

**Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Conference  
Seventh Triennial Convention  
June 4-6, 2011—New Ulm, Minnesota USA**

*Unity of Spirit—Bond of Peace*

---

Essay #1—

**The Invisible and The Visible Church**

**Lyle W. Lange  
USA**

---

**Justification is the Chief Doctrine of the Christian Faith**

In this essay, we will deal with the Bible's teaching on the visible and the invisible church. Before we begin this study, however, it is important that we relate this teaching to the central teaching of the Bible, *justification by grace through faith in Jesus Christ*. It is because of God's justification of the world that there is a church, and it is vital to maintain this chief doctrine of the Bible if the church is to be preserved.

The teaching of justification by grace through faith in Jesus Christ is the chief teaching of the Bible. It was the central teaching of the Old Testament. Some have said that the Old Testament is law and the New Testament is gospel. If that were true, people of the Old Testament would have been saved by works, and people of the New Testament would not have known they needed to be saved. Rather, both testaments contain both law and gospel. In both testaments, the central teaching is that God saves sinners by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. From the first gospel promise (Genesis 3:15) onward, people of the Old Testament were directed to the Savior who was coming. Peter declared that all the prophets directed people to salvation in the coming Messiah (Acts 10:43).

Christ, crucified for our sins and risen from the dead, was the central theme of the Old Testament and is the central theme of the New Testament. Paul stated that he never shirked from declaring all that God's Word taught (Acts 20:27). Yet, he also declared that Christ crucified was the hub around which all of his teaching revolved (1 Corinthians 2:2). So close a relationship exists between this central teaching of Scripture and all other teachings of Scripture, that when you tamper with Scripture, you tamper with Christ. To lose the biblical teaching on justification is to lose the Christian faith (Galatians 5:4).

Luther declared in the Smalcald Articles:

Here is the first and chief article:

That Jesus Christ, our God and Lord, "was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification" (Rom. 4[:25]); and he alone is "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1[:29]); and "the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Isa. 53[:6]); furthermore, "All have sinned," and

“they are now justified without merit by his grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus . . . by his blood” (Rom. 3[:23–25]). Now because this must be believed and may not be obtained or grasped otherwise with any work, law, or merit, it is clear and certain that this faith alone justifies us, as St. Paul says in Romans 3[:28, 26]: “For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law”; and also, “that God alone is righteous and justifies the one who has faith in Jesus.” Nothing in this article can be conceded or given up, even if heaven and earth or whatever is transitory passed away. As St. Peter says in Acts 4[:12]: “There is no other name . . . given among mortals by which we must be saved.” “And by his bruises we are healed” (Isa. 53[:5]). On this article stands all that we teach and practice against the pope, the devil, and the world. Therefore we must be quite certain and have no doubt about it. Otherwise everything is lost, and the pope and the devil and whatever opposes us will gain victory and be proved right (Smalcald Articles, Part II, Article I:1-5).

The Formula of Concord reiterated this truth when it said:

This article on justification by faith (as the Apology says) is the “most important of all Christian teachings,” “without which no poor conscience can have lasting comfort or recognize properly the riches of Christ’s grace.” As Dr. Luther wrote, “If this one teaching stands in its purity, then Christendom will also remain pure and good, undivided and unseparated; . . . but where it does not remain pure, it is impossible to ward off any error or sectarian spirit.” Regarding this article of faith Paul specifically says, “a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough” [1 Cor. 5:6; Gal. 5:9]. For this reason, he so earnestly and zealously advocates use of these *particulae exclusivae* [exclusive clauses] in this article (that is, expressions such as “apart from the law,” “apart from works,” “on the basis of grace” [Rom. 3:12, 27–28, 24; 4:6, 16; 11:6; Gal. 2:15-16; 3:11; Eph. 2:8-9], which exclude human works), so that he may demonstrate how highly necessary it is that in this article, alongside the pure teaching, one separate, exclude, and reject the antithesis, that is, all contrary teachings (Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article III:6-8).

Having reflected on this central teaching of the Bible, we may now turn to the result of this teaching, that God has gathered together, through the gospel and sacraments, an assembly of believers in Christ.

### **The Church is the Assembly of Believers in Christ**

We use the word church in a variety of ways. We speak of the building in which we conduct worship services as a church. We may speak of “St. Paul’s Lutheran Church” as the local church to which we belong. We may speak of the denomination or synod to which we belong as church. When Scripture speaks about the church (Greek: *ekklesia*), it refers to the assembly of believers brought together by the Holy Spirit through the means of grace (Acts 20:28; 1 Corinthians 1:2; Acts 2:41). The church is also called “the body of Christ” (Ephesians 1:22-23), “the family of God” (1 Peter 4:17), “the family of believers” (Galatians 6:10), “members of God’s household . . . a holy temple in the Lord” (Ephesians 2:19-21).

In his explanation of the Third Article of the Apostles' Creed in the Large Catechism, Luther gave this definition of the church:

But some among our people, who understand neither Latin nor German, have rendered it "communion of saints," although no German would talk that way or understand it. To speak proper German we ought to say "a community of saints," that is, a community that is composed only of saints, or, still more clearly, "a holy community." . . . This is the meaning and substance of this phrase: I believe that there is on earth a holy little flock and community of pure saints under one head, Christ. It is called together by the Holy Spirit in one faith, mind, and understanding (Large Catechism, Third Article: 49-51).

### **The Church is Found Where the Means of Grace are Administered**

The church (the assembly of believers in Christ) is found wherever the gospel is proclaimed and the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper are administered. The prophet Isaiah wrote, "As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth; it will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it" (Isaiah 55:10-11). When it rains, the water causes the planted seeds to grow into plants. The plants produce more seed to plant as well as food to feed the farmer and others. So also the gospel will carry out God's purpose. God is always at work in and through his gospel, so that it is "the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes" (Romans 1:16).

The church will be found wherever the gospel is proclaimed and the sacraments are administered. On Pentecost, Peter baptized 3000 people. Luke wrote, "Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day" (Acts 2:41). We also read of the early church, "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread [a reference to the Lord's Supper] and to prayer" (Acts 2:42). Baptism and the Lord's Supper were instrumental in the gathering and strengthening of the church.

### **What is the Church Like?**

*The church is invisible.* Faith is a matter of the heart. Only God can look into a person's heart to see if he believes. As Solomon declared, "You alone know the hearts of all men" (1 Kings 8:39). We must accept what people profess concerning their faith, as they must accept what we profess. Jesus said, "The kingdom of God does not come visibly, nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is within you" (Luke 17:20-21). The people of Jesus' day expected the Messiah to come and establish an earthly kingdom which would cast off the hated Roman rule. Jesus pointed out that God's kingdom, his rule in the hearts of believers, is an internal matter. It is something which only God can see. As Paul stated, "The Lord knows those who are his" (2 Timothy 2:19). Since the church is invisible, we confess, "I believe in the holy Christian church" (Apostles' Creed).

The Roman Catholic Church teaches that “the church” is the visible body ruled by the pope. Thus, they assert “the church” is an outward, visible body. We, however, on the basis of Scripture, confess, “I believe in the holy Christian church.” We know “the church” by faith, not by sight. Only the Lord knows those who are his (2 Timothy 2:19). In response to Rome’s error, Luther stated: “We do not concede to them that they are the church, and frankly they are not the church. . . . God be praised, a seven-year-old child knows what the church is: holy believers and “the little sheep who hear the voice of their shepherd” (Smalcald Articles, Part III: Article XII:1,2).

*The church is one.* There is only one church of Christ. There is not a Lutheran branch and a Methodist branch. There is only one body of believers in Christ. Jesus said, “There shall be one flock and one shepherd” (John 10:16). To stress the unity of Christ’s church, Paul stresses the word “one” seven times in Ephesians 4:3-6. Paul also declared, “You are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28).

There are many different denominations in the world today. There is only one “holy Christian church,” however. In this world, denominations serve a useful purpose. We cannot look into the hearts of people to see if they are believers. We must deal with people on the basis of their professions of faith. A church body’s confessions will tell us what their members believe. If a church body’s confessions do not agree with Scripture, we know that error exists in that denomination. If the gospel is still present in that church body’s confessions, there will be Christians in that church. Yet, we cannot join with a church body which teaches error. This is not a loving witness to the people who are in error. Joining a church body that teaches error could also cause people to stumble in their faith or lose it. Error is never helpful to faith. It is always harmful to faith. We don’t want to expose our faith to error lest we succumb to it.

Thus, we do not join with Roman Catholics, Methodists, Presbyterians, or other church bodies which teach or tolerate error. Yet, we know that there are Christians in those church bodies where the gospel is still present. All who believe in Christ are one with us in Christ’s one invisible church. However, since we cannot look into people’s hearts to see if they believe, we will not be in the same denomination with these people on earth, though we may be members together with them in the invisible church.

*The church is holy.* We confess, “I believe in the *holy* Christian church.” The church is not holy because of the good things we do for God. Rather, the church is holy because believers are clothed in the righteousness of Christ (Galatians 3:27). Through Baptism, God has made his church holy, giving to believers the holy, sinless life of Christ and the benefits of his suffering and death (Ephesians 5:25-27). The holiness of the church is not an inherent holiness, one which comes from within. It is an imputed holiness, one which comes to us from outside of ourselves. It comes through faith in Christ. Yes, God’s people do serve him with holy works (1 Peter 2:5, Romans 12:1,2). Believers’ works are holy only because they are viewed through the perfect life of Christ. Members of the church can be called saints (Ephesians 1:1) because they are counted holy for the sake of Jesus.

*The church is universal (catholic).* The word “catholic” with a small “c” means “universal.” Since Rome calls itself the Roman *Catholic* Church, we always have to explain the proper

meaning of the word “catholic.” The church embraces people from all over the world. No one is excluded because of race, ethnic origin, gender, or social standing. The gospel reaches out to all people, bringing people from all over the world, from different social standings, from different genders, to faith. Peter had to learn that God wanted the Gentiles (non-Jews) to hear the gospel. When the Lord led him to the house of Cornelius, Peter declared, “All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name” (Acts 10:43). Jesus prayed, “I pray also for those who will believe in me through their [the apostles’] message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you” (John 17:20,21).

*The church is imperishable.* The devil seeks to destroy Christ’s church. He rages against it and attacks it in every way he can. Yet, we need not fear. Jesus gives us his assurance that the devil will never succeed. Christ will protect and preserve his church through all ages. He said, “The gates of Hades will not overcome it” (Matthew 16:18). The entire book of Revelation is a carrying out of this theme. The seven different visions Christ granted John in Revelation all have the same theme: Christ will preserve his church. As Jesus said, “My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand” (John 10:27,28). What a comfort these words are. They lead us to say with Luther:

Though devils all the world should fill,  
All eager to devour us,  
We tremble not, we fear no ill;  
They shall not overpower us.  
This world’s prince may still  
Scowl fierce as he will,  
He can harm us none.  
He’s judged; the deed is done!  
One little word can fell him (CW 200:3).

*Christ’s church is the only saving church.* There is only one way to heaven, and that is through faith in Jesus Christ. Jesus declared, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). Only those who believe in Christ belong to the holy Christian church. Only those who believe in Jesus will enter heaven. Thus, Christ’s church is the only saving church. We cannot identify any visible church or denomination as the only saving church. Wherever the gospel is proclaimed, believers will be present. Those who enter heaven do so, not because they belong to any particular church body or denomination. Rather, heaven is a gift of God to those who, through faith, are members of his church.

The Roman Catholic Church has asserted that it is the only saving church. In 1302 Pope Boniface VIII declared, “We are obliged by the faith to believe and hold—and we do firmly believe and sincerely confess—that there is one Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church and that outside this Church there is neither salvation nor remission of sins” (Bettenson, *Documents of the Christian Church*, p. 159). This declaration was made by Boniface in the context of a power struggle with Philip IV (the Fair) of France. Philip had levied a tax on the clergy in France to help him pay for his conflict with Edward I of England. The French clergy appealed to Boniface,

who asserted that Philip had no authority to tax them. Boniface claimed authority over temporal kingdoms as well as over the church.

This exclusive view held sway in Rome until it was reinterpreted in the twentieth century. Father Leonard Feeny, S.J. (died 1978), insisted on a literal interpretation of the principle of exclusivity enunciated by Boniface VIII. Father Feeny's interpretation ran counter to the spirit of ecumenism rising in Rome. The Holy Office (now the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith) sent the so-called "Boston Letter" to Cardinal Richard Cushing of the archdiocese of Boston in 1949. In that letter they stated:

It is not always required that a person be incorporated in reality as a member of the Church, but it is required that the person belong to it at least in desire and longing. It is not always necessary that this desire be explicit. . . . God also accepts an implicit desire, so called because it is contained in the good disposition of soul by which a person wants his or her will to be conformed to God's will (McBrien, *Catholicism*, p. 815).

This view was reaffirmed by Vatican II's (1962–1965) "Dogmatic Constitution on the Church." There, Rome, under the leadership of Popes John XXIII and Paul VI, reasserted her view that she is the only true and saving church. Rome said:

It teaches that the Church, now sojourning on earth as an exile, is necessary for salvation. . . . Whosoever, therefore, knowing that the Catholic Church was made necessary by God through Jesus Christ, would refuse to enter her or to remain in her, could not be saved ("Dogmatic Constitution on the Church," in Abbot, *Documents of Vatican II*, pp. 32-33).

Yet, Rome also asserted:

Those also can attain to everlasting salvation who through no fault of their own do not know the gospel of Christ or his Church, yet sincerely seek God and, moved by grace, strive by deeds to do His Will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience (*Ibid.*, p. 35. For a similar statement, see also the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, p. 224, n. 847).

McBrien sums up the change in Rome's view as follows:

The understanding of the necessity of Catholicism differs from the common pre-Vatican II understanding of the Catholic Church as the "one, true Church of Christ." The deeper theological reasons for the shift in understanding are the renewed appreciation of the universal availability of grace and revelation, and the recognition that the Church (i.e., the whole Body of Christ) is composed of many churches, some of which are not in communion with the Bishop of Rome. The Catholic Church, however, retains a certain normative status in relation to other churches (McBrien, *Catholicism*, p. 736).

Some in Rome believe that there is still one true religion but that insofar as other “religions” embody authentic values and even saving grace, they do so as “anonymously Christian” communities. Rome’s view, then, has gone from *exclusivism* (where they hold they are the only saving church) to *pluralism* (where they are willing to accept a variety of beliefs as having some validity).

### **Though Invisible, the Church is not Unnoticeable**

The church is invisible. Only God can look into a person’s heart to see if that person has faith in Christ. Yet, though the church is invisible, we can find where it is present. The means by which the presence of the church is identified are the means by which God produces the church. These means are the gospel and the sacraments. Where the gospel is proclaimed, where the sacraments are administered, there we are assured we will find believers. The gospel has the power to change hearts (Romans 1:16). Where it is proclaimed, there we are assured God is at work bringing people to faith (Isaiah 55:10-11). We, then, call the means of grace *the marks of the church*, because they indicate to us where the church is to be found.

Further, where you find believers, you will find fruits of their faith. You will find people holding to Christ and his Word in faith. Jesus said, “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples” (John 8:31). You will find people confessing their faith in Christ. This is a natural fruit of the Christian’s faith. As the apostles said, “We cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:20). Where the church is present, we will find people holding to Christ in faith and confessing their faith in him.

We call a visible gathering of people around the gospel “the visible church” because of the believers in their midst. This is not a church apart from the invisible church. Those believers in a visible gathering are members of the invisible church. That visible gathering of people around the gospel is called “church” for the sake of the believers in their midst. Yet, we are also aware of the fact that there are hypocrites in visible gatherings of people around the gospel. Jesus told the parable of the weeds among the wheat (Matthew 13:24-30,36-43) to illustrate that unbelievers will be present in visible gatherings of people around the gospel. They will pretend to be Christians, but they mask their unbelieving hearts by a pretense of Christian faith. That is why the Christian life cannot be an infallible mark for identifying the presence of the church, for the Christian life can be imitated. Ananias and Sapphira tried to imitate the Christian life. However, they were hypocrites whom the Lord exposed in the early church (Acts 5:1-11).

Hypocrites will be present in the visible church. Yet, they are not part of the invisible church. Since they have no faith, they do not belong to Christ’s church, even if they are associated with a group of believers who gather around the gospel.

Concerning these matters our Confessions state:

However, the church is not only an association of external ties and rites like other civic organizations, but it is principally an association of faith and the Holy Spirit in the hearts of persons. It nevertheless has its external marks so that it can be recognized, namely, the pure teaching of the gospel and the administration of the

sacraments in harmony with the gospel of Christ (Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article VII/VIII:5).

Although hypocrites and wicked people are indeed associated with this true church according to the external rites, nevertheless when the church is defined, it must be defined as that which is the living body of Christ and as that which is the church in fact as well as in name (Apology, Article VII/VIII:12).

Nor indeed are we dreaming about some platonic republic, as some have slanderously alleged. Instead, we teach that this church truly exists, consisting of true believing and righteous people scattered through the entire world. And we add its marks: the pure teaching of the gospel and the sacraments (Apology, Article VII/VIII:20).

Therefore in accordance with the Scriptures we maintain that the church is, properly speaking, the assembly of saints who truly believe the gospel of Christ and have the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, we admit that in this life many hypocrites and wicked people, who are mixed in with these, participate in the outward signs. They are members of the church according to their participation in the outward signs and even hold office in the church. Nor does this detract from the efficacy of the sacraments when they are distributed by the unworthy, because they represent the person of Christ on account of the call of the church and do not represent their own persons, as Christ himself testifies [Luke 10:16], “Whoever listens to you listens to me” (Apology, VII/VIII:28).

### **The Outward Form of a Christian Assembly May Vary, but Wherever the Marks of the Church are Present, the Church is Present**

The Lord wants Christians to gather together around the means of grace. The writer to the Hebrews wrote, “And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing” (Hebrews 10:24,25). We gather together around the means of grace to spur one another on toward love and good works. Christians benefit from their association with other Christians. When you start a charcoal fire in a grill, you don’t separate the pieces of charcoal from each other. Rather, you pile them together. In that way, the heat from one will set fire to another. So also, Christians encourage each other with the gospel in the Word and in the sacraments.

The forms in which believers gather together around the Word and sacraments will vary. The primary form in which the church gathers is the local congregation. The local congregation carries out the most comprehensive program of work. Here the Word of God is proclaimed and taught regularly in church services, Bible classes, and programs of Christian education. Believers gather together for worship and mutual encouragement. The sacraments are regularly administered. The sick and shut-ins are visited. People reach out to bring others the gospel of Christ.

Our Lord did not, however, command any particular form in which the church was to gather. He left that up to his people to decide in Christian freedom. He simply gave the church the

commission to proclaim the gospel and to administer the sacraments. How, or in what form, they did this, he left up to the church's discretion. Thus we find, in the early church, Christians gathering together with other Christians from other areas to carry out Christ's commission. The believers in Jerusalem and Antioch had close contact with each other. The church at Jerusalem sent Barnabas to Antioch. Barnabas brought Paul from Tarsus (Acts 11:19-26). The church at Antioch then sent Paul and Barnabas out on Paul's first missionary journey (Acts 13:2,3). The council at Jerusalem involved people from the church at Antioch as well as people from the church in Jerusalem (Acts 15). The churches in Galatia, Macedonia, and Achaia joined in a collection to help the poor in Jerusalem (1 Corinthians 16:1-4).

These early gatherings of Christians from different areas, who united to carry out Christ's commission, were forerunners of our modern-day synods. A synod is an assembly of Christians, from different congregations, from various areas, who unite to carry out the work Christ gave to his church. Since the marks of the church (the gospel in the Word and in the sacraments) are present, a synod is also church. A synod will pool the resources of the collective membership in the interest of carrying out Christ's commission. A synod will engage in activities such as beginning home and foreign missions. What a small group of people may not be able to do on their own, a larger group of people will be able to do. Training future pastors and teachers is also the work of a synod. If each congregation trained its own church workers, they would find that the quality of training would suffer. Thus, believers pool their resources to fund worker-training schools where they can give future workers the best training they can possibly give them.

Other forms in which the church may gather are area Lutheran high school associations, an association to run a Lutheran college, institutional ministries, Bible camps, groups which provide radio or TV services, the old Synodical Conference (1871–1967), and the Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Conference (founded in 1993). All are believers gathered around the gospel. Where the marks of the church are present, the church is present.

There are some who have maintained that the only visible form of the church which God instituted is the local congregation. They say that any other assembly or association of Christians, such as a synod, is merely a human arrangement. Some in the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod and the Lutheran Churches of the Reformation have taught this error. It is an error, because any group of believers gathered together around the means of grace is church.

### **God Builds and Nurtures the Church through the Means of Grace**

Christ has given his church the commission, “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19,20). Christ, as the head of the church, sends out believers to bring to the world the good news about Jesus. It is through the proclamation of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments that Christ builds and preserves his church. Wherever the gospel is proclaimed, there God is at work reaching people to bring them to faith in Christ (Isaiah 55:10,11).

God builds his church through the means of grace. There is always a temptation to achieve large growth in the numerical membership of the church through a “quick fix.” Certainly we can make use of different methods of presenting the gospel. We also will not want to place obstacles in the

way of bringing the gospel to people. Yet, we must be careful that we do not rely on something other than the means of grace to build and nurture the church. It is in this connection that we want to look at the Church Growth Movement. Church Growth, as a movement, involves more than evangelism. It covers such areas as church planting, church diagnosis, assimilation, nurture, spiritual gifts, and small group diagnosis.

The father of the Church Growth Movement is Donald McGavran, a Disciples of Christ missionary for the United Christian Missionary Society in India. He died in 1990 at the age of 92. McGavran had noticed that a few congregations in central India were growing at a rapid rate while others were growing slowly or not at all. He wanted to know why this was happening. His answers led him to found the Church Growth Movement. In 1961, McGavran resigned from the United Christian Missionary Society. He founded the institute for Church Growth at Northwest Christian University in Eugene, Oregon. In 1965, he moved the Institute to Pasadena, California, at the invitation of Fuller Theological Seminary. There McGavran became the dean of a separate graduate school, Fuller Theological Seminary School of World Missions.

The first six faculty members at this school have contributed to the body of Church Growth material. Arthur Glasser served under the China Inland Mission. Edward Orr was an evangelist from England. Alan Tippet was an Australian, who had 20 years of missionary experience in the Fiji Islands. Charles Kraft had years of mission experience in Nigeria. Ralph Winter was a missionary to Guatemala. C. Peter Wagner was a missionary to Bolivia.

In 1972, the Church Growth Movement underwent a major change in emphasis. Up until that time, the focus was mainly on world missions. Church Growth leaders, such as C. Peter Wagner, began asking the question whether the same principles of Church Growth which seemed to work on foreign fields would also work in North America. McGavran and Wagner held a seminar, teaching the principles of Church Growth to 25 pastors and lay people at the Lake Avenue Congregational Church in Pasadena, California. The seminar met with such enthusiastic response that the Church Growth Movement switched its major emphasis from foreign fields to domestic fields.

Today the leading Church Growth figures are C. Peter Wagner, Win Arn (evangelism leader for the Evangelical Covenant Church; founder of the Institute for American Church Growth), Carl George (head of the Charles E. Fuller Institute of Evangelism and Church Growth), Waldo Werning (a LCMS man known for his work in the area of stewardship but also the author of a book on Church Growth), and Lyle Schaller (a writer, parish planner, church consultant, and resource leader for Church Growth workshops).

There are some things in the Church Growth writings of McGavran which may be useful. He has a great deal of experience from which he can offer practical suggestions to deal with mission problems in an effective way. We would not say it is wrong to employ strategies to reach people with the gospel. The apostle Paul employed a strategy in his missionary journeys. He preached the gospel first in the synagogues. If they rejected his message, he then went to the Gentiles. He went to where the people were. He didn't just go into a town, find a space for a church, hang out a sign which said "You all are welcome," and then sit down and wait for the people to come. As

we share the gospel, it is appropriate that we devise strategies by which we can best reach people with the gospel.

Yet, the Church Growth movement has the spirit of Reformed theology. Thus, there are a number of theological weaknesses of which we need to be aware (See Valleskey, “The Church Growth Movement,” pp. 102-110).

1. Doctrinal pluralism. While the Church Growth writers will hold a certain number of doctrines to be fundamental (there can be no salvation without them), they are willing to compromise on those doctrines which they do not deem to be fundamental. They will agree to disagree in those areas.
2. They do not give the means of grace their proper due. They do not connect the Holy Spirit’s work with the means of grace. Baptism is looked on as an act of obedience and the Lord’s Supper is viewed as a memorial meal.
3. Decision theology. The Arminian emphasis on free will is evident. Only in Lutheran Church Growth material will you find this emphasis absent. The goal of Church Growth is to persuade people to accept Jesus. They emphasize the powers of persuasion, not the power of the gospel.
4. Church Growth has a faulty understanding of sin and grace, law and gospel. The Church Growth Movement stresses the *felt needs* approach to evangelism. According to this approach, you look for needs the church can fill for people, such as loneliness, grief, alienation, poverty. You then fill the need in order to generate a positive response to the gospel. When this approach is used, sin is minimized. The real law, which exposes the depths of human depravity, is ignored. The grace of God is obscured when the unconditional gospel is presented as conditioned on human response. The real gospel, which proclaims the good news of free and full salvation in Christ, is obscured or lost.

In conclusion, when reading Church Growth literature, one must carefully sift the wheat from the chaff. Sociological research and principles do not build the church. Only the Holy Spirit, through the means of grace, builds the church. We need to test methods on the basis of Scripture, not on the basis of visible results.

### **What Constitutes an *Orthodox* Church?**

An *orthodox* church is a “right-teaching” church. What determines if a church is a “right-teaching” church? Scripture indicates there are three standards. The church must teach all of God’s Word, no more, no less. It must administer the sacraments in accordance with Scripture. It must practice doctrinal discipline, so that its practice agrees with its profession of faith. A *heterodox* or wrong-teaching church is one which adds to God’s Word or takes away from God’s Word. It does not administer the sacraments as Christ instituted them. It does not discipline those who teach false doctrine, thus creating a difference between its profession of faith and its practice.

In the first place, the church must teach all of God's Word, no more, no less. Jesus said, "Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, . . . teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19,20). He condemned the teachers of the law for adding to Scripture by placing their own interpretations of the law on the same plane as God's law (Matthew 15:9). The book of Revelation closes with this warning: "I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds anything to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book. And if anyone takes words away from this book of prophecy, God will take away from him his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book" (Revelation 22:18,19).

When church bodies add their own laws or doctrines to what God has said in the Bible, they identify themselves as false-teaching churches. When they indicate they don't think all doctrines of Scripture are important, that some can be dispensed with, and that we can agree to disagree on some teachings of Scripture, they identify themselves as false-teaching churches. It is the Bible alone that can establish a doctrine. Those church bodies which teach contrary to Scripture are false-teaching church bodies.

Secondly, an orthodox church body will administer the sacraments as Christ instituted them. When church bodies turn Baptism and the Lord's Supper into sacrificial acts which we must perform simply because God said so, they indicate they are false-teaching churches. When church bodies deny the real presence of Christ's body and blood in the Lord's Supper, or administer the Lord's Supper in a way not in accordance with Christ's institution, they identify themselves as false-teaching churches.

Finally, when a church body does not discipline those who teach false doctrine, they identify themselves as false-teaching churches. Jesus warned against false prophets (Matthew 7:15). Paul left Timothy in Ephesus so he could "command certain men not to teach false doctrines any longer" (1 Timothy 1:3). He told the Christians in Rome not to join in expressing their faith with those who created divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine they learned (Romans 16:17). Paul frequently warned against false teachers (2 Corinthians 11:13; Titus 1:10,11; 2 Corinthians 11:3). The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America permits people in their midst to deny the physical resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. If a church, in a published confession, states it believes in Christ's resurrection, but permits people in their midst to deny Christ's resurrection, it identifies itself as a false-teaching church.

How do we find a "right-teaching" church? We look at the church's published confessions. It is not enough to say, "The Bible is my confession." The question is, "What do you say the Bible says?" Churches must state what they say the Bible says, so we can compare what they say to what the Bible actually says. If a church's confession does not agree with Scripture, then it is a false-teaching church.

We adhere to the Lutheran Confessions as published in the Book of Concord of 1580. The three confessions which are common to all who call themselves Christians are the Apostles', Nicene, and Athanasian Creeds. The six distinctly Lutheran Confessions are: Luther's Small Catechism (1529); Luther's Large Catechism (1529); the Augsburg Confession (the unaltered Confession of 1530; Philip Melancthon, a co-worker of Luther's, made some changes in this confession to

make it possible for the Reformed to accept it. We reject those changes.); the Apology (defense) of the Augsburg Confession (1531); the Smalcald Articles (1537) (with Melanchthon's treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Papacy); and the Formula of Concord (1577). These are the Confessions to which we subscribe. In addition, from time to time, we have added other doctrinal statements to state our position on matters not treated specifically by the Lutheran Confessions, such as inspiration, abortion, and the roles of men and women.

False-teaching churches teach contrary to God's Word, add to God's Word, or take away from God's Word. They do not administer the sacraments in accord with Christ's institution. They live or teach contrary to God's Word, or they permit false teachers to promote error in their midst. A right-teaching church teaches all of the Word of God, no more, no less. It administers the sacraments as Christ instituted them. It practices doctrinal discipline so that its practice agrees with its profession.

### **Are there Christians in False-Teaching Churches?**

Wherever the gospel is proclaimed, there we will find believers (Isaiah 55:10,11). Thus, we will find believers also in false-teaching churches. As long as the church accepts the triune God as the only true God, as long as they proclaim Jesus Christ as the Son of God and the Son of Man, as long as they teach that Jesus died to pay for our sins and rose again from the dead, there will be believers in that church. God will be at work bringing people to faith through that gospel.

There will be believers in that church, not because of the error of that church, but in spite of it. Error is never helpful to faith. It is always harmful to faith. Error undermines faith. Every error will ultimately have a detrimental effect on the central doctrine of the Christian faith, that we are saved by grace alone through faith in Jesus Christ. When people deny the inerrancy of Scripture, they ultimately will undermine what Scripture teaches about Jesus Christ, who is the center of Scripture.

Thus, we will not join a church which teaches or tolerates error in its midst. We do not join it as a testimony against their error. We do not join it lest we cause people to stumble in their faith, giving the impression that their error is not objectionable. We do not join it lest we expose ourselves to error which could destroy our faith. People have often accused us of saying that we are the only ones who are going to heaven. We do not teach this. We believe that all who believe in Jesus Christ as their Savior from sin will go to heaven. Yet, in obedience to our Savior and in love for the souls of those threatened by error, we do not join churches which teach or tolerate error.

### **Conclusion**

As we gather together to celebrate this seventh triennial convention of the CELC, we thank God for his many blessings upon us. We thank God as individuals that "the Holy Spirit has called me by the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith." We further thank God that "in the same way he calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith" (*Luther's Catechism*, p. 5). We jointly thank God for salvation through faith in Christ, for the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and for the active and passive obedience of Christ by which he won our salvation.

We thank him for the means of grace through which he builds and preserves his church. We thank him for giving to us and preserving for us the true teaching of His Word. That we possess this today is not a matter of our doing, but is purely a gift of God's grace.

As we face the future, we are small in number, frail because of our own weaknesses, hated by the world, harried by the devil, and often immobilized by our own fears. Still, we are encouraged to go forward by the words of Jesus: "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

Armed with the promises of Christ, we join the hymn writer and confess:

The Church's one foundation Is Jesus Christ, her Lord;  
She is his new creation By water and the Word.  
From heav'n he came and sought her To be his holy bride;  
With his own blood he bought her, And for her life he died.

Elect from ev'ry nation, Yet one o'er all the earth;  
Her charter of salvation: One Lord, one faith, one birth.  
One holy name she blesses, Partakes one holy food,  
And to one hope she presses, With ev'ry grace endued.

The Church shall never perish. Her dear Lord to defend,  
To guide, sustain and cherish, Is with her to the end.  
Though there be those that hate her And strive to see her fail,  
Against both foe and traitor She ever shall prevail.

Though with a scornful wonder The world sees her oppressed,  
By schisms rent asunder, By heresies distressed,  
Yet saints their watch are keeping; Their cry goes up, "How long?"  
And soon the night of weeping Shall be the morn of song.

Mid toil and tribulation And tumult of her war  
She waits the consummation Of peace forevermore  
Till with the vision glorious Her longing eyes are blest  
And the great Church victorious Shall be the Church at rest. (CW 538)

*Sola Gloria Dei!*

## Works Cited

- Abbot, Walter. *Documents of Vatican II*. Kansas City, MO: Angelus Press, 1966.
- Bettenson, Henry. *Documents of the Christian Church*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1943.
- Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1994.
- Christian Worship*. Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1993.
- Kolb, Robert, and Timothy Wengert, *The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000.
- Kuske, David P. *Luther's Catechism*. Revised edition. WELS Board for Parish Services, 1998.
- Lange, Lyle. *God So Loved the World*. Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2005.
- McBrien, Richard. *Catholicism*. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1994.
- Valleskey, David. "The Church Growth Movement: An Evaluation." *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, 88:2 (Spring 1003), pp. 83-123.

## Discussion Questions

1. What dangers do we face if we do not focus all of our doctrinal teaching on Christ?
2. What confidence do we have when we proclaim the gospel of Christ crucified and risen from the dead? Relate incidents from your own lives and ministries where you have seen the evidence of God's promise (Isaiah 55:10, 11) fulfilled.
3. People often say of churches in our fellowship, "You people think you are the only ones going to heaven." Could we ever give that impression? How would you respond to this charge?
4. God builds the church through the means of grace. We use different strategies to bring the gospel to others. What works in one area may not work in another. Share the strategies that you use in your area of ministry to bring the gospel to others.
5. Discuss the importance of exercising doctrinal discipline in a church.
6. What temptations may we face when we consider the small number of people in our church bodies? What are the antidotes for these temptations?
7. What are the blessings we possess from being churches that hold to the Lutheran Confessions?