

Church and Church Government.

Lecture delivered by Prof. F. Pieper.

The right doctrine of church government is of great practical importance. Much harm has been done to the church by false church government. King Frederick William IV of Prussia said of one form of church government, the form of the state church, that if the church were mortal, it would have long since perished under the government of the state.

The correct doctrine of church government is now a well-known truth among us, and church practice is generally in agreement with the correct doctrine. Nevertheless, it should not be superfluous for us to recall the main features of the doctrine of church government in our general assembly. The fertile ground for false church government, the corrupt human heart, is still present among us. Then the consideration of what right church government is leads us right into the heart of Christian doctrine. Here, too, we immediately see what Christ, the gospel and the Christian church are. Here, too, we will find ample reason to praise the grace of God that has been bestowed upon us.

Just as everything that belongs to the realm of Christian doctrine is extremely simple, so is the doctrine of church government. The contrary is not proved by the fact that there has been much controversy about it within the Church to this day. After all, there is no Christian doctrine, not even a so-called central doctrine, such as the doctrines of justification and of the person and work of Christ, which has not been made difficult and obscure by human artifice. In particular, the human interest in justifying existing abuses plays a major role in the doctrine of church government, [<page 28>](#) and one which clouds Christian knowledge.

The right starting point for the exposition of the doctrine of church government is the doctrine of the church. How and by what means the Church is to be governed is best understood when one knows and establishes what the Church, whose government is at issue, is.

What is the Church? The Church is the believers, or what is the same: the Christians, the children of God. The church is the people whom Christ has called out of the world through the gospel, justified by faith and endowed with all the spiritual goods he has acquired. They are the people in whose hearts the Holy Spirit, indeed the whole Holy Trinity, dwells, who cling in faith to Christ as their spiritual head and are his spiritual body. These people — and no others — are the Christian Church. Whoever does not have the Spirit of Christ is not his. The believers, and only the believers, are the church. Therefore, the means of government for the Christian church is not external force and external coercion, not human commandments, not human wisdom, cleverness, skill, prestige, etc., but only God's Word. Christians, the children of God, cannot and should not be governed by anything other than the Word of their Lord and Savior, by God's Word. Luther says succinctly: "Christians cannot be governed by anything other than the Word of God." ([S/L X, 406](#)) And a little more detailed: "This is called

the church office or church government: such a government, where one has the Word alone, and thus governs, that one needs no power, nor lays hands, nor seeks any power or sovereignty over others. Why is this? Because God wants to preserve and govern His Church by His Word alone and not by human power.” ([StL XIII, 1239](#)) Men can only come into consideration in the government of the church insofar as they proclaim and lead Christ's Word. Luther says of the “priests and bishops”: “Their government is nothing other than to drive God's Word so that Christians may lead and overcome heresy.” ([StL X, 406](#)) The scepter of Christ's kingdom here on earth does not emanate from Rome, nor from the green tables of the consistorial councils and other so-called ecclesiastical superiors, but the scepter of Christ's kingdom emanates from Zion, the sanctuary of God.

Christ Himself decided the whole question of church government when He said: “One is your Master, Christ; but you are all brethren”, Matt. 23:8. Here it is stated as clearly as possible, and as definitely as possible, that there is only one reigning Lord in the Church. [Page 29](#) That is Christ. Luther says: “We (Christians) have one Lord, who is Christ, who governs our souls.” ([StL IX, 1103](#)) Everything that is not Christ has nothing to rule and command in the church. The Church is the strictest monarchy, that is, a kingdom in which there are not several or many, but only one ruler. “One is your Master, Christ.” As far as the relationship of Christians to one another is concerned, they are “brothers”. There is no superordination or subordination among them. Rather, they are all subordinate to one another. They form, says the blessed Dr. Walther, a “great holy brotherhood”, in which there are neither those who dominate nor those who obey. “You shall not be called rabbis”, Matthew 23:8, “The worldly princes rule, and the rulers have authority. It shall not be so among you”, Matthew 20:25-26. But Christ, the only ruler, exercises his office of ruler and government through His Word, as he gave it to the church in the Holy Scriptures and commanded it to teach it to the end. Just as he gathers his church through his word and continually fills it with spiritual life, he also rules it through his word. And so that he retains sole dominion and human dominion does not creep in on the side — because he uses people to proclaim his word — he commands all those who open their mouths to speak in the church to speak only God's Word and not their own. “If anyone speaks, let him speak as the word of God”, 1 Peter 4:11. Thus Christ remains the one “Master”, and the Christians “brethren”.

If we hold that Christians are to be governed solely by God's Word from the clear Scriptures, then all the great and small hierarchical edifices that have been erected in the church collapse. The whole endless dispute about the hierarchy of persons and offices in the Church, especially the dispute as to whether there is a special office of government in the Church instituted by God in addition to the office of the Word, has been brought to an end and rendered irrelevant by the fact that we hold to this position: No man, whoever he may be, has anything to say for himself in the Church. Christ has closed the mouths of all of them — as far as their own areas are concerned — when he himself says: “One is your Master, Christ” etc., and through the apostle Peter: “If anyone speaks, let him speak as the word of God.” Here it is not only the pope's crown that is at stake, but also all the “ecclesiastical superiors” in the so-called Protestant church.

But one interjects: there are things to be ordered in the church that the Master, Christ, has not ordered in His Word. Indeed there are! These are the so-called indifferent things (adiaphora), e.g. the time and outward form [page](#)

[30](#)> of the service, the connection of the congregations to synods, and so on. Who is to make the necessary arrangements here? Christ has already indicated this very clearly with his words: “You are all brothers”. In any case, these things are not to be ordered in such a way that some impose or command them on others, whether the former be pastors or synods, for this would again abolish the principle of the church: “Ye are all brethren” and the church would again be divided into two unequal masses of people, into masters who command and servants who submit. There remains only one way of ordering the middle things that does not contradict the fundamental law of the Church. This is the way of free agreement among all those involved. The Christians of the individual congregations arrange these things themselves, as seems to them to be most profitable according to time, place and opportunity. They take advice, sometimes a lot of advice. In particular, they seek advice from their official counselor, the pastor of the congregation. With regard to church customs, they also try to maintain the outward connection with the old church as far as possible, as well as to come into the closest possible conformity with the orthodox sister congregations of the present. But everything that Christ himself has not commanded is to be left to their Christian judgment and their free decision. If differences of opinion remain here, the minority gives way to the majority, or the majority to the minority, as love demands. Here is a wide field for the submission in love which the Holy Scriptures so often inculcate in Christians. Thus Christians remain brothers in the order of the indifferent things.

It is common knowledge among us that this and nothing else is the teaching of Luther and our church on the order of indifferent things. Luther famously says: “Neither the pope, nor a bishop, nor any man, has power to decree a syllable over a Christian man, unless it be by his will; and what happens otherwise is done by a tyrannical spirit.” ([StL XIX, 68](#)) The Formula of Concord states: “We believe, teach, and confess, that the church of God, in every place and at all times, hath opportunity, according to good judgment, power, and authority, to alter, diminish, and increase the same” (namely, those things not commanded by God) “without levity and vexation, in an orderly and due manner, as is at all times deemed most useful, conducive, and best for good order, Christian discipline and discipline, evangelical prosperity, and for the edification of the church. “ (Müller, p. 698 f. [[Trigl. 1055, 9](#)])

It has been said in more recent times that our confession leaves the question of church government open, or at least almost open. Others have [<page 31>](#) expressed themselves thus: there is no positive doctrine of church government in the Lutheran Confessions. This is a great error. In our Confessions the concept of government in the church is very sharply defined, both positively and negatively. It is repeatedly insisted that all government in the church takes place solely through God's Word, and every form of government that offers Christians anything beyond God's Word is rejected. If these truths remain untouched, then of course our fathers wanted to send themselves into every external order of things for the sake of love and peace. As is well known, the papists demanded the power to make statutes for their bishops in the Church, invoking scriptural passages such as Luke 10: “He who hears you hears me”; Heb. 13: “Obey your teachers and follow them”, etc. [[Trigl. 449](#)] Our confession answers this by saying that in these and similar passages of Scripture, obedience is demanded of preachers if and insofar as they present God's Word, but not if they want to make doctrines at their own discretion. The words of our confession are well known:

“It is also certain that this word of the Lord Christ, Luke 10: ‘He who hears you hears me’, does not speak of human ordinances, but is strictly against them, for the apostles did not receive there a *mandatum cum libera*, that is, a completely free, unmeasured command and authority, but have a measured command, namely, not to preach their own word, but God’s Word and the gospel. ... Therefore this word (he that heareth you, heareth me) cannot be understood of ordinances. For Christ wants them to teach in such a way that Christ himself may be heard through their mouths. So they must not preach their own word, but his word, his voice and gospel, should be heard. This comforting word, which most strongly confirms our doctrine and contains much needed teaching and consolation for the Christian conscience, is what the coarse donkeys apply to their foolish statutes, their food, drink, clothing and such childish works. They also cite this saying, Heb. 13: ‘Obey those who deceive you. This saying demands obedience to the gospel. For it does not give the bishops their own rule or authority apart from the gospel.” And to the passage in Matthew 23: “The scribes sit in Moses’ seat. All therefore whatsoever they say unto you, that ye shall observe, observe and do”, our Confession, etc., remarks: ‘Neither doth this saying establish a rule apart from the gospel; therefore they cannot prove their authority, which they have established apart from the gospel, by the gospel, for the gospel speaketh not de traditionibus’ (of the ordinances of men), ‘but of the word of God to teach’ (Apology, Art. 27 [28?]. Müller, p. 289 f. [[Trigl. 449](#)]) So much does our Confession inculcate the divine truth, <page 32> that no man has anything to command another in the church, that it also denies the apostles the authority to command anything that Christ did not speak and command through them. It says in the Smalcald Articles: “It cannot be said with any truth that Peter had some authority over the church and all other ministers before other apostles. For thus he says: ‘It is all yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas,’ that is, neither Peter nor other ministers of the Word may ascribe to them any authority or supremacy over the church. Let no one encumber the church with his own statutes, but let it be said here that no authority or authority is more valid than the Word of God”. (Müller, p. 330 [[Trig. 507](#)]) Chemnitz remarks that the apostles would have torn their clothes in horror if someone had wanted to ascribe to them the authority “to give laws of which they had no commandment or testimony of the divine word”. (*Examen, de bonis operibus, Genevae* 1668, p. 179)

It has been said that the government of the church by the word of God alone is quite good in theory. But in practice the situation is different. Where do we have such people who submit to God’s Word and are willing to be subject to one another in things that God has not commanded? Of course, the pope will not make such people. Neither will emperors and kings. Nor will episcopal decrees and synod resolutions. Even Moses won’t do it. But the one who brings it about is the Church. The Lord Christ makes such people through His Word and the Holy Spirit. And Christians — all Christians — are such people. Here we come back to the right concept of the church, whose government we are dealing with. What belongs to Christ can also be governed by Christ’s word. This is what the Lord Christ Himself says when He says in John 8: “He who is of God hears the word of God.” Those who do not allow themselves to be governed by God’s Word are the enemies of Christ and His Church, as the Lord Christ immediately adds with regard to the Pharisees: “Therefore you do not listen” — namely to God’s Word — “for you are not from God.” We let them go. In his exposition of

church government by God's Word alone, Luther also repeatedly raises the objection that there is a lack of people for such a government. He prefaces this with: "There is no ruler among Christians except Christ himself and Christ alone. And what kind of supremacy can there be, since they are all equal and have the same right, power, property and honor; moreover, no one desires to be the superior of another, but each desires to be the inferior of the other" (according to 1 Peter 1:5: 'Be ye all subject one to another')? "If, where there are such people, one could not set up a supremacy, even if one would like to do so, <Page 33> because it does not suffer the kind and nature to have superiors, since no one wants to or can be a superior . " Luther continues: "But where there are no such people, there are no true Christians. ... Christians must be governed by faith, not by outward works. Faith, however, cannot come by the word of man, but only by the word of God, as St. Paul says in Romans 10:17: "Faith comes by hearing, but hearing comes by the word of God. Those who do not believe are not Christians, nor do they belong to the kingdom of Christ, but to the kingdom of the world, to be forced and ruled by the sword and outward rule. Christians do all good of their own accord and without constraint, and have enough for themselves in God's Word alone." (StL X, 406) One has again objected: But even Christians still have the flesh in them, which sets itself against the government of God's Word and never becomes pious. Indeed! But even human commandments will certainly not make the flesh pious. But if we continue to patiently instruct and admonish Christians with God's Word, then Christians will continue to crucify their flesh along with its lusts and desires and continue to submit to God's Word. The experiences we have had in this regard in our synod will be discussed later. This is how it works with God's Word, with God's Word alone, and this is how the Church is rightly governed.

After what has been said, we can now summarize in a few words what right and wrong church government consists of. Right government is that by which Christians are led by God's Word alone and everything that is not determined by God's Word is left to the freedom and good will of the Christians. Every government is wrong by which Christians are commanded — whether much or little — beyond God's Word.

If we look at history, false government has been exercised partly by the state, partly by the church and under the name of the church.

Secular authorities wanted to dictate to the church what it — the church — should profess as Christian doctrine and how it should organize church practice. This began soon after the Roman emperors converted to Christianity. This has continued in many places up to the present day. But it is fundamentally wrong! The bodily things, the things that concern civil life, are subject to the secular authorities. In these things we Christians are absolutely subject to the worldly authorities, not merely out of compulsion and fear of punishment, but for the sake of conscience, because God wants it that way. <Page 34> "Let every man be subject to the authorities who have authority over him." Rom. 13:1. But Christ has not entrusted the determination of church doctrine and practice to the secular authorities, either in whole or in part. He himself wants to govern the church through His Word, as he has left it in the church. Therefore we do not accept any commandments from the secular authorities, to whom we are subject in civil matters, in ecclesiastical matters. In ecclesiastical matters we must not allow ourselves to be commanded by the secular authorities. Unless we want to fall away from Christ as our one Master. Let us beware of any form of state

ecclesiasticism! This warning is also necessary for our country. A powerful movement is currently underway to at least partially reverse the separation of church and state which, thank God, exists in this country.

Even more, a false church government has emanated from the church itself and has been exercised under the name of the church. Individuals in the church, or at least a number of them, have arrogated to themselves the right to rule the church with their own commandments.

The main abomination here is the abomination of the papacy. The pope claims to be appointed by Christ himself as the supreme leader of Christians, to such an extent that all Christians are subject to him in doctrine and life and no one can be saved who does not recognize the pope's supremacy. Christ himself, so the pope's creatures claim, has determined only a few main things; most things he has left to the church, that is, to the pope, to determine. Thus the pope rules the Church with his commandments. The bishops are only the governing bodies of the pope. And no Christian should presume to test the pope's commandments against the Holy Scriptures, because they are dark to the ordinary Christian and can only be correctly understood and interpreted by the Church, which is, after all, the "infallible" pope. This is the abomination of the Antichrist, as he is described in 2 Thess. 2, "who is an abomination and exalts himself above all that is called God or worship, so that he sits in the temple of God as a god, pretending to be God". Luther says in the Smalcald Articles how a Christian should relate to the pope and his arrogant rule: "Therefore we must not kiss his feet or say: You are my gracious Lord! but as in Zachariah the angel said to the devil: God punish you, Satan." (Müller, p. 309 [[Trigl. 477](#)])

But false church government, in so far as it is exercised under the name of the church, is not confined to the papacy.

The so-called Greek Church puts the bishops in the place of the pope. It believes that "the Holy Spirit has given the bishops to the individual churches, which [page 35](#) are true churches and truly consist of his members ... truly made them rulers and heads." (In the Greek Confession of Dositheus. Cited in Günther, *Symbolik*. Second edition, p. 340 [[1913 4th edition: p. 380-381](#)]) All believers should be subject to the rule of the bishops for the sake of conscience.

In the greater part of so-called Protestant Christendom a false doctrine of church government is held and practiced. Here we usually find the provision that the church may not establish anything that contradicts the word of God. This is the case, for example, with the Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Methodists, etc. But these same people are very crude in the ordering of things that are not commanded in God's Word. To cite just one example: they attribute to their general church assemblies the power to make ordinances to which Christians are subject for the sake of conscience. The Presbyterians' "Confession of Faith" states: "It belongs to the synods and conciliar bodies to decide officially (ministerially) disputes in matters of faith and conscience, to lay down rules and orders for the better organization of public worship and the government of the Church of God, to receive complaints in cases of bad administration and to decide on them as an authority: Which resolutions and decisions, if they be according to the word of God, are to be received with reverence and submission, not only because they agree with God's Word, but also because of the authority whereby they are made, because the same is an ordinance of God , appointed (appointed) thereto in his word ." (Confession of Faith, chap. 31)

But even in the church called Lutheran, the false church regime has

penetrated in various degrees and gradations. We emphasize here the aberration which has striven for dominance here in America and has its representatives in Germany among some of the separated Lutherans. They teach a church government instituted by God in addition to the ministry of the Word of God, which is to make ordinances for individual congregations, or a sum of congregations, to which Christians must be subject for the sake of conscience. This church government also has divine authority in cases where it does not uphold God's Word and commandment. Admittedly, the restriction is added that church government may not prescribe anything that is contrary to God's Word. But this does not improve anything. It is already against God's Word to prescribe something to Christians that God has not commanded in his word. The fourth commandment has been invoked both here in America and in Germany for the obedience that Christians supposedly owe to [page 36](#) pastors or ecclesiastical superiors in central matters. Parents could command their children to do things that are not commanded in God's Word, if only these things were not contrary to God's Word. However, pastors and other church leaders are spiritual fathers. Thus, by virtue of divine order, one owes them obedience in all things that are not commanded in God's Word, if only they are not forbidden in God's Word. This argument has deceived many sensible and wise people. But it is quite wrong and very easy to refute. What is the situation? Parents can, however, give their children commands that go beyond God's Word, because they are endowed by God with legislative authority over their children, for example when it says in Col. 3:20: "Children, obey your parents in all things." According to God's order, children are under their parents. But God has not endowed the church, or rather individual persons in the church, with legislative authority over Christians, but says here: "One is your Master, Christ; but you are all brothers." For children, however, parents are in God's place with regard to things that God has not commanded. But the superiors in the church are not in God's place in relation to Christians. All Christians are only under God without the mediation of ecclesiastical superiors. Only one is their Master, Christ; they are all equal (coordinated) brothers. Christ has left no representatives in the Church to command Christians in his stead what he has left uncommanded. Anyone who sets himself up as such a representative of Christ is interfering with Christ's rule.

It has been said: "Does it really matter so much that Christians do not allow themselves to be commanded by men in the so-called indifferent things? What's the harm in making it a duty of conscience for Christians to submit to human orders that are well-intentioned?" We have been told more than once that we spend too much time and energy defending Christian freedom.

Those who raise this objection prove their poor understanding of spiritual matters. In his letter to the Galatians, St. Paul exhorts Christians in many words to persevere in their freedom so that Christ may set them free, Gal. 5. And Luther, as a faithful disciple of St. Paul, famously says that every Christian should rather lay down his life than become subject to the commandments of men in the church. Let us briefly consider the reasons for this position.

Whoever wants to rule in the church beyond Christ's word is thereby encroaching on Christ's government and touching Christ's majesty. Christ has acquired the Church as His own with His blood, so that He [Page 37](#) is its Master, its only Lord and Ruler. Whoever now wants to command the Church apart from Christ, be it much or little, is thereby encroaching on Christ's position

as Savior and ruler. He acts as if he also died and was buried for the Christians and then rose again.

Furthermore, anyone in the church who wants to command beyond Christ's word is touching the glory of Christians, with which their Savior has crowned them. All who through faith in Christ have obtained forgiveness of sins and the sonship of God have thereby also obtained the privilege of being subject in all spiritual things only to Christ and His Word and are freed from all human ordinances. This is the glorious freedom of the children of God, which is not acquired with gold or silver, but with the precious blood of Christ and given to them through justification. If men now claim the right to govern Christians with their — men's — commandments, they thereby turn God's free children into human servants and actually accuse them of falling away from Christ as their one Lord and Master. “Dearly beloved,” says Luther, “let it not be a small thing to you to forbid where God does not forbid, to break Christian freedom which Christ has tasted blood for, to burden consciences with sin where there is none. Whoever does and may do this, may also do all evil, yes, he already denies everything that God is, teaches and does, including his Christ.” (*Against the Heavenly Prophets*, [XX, 207](#))

Furthermore: Whoever wants to rule in the church beyond God's Word, thereby causes the greatest disorder in the church. Of course, one excuses the issuing of human commandments over and above God's Word with the good intention of serving the good order in the Church and wanting to ward off the otherwise threatening disorder. A few words later on about the disorder that allegedly threatens the church if one does not intervene with human commandments. Let us first state this much: every order of things, according to which Christians are commanded to go beyond God's Word, is from the outset an abominable disorder, a complete reversal of the order of the house in the Church of Christ. The first and all-dominant paragraph in this house order is: “One is your Master, Christ; but you are all brothers.” Anyone in the Church of Christ who wants to command over and above God's Word is a revolutionary in the Church who wants to overthrow the rightly existing order, namely the sole rule of Christ. Luther calls the order in the papal church, according to which the pope and the bishops are to have the power to enact laws binding consciences in addition to Scripture, an order “against God”, indeed, “the devil's order”. ([XIX, 704](#)) [<page 38>](#) He desires “that all Christians bless themselves with all crosses for the faith who believe that the pope is right in his government”. In the same way, we call every rule in the church disorder, whereby Christians are commanded to do something beyond God's Word, whether this commandment comes from pastors, synods, a church college [*Kirchen-Collegium*], consistory, *summus episcopus* or something else.

And finally: every church government that goes beyond God's Word and interprets human statutes to Christians is detrimental to the church. Luther says of the papacy: “But how the pope ruled in the church after he had obtained this” — namely, authority over Christians — “is before our eyes.” ([XIII, 1242](#)) Yes, it is truly before our eyes. Let us be warned! Once it has been admitted that men besides Christ may exercise authority in the Church, the door is open to all false teaching and practice. Whoever has the audacity to command Christians in the so-called indifferent things will not shrink back from dictating from his head in the actual matters of faith. Indeed, he has already struck at the heart of Christians' faith by binding their consciences to something other than God's

Word. Where human statutes arise, God's Word loses its dominion. That is in the nature of things. Where people allow themselves to be commanded by men, the true Christian conscience is lost. There is no longer a sharp distinction between the word of God and the word of man, there consciences degenerate, there one loses conscience for pure doctrine. History truly speaks clearly enough here. Where has it come to under the papacy? Thither, says Luther, “that the Word of God has been lost, and the church has been turned into a worldly government, new services have been organized, and everything has been sought and contrived in order to bring money from the people and to increase the splendor of the clergy.” (XIII, 1239 f.) Where has it come to in the state churches? To the point where they are extremely indifferent to God's Word, but are all the more strict about the state church orders. As a result, a strange use of language has developed. When people in state churches talk about “those at the top”, they do not usually mean God and God's Word, but the secular regime and the ecclesiastical “superiors”. This is indicative of the state of affairs. The word of man has pushed God's Word aside. This is the terrible curse of the reversal of divine order in the Church!

How important it is therefore to adhere to the correct doctrine of church government and to attribute binding force to God's Word alone, and not to human and ecclesiastical orders.

So how is the government of the church organized in practice if it is governed only by God's Word? [<page 39>](#)

Let us first look at the only external community established by God, the local Christian congregation, [*Ortsgemeinde*], in which things are done properly. The pastor of the congregation, because he leads the Word of God by virtue of his office, naturally also governs the congregation with the Word by virtue of his office. As often as he publicly expounds God's Word from the pulpit, how it is to be held according to God's will in doctrine and life in general and in particular, he governs. When he proclaims and asserts God's Word and will in his dealings with individuals, he also governs. He governs, not for his own person, not because he is more gifted, or more learned, or more respected, but because he has to lead the Word of God by virtue of his office and insofar as he does so. Thus Luther ascribes spiritual rule to all pastors in their congregations. He writes, in contrast to the Roman delusion that the bishops and the pope are entitled to reign in the church: “So every pastor or spiritual ruler should be a bishop, that is, an overseer, a guardian, so that in his city and among his people the gospel and the faith of Christ are built up and remain against the enemies, devils and heresy.” (SL XVIII, 1283) And our Confession says: “Therefore the church can never be governed and preserved in a better way than that we all live under one head, Christ, and the bishops” (that is, pastors) “all, equally according to office, although they may be unequal according to gifts, diligently hold together in united doctrine, faith, sacraments, prayers and works of love” etc. (Smalc Art., Part II, p. 308)

The local congregation meets in congregational assemblies to carry out the things incumbent upon it, following the example of the apostolic congregations. Who rules in the church meetings? The pastor is of course also officially responsible for bringing the word of God to bear in the church meetings. So he also governs here with the Word of God. But the members of the congregation also speak in these meetings. And it is not uncommon for one or more members of the congregation to bring the word of God or the words of God, which clearly

illuminate and decide the matters under discussion. In this case, the members of the congregation in question rule. Of course, again not for themselves, but because they assert the all-governing and decisive Word of God. Christ reigns in his church through them.

Allow me to refer to a personal experience in this context. I received my first instruction on governing in the church, before all theological study, from a simple Christian. Within a congregation in Wisconsin, some Lutheran Christians were gathered in a farmhouse one [page 40](#) Sunday afternoon. Some high school students were also present. The conversation turned to church government and specifically to the question of who governed the congregation. A simple Christian expressed his astonishment as to how one could still argue about church government in the church. It was clear: “In the church, the one who has God’s Word rules. In a church meeting, those who are given by God to lead the right, decisive word of God rule.” This is how several church members governed in their last church meeting, because they led the word of God that convinced all the others.

This is how the church is governed in matters that are decided by God’s Word. It has already been explained earlier how the order of the middle things happens through mutual agreement. Only one thing should be pointed out here. The local congregation may also establish auxiliary offices for the public preaching ministry, e.g. the office of overseer. Probably all our congregations have this ecclesiastical institution. It is only necessary to ensure that the overseers are not given any authority that goes beyond God’s Word.

But what is the government of the church when the local congregations have joined together to form larger church bodies, e.g. synods? One could argue: If the church is only to be governed by God’s Word, what is the point of your whole synod institution, which, as you yourselves always emphasize, is not commanded in God’s Word? You have the connection of the congregations to synods, in which the congregations advise and supervise each other. In addition to the preaching office commanded by God, you have established other offices in your midst that are not ordained by God. You have visitors, district presidents, a general president and other synod officials. If God’s Word is sufficient for the government of the church, what is the use of these human ordinances? We answer: Certainly not as if God’s Word were not sufficient for the government of the Church and the poor, forsaken Church had to be helped up with some human ordinances. Our whole synod organization has the opposite purpose. Through it we want to help one another so that God’s Word, and nothing but God’s Word, governs us. The visitors see to it that the congregations in the visitation district assigned to them are governed by God’s Word; the district presidents have the same office in the entire district and the general president has the same office in the entire synod, subject to certain restrictions. For this reason, we do not choose visitors and presidents who are well versed in the acts and well versed in our “Synod Handbook”, but people who are well versed in the Word of God and are able to explain and apply it clearly to others in relation to [page 41](#) the circumstances at hand. The offices of oversight established by our synod order are not intended to supplement God’s Word, but to serve God’s Word so that it — God’s Word — may be heard. The purpose of our synod community is stated in our synod handbook, among other things: “Preservation and promotion of the unity of the pure confession”, “Supervision of the unity and purity of doctrine”. The purpose of the synod is not to bind the congregations beyond God’s Word

through synod resolutions. Rather, with regard to this point, the constitution of the synod states quite explicitly: “The synod is only a consultative body with regard to the self-government of the congregations [*Gemeinden*]. ... If a congregation does not find the decision (of the Synod) in accordance with the Word of God or unsuitable for its circumstances, it has the right to disregard or reject the decision.” (Synod Handbook, p. 7) The ecclesiastical institution of the synod is not intended to establish a rule alongside and beyond the Word of God, but rather the entire synod institution is to serve the sole rule of the Word of God.

Luther also speaks of offices that are established as auxiliary offices for the ministry of the Word in the church. These are the offices “which are to oversee all offices” and “see to it that all offices function properly”. He calls the offices of oversight [*Aufsichtsämter*] established in Christian freedom alongside the office of preaching also an office of government. However, he insists most emphatically that this “office of government” is not to be granted dominion. He calls it the “servant” of the preaching office [*Predigtamtes*], which is to “stimulate and awaken the preaching office, just as a servant awakens his master in his sleep or otherwise admonishes him of his office”. Of course, the preachers, although they hold the highest office in Christendom, should for their part be prepared in heartfelt humility to accept reminders and admonition from the “rulers” at all times. Here we include a longer, exquisite exposition by Luther.

Luther writes in the Church Postil on the words Romans 12:8: “If any man rule, let him rule carefully”, among other things as follows: “But how does St. Paul thus reverse the order? that he does not place ruling first and foremost, but lets prophesying come first; after that, serving, teaching, exhorting, giving; and places ruling last of all among the common offices, namely, in the sixth place. The Spirit has undoubtedly done this for the sake of the abomination to come, that the devil would establish a pure tyranny and worldly power in Christendom; As it is now the case that government is supreme, and all that is in Christendom must be governed according to tyranny and its will, and all prophecy, ministry, teaching, exhortation and giving [<page 42>](#) must perish before this tyranny is broken off, so that it can be governed according to prophecy, teaching and other offices. But we should know that nothing is higher than the word of God, which is the office above all offices; therefore the office of government is his servant, who is to inspire and awaken it, just as a servant awakens his master in his sleep, or else exhorts him to his office; so that what Christ says in Luke 22:26 may stand: 'Whosoever will be greatest among you shall be your servant; and the first shall be last.' Again, teachers and prophets should obey and follow the ruler, and also be burdened, so that all Christian works and ministries may be the servants of others; so that what St. Paul teaches in this epistle may remain. Paul teaches that no one should think himself the best, and exalt himself above others, and think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but that one office and gift may be nobler than the others, but that each one may serve and be subject to the other; thus the office of government is the least, and yet all others are subject to it, and in turn it serves all others with its care and attention. Again, wisdom is the highest, and yet follows the governor.” (*StL XII, p. 339* [§ 28; Lenker, *Sermons*, vol. 7, 32-33])

But — it is further argued — if there is no dominion of one person over another in the Church, how does the special gift of government come into its

own? After all, Christ also gives the special gift of government among other gifts in his Church. Among the many gifts with which Christ endows his church, Scripture expressly mentions the gift of government, Rom. 12:6, 8; 1 Cor. 12:28. But just as none of the many gifts in the church establishes dominion, neither does the gift of government. Individuals in the church have the gift of teaching before others, for example. They can explain more precisely and clearly than others what is true and what is false teaching. But this does not give them the slightest authority in the church. The special gift of teaching must be exercised precisely so that the teaching presented does not appear to be one's own teaching, but is recognized as the teaching of the Word of God. Individuals in the church have the gift of interpreting Scripture before others. They understand better than others how to bring the meaning of Scripture to light. But again, this does not give them any dominion in the church. The special gift of Scriptural interpretation must be exercised precisely in the fact that the interpretation presented does not appear as one's own interpretation, but is recognized as the interpretation given by Holy Scripture itself. This is also the case with the gift of government. Admittedly, individual persons in the Church know how to judge and regulate present circumstances before others. They have a special gift of government. But how [<page 43>](#page43) is this gift of government to be exercised? In such a way that it places itself entirely at the service of the Word of God, that it is used to govern the church of God with the Word of God. Those equipped with the gift of government must direct their gift so that all things that are decided by God's Word are now also decided according to the clear Word of God, and that all things that are left free in God's Word are given over to Christian freedom and ordered by Christian agreement. It has already been pointed out earlier that the Christian congregation [*Gemeinde*], when it organizes the so-called office of overseer or elder as an aid to the preaching office, does not grant this office any authority. It is a very shameful misuse of God's gift if someone uses it to rule the church of God according to his own head. Luther admonishes pastors to always study the Holy Scriptures and especially the so-called pastoral letters diligently, so that they are able to govern Christians from God's Word and “not be in need to govern Christians from their own human conceit”. (Preface to the 1st letter to Timothy [*StL 14, 121*]) We have the most horrible example of such misgovernment in the church — namely the government of Christians “out of their own conceit” — in the papacy. But every pastor, indeed every Christian, has reason to be warned against this abomination, lest he, because he has a natural talent for governing, rule in the church after his own head, and thus arrogate to himself a dominion in the church. Luther says with regard to this point following the enumeration of the offices and gifts in the church Eph. 4:11: “These are the distinct offices, and therefore the gifts must also be distinct. But for the sake of such distinct gifts and offices no one should arrogate to himself worldly authority, nor desire to rule in a worldly way. They are all bound to one another by the gospel, that they may abide by it and do nothing contrary to it. This is the right order that should be and remain in the church; and it is a far better order than that of the pope, who makes an order not of offices but of outward power, contrary to the command of Christ.” (*StL XIII, 1241*) Here are a few words about the disorder to be feared if no Christian in the Church has anything to command another and the Synod also has no legislative power. Human reason thinks that one or more in the Church must be granted the power to command over and above God's Word. Otherwise confusion would follow.

Luther also dealt with this objection. He writes: “But now someone might ask and say: What kind of government is this, and how can it exist, since there is no head, and those in office are all equal, and no one should have more authority or power than the other? [<Page 44>](#) For reason regards such equality as a deformity and a harmful thing. Again, where there is a head to whom others may look and be guided by, reason considers such an order to be useful and good, and concludes that if things are to be right in the church, they must be so, or there will be sheer confusion and disorder.” “And this is the cause,” Luther adds, “which still imprisons many sensible, wise people.” He reports that in his time there were people who did not want the pope's rule because it was “a public, irrefutable annoyance”, but who nevertheless considered order in the church necessary, “as in the secular rule, where (among the servants of the church) one is higher, has more command and greater power than the other”, in order — well, to prevent disorder. Even today there are still “many sensible and wise people”. The sects and Romanizing Lutherans still operate on the same grounds today. But let us listen to Luther with regard to this objection. He says: “It is true that reason considers it a deformity and harmful error that all who are in church offices should be equal, and that one should have as much command, power and authority as the other. ... But here we have an expressed command of our dear Lord Christ, who wants things to be different in His Kingdom, which is a spiritual kingdom, than in the worldly kingdom: so that everyone may learn how in the kingdom of Christ it is not human power or great prestige, but only the Word of God that is to apply and rule.” (StL XIII. 1240) We have already seen earlier that Christians really do submit to God's Word.

Let us look at ourselves. Our synod now has 50 years of experience with church government by God's Word alone behind it. The “sheer confusion” and “disorder” that the whole world fears with this type of government has not occurred in our case. It has also been prophesied to us, on this side and on the other side of the ocean. The statement that the synods have only “consultative”, not legislative, power over the congregations has been called the “real heart of anarchy”. The church, which does not enjoy a church government with legislative power, is like a “little plant without a supporting stake”. Confusion would soon get out of hand with our constitution. None of this has happened. In our synod, we have probably experienced the most peaceful time the Church has ever enjoyed, also in terms of external order. We have to say that the government of the church with God's Word alone has proven itself in 50 years of practice. Admittedly, the flesh of Christians has also made itself felt here. It has not always immediately submitted to the Word of God. Now and again, long negotiations, much instruction and persistent exhortation were necessary. But God's Word has always prevailed. Even in seemingly [<page 45>](#) hopeless cases, it has revealed its ruling, all-dominating power. We have been so firmly united and held together by the rule of the Word of God alone that people from afar have thought and still think that we have a High Church rule. Recently an English paper wrote that the Missourians are the High Church Party in the Lutheran Church.

I repeat it once again: the government of the church with God's Word alone and the release of everything that is not commanded in God's Word has proven itself with us. We have experienced in our synod life that the Church of God fares best when it sticks to God's order. May it never be otherwise!

Spiritual vigilance is also needed on this point. The fact that the false church

government is so common in the church points to a ground for this perversion of God's order that can still be found in all Christians. This is the evil flesh. The evil flesh, which is still found in all of us. According to the flesh, the one wants to be higher than the other and not a mere servant who serves his brother or brothers with God's Word. According to the evil flesh, the Christian does not merely want to serve the Word with his gifts, but to misuse his gifts for domination. This requires watchfulness and prayer! Furthermore: The flesh, even of Christians, does not recognize the glory of the doctrine of justification and therefore also not the freedom of a Christian. It does not recognize the spiritual nature of the Church of Christ, but always wants to confuse it with the kingdoms of this world. It does not believe in the power of the Word of God, but considers it a weak thing. Insofar as the flesh is listened to, one looks around for a stronger regiment; for a regiment whose arm one wants to strengthen by ascribing to it a power that goes beyond God's Word.

It is the same here as with the doctrine of justification. All the spiritually blind think that the door is opened to a life of sin if justification and the attainment of salvation by grace for Christ's sake are taught through faith without works. Hence the attempts all along the line of the erring communities — from the Pope's sect through all sects to the synergistic Lutherans — to include human works in the article of justification and the attainment of salvation. Only in this way would the Christian life progress. So also with church government. All those who judge according to the flesh believe that God's Word alone is not sufficient to govern the church. If the church is not to fall into disorder, authorities with legislative power must be created. Hence the whole long series of false church governments from the papacy to the American synods endowed with legislative power. But that, as I said, is the judgment of blind human reason. St. Paul says with regard to the relation of [<page 46>](#) sanctification and justification: “Sin shall not have dominion over you, because ye are not under the law, but under grace”, Rom. 6:14. Analogous to this is to be said with regard to church government: the church will not fall into disorder, but will be well governed, if it is not governed by the ordinances of men, but only by the word of its Master.

By God's grace, let us stick to this way of governing. Any temptation to deviate from it is to be recognized and rejected as a temptation of the devil. The devil deceives the church when he persuades it that it must have a power and authority in its midst that goes beyond God's Word. The church becomes weak from the moment it begins to look for human supports, in the opinion that God's Word is not sufficient as a governing and supporting power. Thus she takes flesh for her arm and departs with her heart from her one Lord. Indeed, we must say that the church abandons itself as a church and takes on the nature of worldly kingdoms as soon as it does not allow itself to be satisfied with God's Word as a means of government.

How glorious, on the other hand, is the church government that is exercised with God's Word alone! How can one find words enough to praise the glory of this church government! Christ's glory remains untouched; He remains — as it should be — the only Master. The glory of Christians remains untouched. They enjoy their high, dearly acquired privilege of being under their Savior's rule and government without the mediation of men. All the gifts that Christ bestows on His church are put to the right use; they serve only to glorify Christ, not to glorify themselves.

And the church is strong under this rule, however weak it may appear in the eyes of men. No power of the world, not even the fear of death, not even death itself can drive apart what is brought together and held together by God's Word. That we, as an ecclesial community, enjoy this marvelous, unspeakably glorious reign is such a great grace that we should praise and glorify God for it daily. How eager we should be to extend the kingdom in which Christ alone reigns through His Word! How willing we should be to put all our gifts and goods at the service of this kingdom! How easily we should be able to forget all personal offenses that we may suffer in our dealings with one another as brothers under such a glorious rule!

Oh, may God open our eyes to the glory of the church government through Christ's Word alone! Let us remain under this government by His grace until our eyes behold Him who has led us here with His Word. Amen.