

Inaugural Address

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I Believe One Holy Christian
Church: What Does It Mean Today

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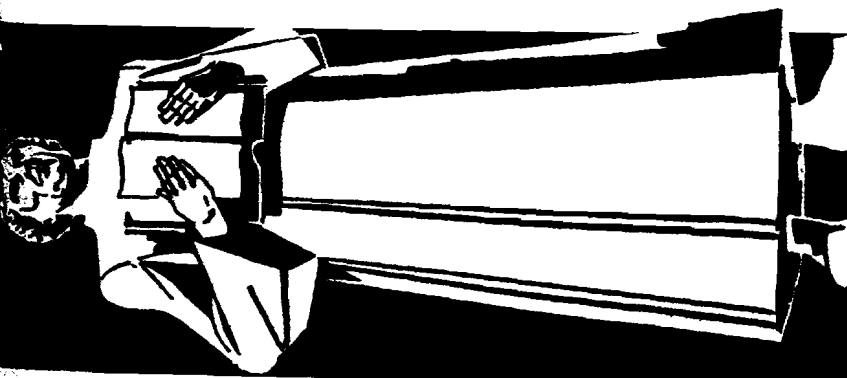
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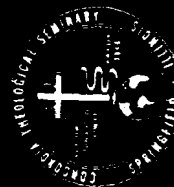
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I Believe One Holy Christian Church—What Does It Mean Today?

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Translated by Mr. Wilhelm Torgerson and Mr. Donald Poock

I BELIEVE ONE CHURCH—what does that mean? We really do not have to *believe* that there is a Church. The parish Church of Sittensen is there for all to see. The Territorial Church of Hannover or the Church of Sweden are concrete realities to which one can point on the basis of official documents, of geographical maps, and in telephone directories. It really does not require faith.

Faith directs itself to what one hopes, to what one cannot see, according to the Epistle to the Hebrews; and that applies also when we confess: I believe one Church. This faith in the Church is part of our Christian faith. The Church is properly part of the creed. There she is mentioned as one of the redemptive acts. She is part of the work of God which we accept in faith. The work of God in the world is somehow always noticeable or visible. But the divine aspect cannot be demonstrated, cannot be controlled, cannot be photographed.

So it is also with Jesus Christ. People could see and hear Him. But that He was the Son of God they could not see or find out in a way obvious to all. Here only faith could hear the Word of God. Only faith could see His deeds to be God's deeds. Only to faith it was obvious that He was the Messiah, the Son of the living God. That is still the case today. Some cannot see Him at all. He escapes them in the haze of some *Gemeindetheologie* (a post-resurrection theology "constructed" by the early Christian community), in alleged "gnostic accretions" and in whatever else supposedly effaced the so-called "historical image of Jesus." And even when we have His image before us, only faith sees who He really is. In my opinion an exact scientific investigation demands that we come to terms with (1) the entire method of fixing the rabbinical tradition, (2) the apostolic office which pledges its holder to inviolable faithfulness, (3) the equally obligating apostolic witness, (4) the well-known pericopes used and heard repeatedly in the worship service of the church and (5) the very figure of Jesus that cannot simply have been invented. This guarantees that we do not have to grope in the dark when our task is to determine who Jesus claimed to be and how the disciples saw and experienced Him. And even then the question who He really was can be answered only in faith, just as was the case when Jesus lived.

So it is also with the Church. Everyone can see her, but some see more than others. They see that God is at work here. They see that this is God's Church. That means: They believe in the Church.

What does that mean today? What do I believe when I believe in the Church?

1. I believe one *holy* Church.

This means: I believe that this Church is *God's* Church. God alone is holy. Here on earth we can only call holy what God has made holy, what He has accepted as part of His sanctifying work. And precisely that is the case with the Church. She was founded by God with the specific intent of serving His redemptive work on earth. Thus the Church is part of the Third Article as a redemptive act. The Holy Ghost is sent to witness to Christ, to portray to us His image, to continue His work. In this the Church is His means. She is His means because she is custodian of the means of grace and fellowship of the saints. She is God's Church, God's work, God's people, Christ's body, and however else the Bible refers to her.

We want to expand on this somewhat more precisely.

God's Church is *founded by God*. Her prototype in the Old Covenant is God's people Israel. The Church is established by Christ as the Christian Church under the New Covenant. Jesus speaks of her as "My Church" in Matt. 16:18.

Liberal theology denied that Jesus could have founded a church. Those who interpreted Early Christianity as extremely eschatological thought the same. When I was a student in the twenties, this school of thought—in the meanwhile supported by form criticism—was dominant. Let me remark on the side that with some astonishment I have taken note that there is one German school of exegesis that stands pat on the theories of that time. The thirties brought to our circles a new sensitivity arising out of a deeper understanding of the sources and the contemporary Jewish environment. It seems to me that we can marshal the strongest possible reasons to be found in scientific exegesis to make clear that Jesus during His lifetime really established a community, an *ekklesia*. This is proven by the selection of the twelve apostles. The number is symbolic: It signifies the new Israel. With the help of contemporary Jewish ideas we can quite accurately determine the nature and function of the apostolic office. An apostle, *shaliach*, is a person commissioned who in the name of his master acts with the full power to represent him. The New Testament shows very clearly how this applies to the apostles of Christ. That Jesus chose apostles proves—as does, for instance, the institution of the Lord's Supper—that He did not expect an immediate *parousia*, rather that He intended an interval in which the new people of God were to live as Church in the world. Thus it was not the disciples that formed the Church. She was there from the start. She was the true

people of God that had now recognized its Messiah and had been gathered and was led by Him.

A further point: As this Church was founded by God, so she was also *ordered by God*. She was not left simply to fortuitousness, not to mere human intelligence and ability. The apostles were subjects of their Lord's promise that the Holy Ghost would lead them, lead them "into all truth" (or perhaps more accurately translated, "to the full truth", John 16:13). Apostolic times required that regarding the death and resurrection of Christ there be foundational thinking, preaching and teaching. The Christian faith holds that this elaboration of the Christian faith was not a distortion but an objective presentation. "Believing in Christ" also means to believe in the work of the Risen One in the Church.

Here I should say a word about historical criticism. After all, the critics claim that the history of the early Christian community (*Urgemeinde*) is real history and therefore subject to historical examination. They would like to examine, for instance, whether the early community really understood Jesus correctly and objectively handed down His concerns. They will admit that by means of historical investigation we can go back no farther than the earliest layer of the faith and the preaching of that community. This was admittedly the preaching of the crucified and risen Lord. Yet they will insist that they are in a position to find out that Jesus never referred to Himself as the Son of Man and that He did not want to be the Messiah.

This is of course a problem that can definitely be treated scientifically insofar the sources permit. Who Jesus was we can certainly not determine scientifically, but we can irrefutably determine who he claimed to be. If it could be proven that Jesus really did not want to be Messiah, Son of Man, God's only Son, in the sense in which the Gospels claim, then one, in my opinion, would have to cease being a Christian. Then all of early Christianity and its preaching would then be an immense error, and it should be admitted. It is difficult for me to understand how one can speak so fervently of "intellectual integrity" and at the same time represent Christianity with such opinions. Such "integrity" I do not understand. The scientific conclusions on which people depend and which are held up as extremely important are quite disputed. But scientifically it *cannot* be disputed that an understanding of Jesus that denies His stature as Messiah and Son of God is something fundamentally at odds with the religion known by the name of Christianity. We must say this: We should not hold anyone back from engaging in historical criticism. God has acted in the world, has intervened, has made history. We cannot on the one hand claim that something has happened in history and on the other forbid the studying of this history. If our faith is correct then ultimately it must always show that criticism is in error.

Now we must be very clear about how utterly difficult it is to come to scientifically reliable conclusions in this field—and we ought to tell this to our congregations again and again. The possibility of testing the New Testament by means of other sources is very small. And with internal criticism, in which the New Testament writings are compared and analyzed, the results are always problematic and very often depend on the preconceived notions of the investigator. That is why the different schools in the history of Biblical criticism have always been very dependent on the culture of their time. Therefore the results must in their turn be critically examined. There are but few universally recognized and established results. It sometimes seems as if such results had been established. But that is frequently a result of the fact that research has not advanced in a country. An instance of this is when the congregations are told that the Gospel of John has nothing to do with the real Jesus and that this is a universally recognized truth. This is simply not true. Whether this is actually true in Germany others may say. It certainly is not true for Scandinavia. We, too, have a school of exegesis and we are proud of it—justifiably, to my mind. But in our midst eminent scholars think quite differently about the Gospel of John. We need not even speak of the problem whether Jesus himself claimed to be the Messiah and the Son of Man. That fact is universally admitted in our circles.

Now if the Christian faith shows itself in this, that we admit the Lord Christ is right and recognize Him to be the Son of God, then the Christian faith also consists in this, that we trust Him to have led His apostles and His Church into all truth. That means we accept as true—as long as the contrary has not been unequivocally and convincingly proven—that the apostles did not falsify His reflection but rather portrayed the events just as they took place in order to make clear to us who He is and what He wants.

2. I believe in an *apostolic* Church.

That is the way the Nicene Creed speaks, that confession of faith used in the worship service of both the Eastern and the Western Churches.

That the Church is apostolic has not only reference to the fact that she was guided by the apostles, that the apostolic message was normative for the Church and that the apostles were considered to be her foundation. All that can be historically established. One does not need faith to apprehend this fact. Faith means here to accept these facts as *established by God and pleasing to Him*. Thus I believe that the apostles had a commission from God, were equipped by the Holy Ghost for this commission and were granted divine guidance in the difficulties of these initial times. Frequently Biblical criticism claims that many ideas first appeared in the early Christian community (*Urgemeinde*) or at least were formulated there first. That is true. The New Testament itself says just that. "There is

still much that I could say to you, but the burden would be too great for you now. However, when He comes who is the Spirit of truth, He will guide you into all the truth." (John 16:12-13 NEB). Our faith therefore holds that the ancient Church was shaped and guided by God. Like faithful stewards the apostles passed on the gifts entrusted to them. And not only that: Through the Holy Ghost they were enabled to make the right decisions; they found the right words to give expression to the mystery of Christ. It is correct to say that the New Testament contains a number of interpretations which do not fully express what happened through Jesus. But it is quite incorrect to infer from this that these interpretations are not binding, rather that we ourselves are today entitled to put forth equally good or even better ones. Whoever makes these inferences has abandoned faith in the apostolic Church.

The Church being apostolic is therefore of great significance. This faith says that the apostolic age possesses a unique significance. That age was chosen to lay the apostolic basis for the future. It was done under God's guidance. We can only guess *why* God wanted it this way. But we confess in the creed *that* He wanted it this way.

This is important also for the formation of the canon. The critics claim that the canon was established by means of an ecclesiastical decision. Historically and humanly speaking this may be true. But faith sees something more than that in this external event. It is not as if ecclesiastical tradition had decided here. From the very beginning the Word was in the Church. It was there as the Holy Scriptures of the Old Covenant, the Bible of Jesus and of the apostles. It was there as the *paradosis* of Jesus, as the teaching entrusted to His apostles. It was there also in the apostolic *kerygma*, that is the apostolic preaching of the death and resurrection of Christ. The Word was there in the worship service, in the ever recurring pericopes of apostolic origin. Added to this were the apostolic writings which were read in the services over and over again. The Swedish New Testament scholar Odeberg—intimately familiar with ancient Judaism—has repeatedly pointed out that for canonical recognition of a writing the decisive factor was whether it had already been read as an apostolic writing in the worship service. In this the Church was never at liberty to accept or to reject as she deemed proper. The apostolic Word was put down in the apostolic writings. To them the Church was bound. The apostolic *Word* was greater than the Church, not as a *Word* of man, but as the *Word* of the apostles chosen by Christ and guided by the Holy Ghost. When at a later date the Church in a few cases had to decide whether a certain writing not read in all areas of the Church was canonical or not, she was still subject to apostolic authority. The writing had to be apostolic, if not directly from apostolic hand, at least written in the apostolic spirit. Only writings were considered that from earliest times had enjoyed apostolic esteem in the wor-

ship service. This whole chain of events we Christians recognize as divinely guided. That is part of faith in the apostolic Church. We do not need to determine in detail the so-called principles for the formation of the canon. They are not principles that could be used for an expansion or a revision of the canon. The apostolic age is unique and foundational. Admittedly the canon had not yet been fixed in every detail when the age of the apostles and their pupils drew to a close. But the main components were there, the essential content had been established as norm and with its authority acted determinatively towards its final definition. The apostolic basis cannot be altered, re-examined or through ecclesiastical decisions be revised. This should be considered also when dealing with the problem of women pastors. We believe in the apostolic Church.

3. I believe in one *Christian* Church.

The word "Christian" stands for "catholic". It is Greek and means: universal, all-embracing, enclosing the whole. If we were to express this Biblically one could perhaps say, as the Letter to the Colossians does, that in Christ "the complete being of God, by God's own choice, came to dwell" (Col. 1:19), and God has made Him to be the Head of the body, that is, the Church. Through Him the Church partakes of this divine fullness. It was God's intention "to reconcile all things, whether on earth or in heaven, through Christ alone" (Col. 1:20). Therefore the Church must possess within her this fullness in order to be able to receive within her all peoples and races.

The Catechism of Cyril of Jerusalem treats of this in the following way: The Church is called catholic (all-embracing) because she encloses the whole earth, because she embraces all doctrines necessary for salvation and proclaims them forever, further because she leads men of every kind into the true Christian faith, and finally because for all sins she is in possession of the means of salvation and of all virtues and all spiritual gifts.

What does that mean today?

First of all this confession ought to be a mighty call for repentance. But the Church in which we live really does not look like that. I hardly need to mention the unity that is lacking. Worse than that is the lack of this all-embracing love, this spiritual ability to pervade everything and fashion it. Every local congregation ought to be a mirror image of the Universal Church. In every parish the means of curing all sins, the full number of spiritual gifts and virtues, ought to be employed. Is that being done?

But this confession is also a promise. Thus we believe because God has promised it to us. He has granted His Church the whole fullness of divine truth, everything we need, including everything for this life. We need not ask anxiously how we are to inject life into a message that is two thousand years old. It is not correct to

claim that before anything else the Bible must be read historically since none of its writings was directed to us. Paul knew better than that. He knew that the Scriptures—the Old Testament—were given not only to the old people of Israel. “For all the ancient scriptures were written for our own instruction, in order that through the encouragement they give us we may maintain our hope with fortitude” (Rom. 15:4 NĒB). “These events happened as symbols to warn us” (I Cor. 10:6). “Does He not speak entirely for our sake? It was written for our sake” (I Cor. 9:10 RSV).

The Christian faith holds that the Bible was given for all peoples and for all times. Obviously we must note to whom a word of the Scriptures is directed, or we could not understand it properly at all. But we must always keep in mind that God, in sending just this *Word* into the world, also directed it to us and to our time.

That the Church is catholic, therefore, means that she stands ready with her means of grace also for our time. The apostolic faith is abandoned when we imagine that here we are dealing merely with the heritage from days long past which we now, through some painful and complicated process, must mould anew if we are to gain therefrom something sensible for our time and for our contemporaries.

It is, of course, true that the world has changed. But God has known that for a long time. Every Sunday we confess in the service that we trust Him to have remembered this new world, too, when he sent forth His *Word* into the world.

We also confess our conviction that the answer to the problems of our time is to be found in the Word of God. We confess that we will look for those answers there and, having heard them, be obedient, convinced that God is right and wiser than man.

One final point. That the Church is catholic and embraces all things necessary for salvation and for life in Christ means that we do not have to seek outside the Church for the true human-divine relationship. No Christians should be ashamed to be in the Church. Of course, even today it could be that God has chosen what the world considers foolish and weak and despicable. And yet this community of little people, who do not know much of the high wisdom of existentialism but who believe in Christ, is the Church of Christ in which the hidden life with Christ in God progresses. When this life becomes weak we must repent and call for repentance. But we should not imagine that the new life in Christ is to be found where the Church is not, for *there* is no faith in Christ and *there* is no love towards Him. When even heathen act in the right way—sometimes in a manner that really shames us Christians—that is still not the Church. Not works justify but faith.

It is true that the living community of God is invisible insofar as faith cannot be photographed. But it is equally true that faith comes by hearing, that preaching is necessary in the Church, that no church can be without Baptism and the Lord's Supper. The Church is not hidden in the world. The Church calls. The Church baptizes. The Church celebrates the Lord's Supper. The city which is set on a hill cannot be hid!

Even if criticism does not want to accept it, nevertheless a Christian replies: I believe one holy Church. I believe that God can intervene in this world and that He has done so, in fact uniquely and decisively, in the person of Jesus Christ. I believe that He has witnessed to this His decisive deed in a manner that does not lead us astray. I believe that He has fashioned His message the Bible and the means of grace in a way that He is in our midst, acting and speaking. I believe that this apostolic message and this apostolic Church is part of His work. I praise His holy Name for this great act of mercy and I confess trustingly and gratefully: I believe one holy Christian Church. Amen.