man's servant ? To his own master he standeth or falleth." The normal relation between Lutherans should be fellowship ! (Here I add a parenthetical footnote : The key to the world Lutheran problem, I believe, lies in the vexing situation in American Lutheranism.)

One caveat must be made. Should all Lutherans in the world enter into koinonia, Lutherans ought not conclude that *Una Sancta* has been achieved. In the words of Prof. Robert Fischer, "The oneness of the *Una Sancta* does not present Lutheranism with an analogy, but confronts it with a judgment. To identify an eventually united Lutheranism with the church as described in CA VII... seems to me highly questionable."³⁵

2. Lutheran churches should participate with all seriousness in the ecumenical movement. This is not to say, however, that the division in Christendom has been altogether sinful. In fact the Reformation was a "tragic necessity" (Pelikan), which God permitted for the sake of the gospel and his people, the holy catholic church. Although God created the Lutheran confession for a specific purpose, he did not create us for perpetual isolation in which we are content to talk to ourselves. The "monological" church, whether it be Lutheran, Roman, Reformed, Anglican or Orthodox is not orthodox or "right believing". To believe rightly the churches must permit the Holy Spirit to move them from "monolog to dialog", into a conversation "which does not consist in the clash of theses and antitheses, but in a genuine meeting in truth".³⁶ Having said this, another caveat is in order. The proper role for the World Council of Churches is that of creating the atmosphere for conversation. By definition the WCC is confessionally and ecclesologically neutral (cf. Toronto Declaration, 1950), and as such is not the agency for the establishment of intercommunion or pulpit and altar koinonia. It is illusory to think that all existing churches can be melted together under the aegis of the World Council of Churches.

3. The Lutheran churches are, nevertheless, committed to the confession that the church is one. This confession binds us to seek expression of the unity in koinonia.

³⁵ *Lutheran World*, Vol. VII, No. 3 (December 1960), p. 274.

³⁶ K. E. Skydsgaard, "From Monologue to Dialogue", *The Ecumenical Review*, July 1962, p. 431.

It is our present conviction that the most promising and potentially fruitful way is the bilateral confrontation of confessional groups, e.g. the Lutheran and the Roman Catholic, the Lutheran and the Presbyterian (Reformed), the Lutheran and the Anglican. Here I tend to agree with the judgment of Dr. V. Vajta : “. . . bilateral confessional conversations cannot be refused as being against ecumenical ideals, but instead should be responsibly carried out by confessional organizations. . . . Unity talks or union negotiations would be a hopeless venture on the WCC level”.³⁷ On the other hand, during the last decades, not least in the wake of the ecumenical revival of Biblical studies, the walls between separated churches have become, if not transparent, at least translucent. This leads one to hope that as confessional churches face each other in Christ, they may make common confession of him who is “the light of the world” — and of the churches.

It seems to me, in view of what has been said above, that we should now be ready to admit that the relationships of churches to each other — one Lutheran church to another and one Lutheran church to a non-Lutheran church — is automatically a matter affecting all of us. We are *all* involved in each other. Here it seems to me that this Assembly is in a position to provide genuine stimulus to concrete implementation of Article III of the LWF Constitution.

One of the significant results of Minneapolis in 1957 was the establishment of a Commission and Institute on Inter-Confessional Research. Its first task was to be the study of the Roman Catholic church and its theology. This action took on unanticipated significance with the calling of the Second Vatican Council and in retrospect we see how important the Minneapolis decision was. Recently the LWF has issued an account of the Commission’s activities and plans for the future. I wish to quote one paragraph : “We are happy that a new opportunity for inter-confessional research has been opened up, and with it the possibility of making a contribution to conversation between the confessions. *Research and conversation belong together*” (Italics mine).³⁸

This last sentence leads me to propose that this Assembly take steps to move beyond the important task of *research* to *conversation*. What began so auspiciously in Minneapolis and has been so effectively established by Professor Skydsgaard, the Institute’s first Research Professor, could lead to further unanticipated fruits if this Assembly would make provision for interchurch or interconfessional conversations. Have we not reached the point where the LWF should perhaps request the Commission on Inter-Confessional Research to pursue not only research but conversation ? Lively possibilities for such conversations immediately suggest themselves : Inter-Lutheran, Lutheran-Reformed, Lutheran-Anglican, Lutheran-Roman, Lutheran-Orthodox. Has not the time arrived for the Lutheran church

³⁷ “The Nature of the Lutheran World Federation” (unpublished MS), 1959, p. 6.

³⁸ Based on K. E. Skydsgaard, “On Dialogue Between Roman Catholic and Ev. Lutheran Theologians”, *Lutheran World*, Vol. VII, No. 2 (September 1960), p. 126.

—previously not known for its aggressive ecumenism — to initiate discussions rather than to maintain a defensively withdrawn attitude while other churches have taken the ecumenical initiative? Is not the ecumenical initiative implicit in the Lutheran confession? As the Commission says: “Interconfessional research which does not lead in some way to conversations stops halfway, and conversations which are not based on research are nothing more than irresponsible talk.”³⁹

We conclude with a reminder: both the multilateral discussion carried on in the WCC and the bilateral confessional confrontation are rightfully called ecumenical. And in both aspects of the ecumenical encounter, Lutherans must be alert to the possibility of ever new situations and questions, the answers to which may transcend the normal or traditional ways of thought. For example, Lutheran churches in India and Africa (Tanganyika) are asking: “May we belong to the Lutheran world family of churches — as we do now — should we join (in India) the Church of South India, or in Tanganyika some similar union of churches?” The answer cannot be dogmatic nor naive. But surely the creation of “homeless” (confessionally-speaking) union churches would create awkward relations between Lutheran “mother” churches and Lutheran “daughter” churches. Depending upon the terms and conditions of such regional unions, the basic question must always be: What constitutes fellowship (*koinonia*) in the Christian church and what is the “form of a servant” appropriate to the church at this moment in history?

This brings us back to the analogy between Christ and the church which has been set before us in Philippians 2: 5-11. There the apostle says that he who took the form of a servant became obedient unto death; *therefore*, God highly exalted him.

Must not the Lutheran church in this hour, as it seeks “the form of a servant”, be profoundly aware that the institutional structures must be prepared to die? Only as we and other churches are “obedient unto death” will God “highly exalt” us and thus manifest to the world his servant, the one holy, catholic and apostolic church. To the Philippian church and to us Paul says: “Have this mind in you!”

Maybe this is what “Christ Today” is telling the Lutheran church today!

³⁹ K. E. Skydsgaard, *ibid.*