

Dr. C.F.W. Walther's First Presidential Address

The Scriptural truths regarding the relationship of a church organization and its members, as they are exemplified in our Synodical Constitution

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In these last days of sore distress there have again come days of great joy, days of refreshment and strengthening for us, members and servants of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of this country. God has granted us grace that we, who knew and know that we are united in one faith, but in part were not acquainted and in most cases lived a great distance from one another and had to work and battle alone, have been able to meet here to manifest our unity in the spirit publicly by deeds and jointly to strengthen this unity, to confess our most holy faith jointly and to be edified thereby, jointly to take upon ourselves the burden of the individual and to present it to God in joint prayer. Whereas at present our fellow believers in most other countries, especially in our former fatherland, because of the disturbance and confusion of a violent dissolution of all existing relationships in church and state, are restricted almost entirely to solitary sighing in the closet, we have been able to assemble peacefully to refresh our spirits in the shadow of an undisturbed peace. Thanks, humble thanks be to him who is good and whose mercy endures forever.

However, we are here not only as individuals; most of us have come here as servants and members of the church in the name and on behalf of our congregations in order to deliberate in the fear of God on matters necessary for them and the church as a whole. We are bearing a grave responsibility in being present here, in the confessions which we make and in the resolutions we pass. The eyes of many are on us; they are looking upon our deliberations partly with

concern, partly with expectation. Generally, however, the demand is made upon our meeting— and, we must admit, with perfect justification that it is not only to be beneficial for us personally, but that it also brings a blessing upon our congregations and the whole church.

I do not doubt for a moment that all of you, my dear brethren in Christ, have come here with the fervent prayer to God for such a blessing upon our activity and with the holy purpose, as members of this body, to consider such a blessing the goal of your activity. Perhaps all of us, the one more, the other less, are filled with concern by the thought that our deliberations might easily be unproductive; I mean the thought that, according to the constitution under which our Synodical union exists, we have merely the power to advise one another, that we have only the power of the Word, and of convincing. According to our constitution we have no right to formulate decrees, to pass laws and regulations, and to make a judicial decision, to which our congregations would have to submit unconditionally in any matter involving the imposing of something upon them. Our constitution by no means makes us a consistory, by no means a supreme court of our congregations. It rather grants them the most perfect liberty in everything, excepting nothing but the Word of God, faith, and charity. According to our constitution we are not above our congregations, but in them and at their side. Have we not thereby been deprived almost entirely of the possibility of exercising an energetic, salutary influence upon our congregations? Have we not perhaps by adopting a constitution as ours is, made ourselves a mere shadow of a synod? The relationship into which we have entered being what it is, shall we not exhaust ourselves with labors which may easily be lost entirely, since nobody is forced to submit to our resolutions?

You surely all join me in answering this question with a decided No! You need no proof for this, least of all my reasonings. I hope, however, that you will gladly lend me your ears, if I now at the opening of this year's sessions attempt to focus your attention for several moments on the topic I have suggested. Surely

there is nobody among us who realizes more vividly than I do how completely unfit I am to arise in this venerable assembly and teach among teachers; but it is incumbent upon me to take the floor because of the office which you have seen fit to impose upon me, the least of you; moreover, by means of several hints which I can present according to the measure of my knowledge and the meager preparation allowed me, I hope at least to stimulate you to meditate on this important matter to greater benefit.

The question to which I now intend to give a brief answer is the following: Why Should and Can We Carry on Our Work Joyfully Although We Have No Power But the Power of the Word?

The principal and most important motive is the following: Because Christ has given his servants only this and no other power, and because even the holy apostles have appropriated to themselves no other power and therefore have seriously warned the servants of the church against claiming every other power.

In the first place, Christ declares plainly and distinctly that his church is not of the same nature as a temporal state. In reply to the question of Pilate whether he was the King of the Jews, etc., he uttered the great important words: "My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting, that I might not be delivered over to the Jews. But my kingdom is not from the world." He indicates the real, the true character of his kingdom, or his church, by adding: "To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness to the truth. Everyone that is of the truth hears my voice." It is also pertinent that Christ in other passages calls his kingdom a kingdom of heaven and that the holy apostles call it the house and city of God, the Jerusalem which is above, the free woman, the church of the first-born which are written in heaven, and the like. Christ's kingdom and church, accordingly, is a kingdom of truth, a spiritual, heavenly kingdom, a kingdom of God, in which only free citizens of the kingdom of heaven, members of the house of God, prophets, priests, and kings dwell.

Who, then, has the power in this kingdom? It is Jesus Christ alone. He declares this of himself. He says: "I am a King." "I am the Good Shepherd." "One is your Master, even Christ." The apostle calls him "the head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all." By which means Christ exercises the power in his church, though he has withdrawn his visible presence from it and sat down on the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens, is clearly shown by the last declaration, with which he parted from his disciples: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." Hence his Word, accompanied and sealed by the holy Sacraments, is the means whereby Christ exercises power in his kingdom. This is the "right scepter" with which he rules his people, this is the "rod and staff" with which he feeds his flock.

But Christ not only declares that he alone has the power in his church and exercises it by his Word, but he also expressly denies to all others any other power, any other rule, any other authority to command in his church. Not only does he say, as already stated, "One is your Master, even Christ," but he also adds: "And you are all brothers," that is, in my church you are all equal, all subject to me and no one the lord and commander of the other. In another passage he says to the disciples: "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave."

What Christ hereby denied to the apostles, they never claimed for themselves. They demanded no submission except to Jesus Christ, namely, to his Word. They said: We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves... For we preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord; and ourselves your servants for

Jesus' sake"(2 Cor. 4). When, therefore, St. Paul toward the end of the first chapter of his second letter to the Corinthians had used the expression, that he had not come to Corinth in person because he wished to "spare" his Corinthians, it might have seemed to some as though the apostle were thereby making himself a lord who had the power to demand and grant dispensation according to his pleasure, to punish and to spare; in order that this wrong impression might not become fixed, he immediately adds: "Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy." Again, when this same apostle had urged and admonished the congregation in Corinth to participate in a collection for the poor, he adds: "I speak not by commandment but by occasion of the forwardness of others and to prove the sincerity of your love." Before this, when the Corinthians paid more attention to the persons than to the Word preached by these persons, he had testified to them: "Who, then, is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers by whom you believed? ...Therefore let no man glory in men. For all things are yours, whether Paul, or Apollos, or Cephas, or the world, or life, or death, or things present, or things to come; all are yours; and you are Christ's; and Christ is God's." Even at the election and appointment of officers to care for the physical needs of the congregations the apostles therefore did not claim the right to choose these men alone. When the deacons were to be elected at Jerusalem, the apostles addressed the congregation in this manner: "Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." Then we read "And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen (etc.), whom they set before the apostles." Again, when according to the report in Acts 21, the belief spread in the congregation at Jerusalem that Paul was an enemy of the Mosaic Law, and when he on his journey finally arrived at Jerusalem, James and the elders did not wish to take the responsibility of deciding the matter upon themselves, nor to force the congregation to be satisfied with their decision, but all the elders unanimously

declared: "What is it therefore? the multitude needs to come together; for they will hear that you have come." Again, when, according to Acts 15, a dispute arose among the Christians in Antioch about the question whether Christians who had formerly been Gentiles would have to be circumcised and Paul and Barnabas were unable to soothe the divided multitude, the congregation elected them and several others and sent them to Jerusalem as the delegates to secure counsel at that place where not only Peter and James but also the greatest number of converted and noted Jews lived. What happened? The apostles and elders meet to consider the matter; but they do not dare to exclude the congregation in this matter; all members met; there is argument and counterargument; finally, Peter and James arise and place the matter in the right light. A joint resolution is then passed and included in a Synodical letter, in which we read: "We, the apostles, and elders, and brethren... it seemed good to us, being assembled with one accord." Thus we see that the apostles did not at all claim any dominion over the congregation. Even in the most important church councils, they granted the so-called lay-men just as much right, just as much seat and deciding vote as themselves.

Therefore they also diligently and seriously warn all who have an office in the church against all desire to rule. For instance, Peter writes: "So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock." Likewise Paul admonishes Timothy: "Do not rebuke an older man but encourage him as you would a father. Treat younger men like brothers, older women like mothers, younger women like sisters, in all purity." The holy apostles grant only one power to those who serve the church as rulers, namely, the power of the Word. For thus the same apostles write; first St. Peter: "whoever speaks, as one who speaks the oracles of God— that God in all things may be glorified through Jesus Christ." Then St. Paul writes to

Timothy: "preach the word; be ready in season and out of season."

Accordingly there can be no doubt, venerable brethren in office and respected delegates, that we are not renouncing any right belonging to us if we as servants of the church and as members of an ecclesiastical synod claim no other power than the power of the Word; for in the church where Christ alone rules there dare and can be no other power to which all must submit. To be sure, there are matters which the Word of God does not regulate, but which must be arranged in the church; but all such matters are not to be arranged by any power above the congregation, but the congregation (that is, pastors and hearers) arranges them, free of every compulsion, as it is necessary and appears salutary.

What, then, are men doing who claim a power in the church beside the power of the Word? They are robbing the church of Christ of the liberty which he has purchased with a price, with his divine blood, and are degrading this free Jerusalem, in which there are only kings, priests, and prophets, this kingdom of God, this heavenly kingdom of truth to an organization under strict police rule in which everybody is compelled to be obedient to every human ordinance. They are seeking the royal crown of Christ, the only true King, and are making themselves kings over his kingdom; they are deposing Christ, the only true Master, from his chair and are setting themselves up as masters in his church; they are striving to separate Christ, the only true Head, from his church and are presumptuously trying to be heads of his spiritual body. They exalt themselves above the holy apostles and claim a power which God's Word plainly denies them and which has been granted by God to no man, no creature, not even to an angel or archangel.

Can we, therefore, my brethren, be depressed because we in our American pastorates are endowed with no other power than the power of the Word and especially because no other power has been granted to this assembly? Most assuredly not. This very fact must arouse us to perform the duties of our office and to carry on our present labors with great joy; for in this manner the church also among us preserves its true character, its character of a kingdom of heaven; in

this manner Christ remains among us as what he is, the only Lord, the only head, the only master; and our office and labor preserves the true apostolic form. How could we lust for a power which Christ has denied us, which no apostle has claimed, and which would deprive our congregations of the character of a true church and of the true apostolic form?

Undoubtedly our congregations were free to follow this example and to invest the synod meeting in their name with a power beside the power of the Word; but it is a different question whether it would have been wise if they had done so. I say no, because under the prevailing circumstances we can confidently hope for auspicious success of our work, or rather of God's work which we are promoting, if we use only the power of God. This is the second reason why we should and can carry on our work with joy, although we have no power but the power of the Word.

Perhaps there are times and conditions when it is profitable for the church to place the supreme deciding and regulating power into the hands of representatives. Who, for instance, would deny that at one time the consistories in our German fatherland were an inestimable blessing, especially when the prophecy of Isaiah was being fulfilled in the German Lutheran Church: "And kings shall be your nursing fathers and their queens your nursing mothers" (Isaiah 49:23)? Which person acquainted a bit with history would deny that the Swedish church grew splendidly under its episcopal constitution, especially so long as men like Laurentius Petri, the famous Swedish translator of the Bible and student of Luther, bore the episcopal dignity, and so long as men like the two Gustavuses wore the royal crown of Sweden? If, however, we glance at the conditions in which the church finds itself here, we can hardly consider any other constitution as the most salutary except one under which the congregations are free to govern themselves but enter into a Synodical organization such as the one existing among us with the help of God, for enjoying fraternal consultation, supervision, and aid to spread the kingdom of God jointly and to make possible and accomplish the aims

of the church in general.

It is true, if our congregations had granted us full power to decide and decree in their name, it apparently would have been easy for us to give all of the congregations of our territory the form of truly Lutheran congregations, whereas with our present constitution our hands appear to be tied. But this only seems to be the case. Even though some congregations may use the liberty they possess of rejecting our recommendations even if they are salutary; thereby they indeed deprive themselves of a blessing. But what would be the result if such congregations by their entrance into our organization had obligated themselves to submit to all of our orders? The exercise of our power would have laid the foundation for constant dissatisfaction, for constantly reviving fear of hierarchical efforts, and thus for endless friction. In a republic, as the United States of America is, where the feeling of being free and independent of man is nourished so strongly from childhood, the inevitable result would be that any restriction beyond the limits drawn by God Himself would be empty shells, and our apparent growth would often be nothing but a process of becoming stiff and dying in a great mass of lifeless forms. Our chief battle would soon center about the execution of manufactured, external human ordinances and institutions and would swallow up the true blessed battle for the real treasure of the church, for the purity and unity of doctrine. In a word, we would lose sight of our beautiful aim of building the true church, which is not an external scaffold but the kingdom of God in the heart of men, and at best ourselves bring about our early dissolution.

To be sure, there are religious organizations in this republic which in spite of their strictly representative form of government are being built without antagonism and are prospering in their manner, but why? Because the congregations are not permitted to come to a knowledge of their liberty and their consciences are bound in favor of their form of government by false doctrine. In our Evangelical Lutheran Church, however, we must preach to our congregations that the choice of the form of government for a church is an inalienable part of

their Christian liberty and that Christians as members of the church are subject to no power in the world except the clear Word of the living God. There the above-mentioned disastrous results are certainly to be feared from any restriction of the liberty of the congregations, especially in a republic such as ours is.

We can, however, certainly hope for altogether different results if we ask nothing unconditionally of our congregations except submission to the Word, if we therefore leave it to them to govern themselves and assist them only with our advice. We need not fear that the secular element of a political democracy will invade the church, that therefrom will arise a popular government, a papacy of the people, and that we, who are to be servants of Christ, will thereby become servants of men. How can this be an ungodly popular government, where the people use the rights given to them by God? How can this be a papacy of the people, if the priestly nation of Christians does not permit any man to enact laws for them in matters which God has not prescribed and is willing to obey the preacher of the Word unconditionally only when Christ Himself speaks through him, that is, when he preaches his Word? No, a disgraceful popular government occurs only where the people presume to prescribe to the preacher what he may and may not preach of God's Word; where the people make bold to contradict the Word of God and to interfere in any respect with the conduct of the office according to the Word; or where the people claim for themselves alone the power to enact ordinances in the church, exclude the pastor from this power, and demand that he submit to these ordinances. Accordingly, only such a preacher is a servant of men as does not serve Christ faithfully because of fear of men or because of desire to please men, departs from God's Word in doctrine or practice, and preaches for the itching ears of his audience. But where the pastor is given only the power of the Word, but its full power, where the congregation, as often as it hears Christ's Word from the mouth of the preacher, receives it as the Word of God, there the proper relationship between pastor and congregation exists; he stands in their midst not as a hired mercenary but as an ambassador of the Most High God; not as a servant of

men but as a servant of Christ, who in Christ's stead teaches, admonishes, and reproveth. There the apostolic admonition is properly observed: "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you." The more a congregation sees that he who has the rule over them in the Lord desires nothing but that the congregation be subject to Christ and his Word; the more it sees that he does not desire to dominate them, yes, indeed, that he himself with a jealous eye guards the liberty of the congregation, the more willing the congregation will become to hear his salutary recommendations also in matters which God has not prescribed; it will follow him in these matters not as a taskmaster because it must, but as their father in Christ, because they wish to do it for their own advantage.

Also our Synodical body has the same prospects of salutary influence if it does not attempt to operate through any other means than through the power of the Word of God. Even then we must expect battles, but they will not be the mean, depressing battles for obedience to human laws, but the holy battles for God's Word, for God's honor and kingdom. And the more our congregations will realize that we do not desire to employ any other power over them than the divine power of the Word, the power of God unto salvation to everyone who believes, the more will also our counsel find an open door among them. To be sure, those who do not love the Word will separate from us, but for those who love it, our fellowship will be a comforting refuge; and if they adopt our resolutions, they will not consider them a foreign burden imposed upon them from without but as a benefit and a gift of brotherly love, and will champion, defend, and preserve them as their own.

Even though we possess no power but that of the Word, we nevertheless can and should carry on our work joyfully. Let us, therefore, esteemed sirs and brethren, use this power properly. Let us above all and in all matters be concerned about this, that the pure doctrine of our dear Evangelical Lutheran Church may

become known more and more completely among us, that it may be in vogue in all of our congregations, and that it may be preserved from all adulteration and held fast as the most precious treasure. Let us not surrender one iota of the demands of the Word. Let us bring about its complete rule in our congregations and set aside nothing of it, even though for this reason things may happen to us, as God wills. Here let us be inflexible, here let us be adamant. If we do this, we need not worry about the success of our labor. Even though it should seem to be in vain, it cannot then be in vain, for the Word does not return void but prospers in the thing whereto the Lord sent it. By the Word alone, without any other power, the church was founded; by the Word alone all the great deeds recorded in church history were accomplished; by the Word alone the Church will most assuredly stand also in these last days of sore distress, to the end of days. Even the gates of hell will not prevail against it. "For all flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower fades; but the Word of the Lord endures forever." Amen.