

"Teach Them To Obey Everything I Have Commanded You"— Matthew 28:20

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"In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son" (He 1:1,2). With this statement from the first chapter of the letter to the Hebrews God demonstrates that the revelation of his plan of salvation is finished. He has nothing further to say about the true meaning of life, about his rescue of mankind from the slavery of sin. This is the sense of the message of the whole Old Testament, beginning with Adam and Eve: it directed believers to Christ, who would, according to God's promise, restore what humanity lost through the fall into sin. Through the prophets God described, feature by feature, the marks that would characterize the person and work of his Son, until Jesus Christ himself came and proved the truth of all Messianic prophecy. His substitutionary atonement was God's judicial verdict acquitting the whole world of sin. To the atonement God added his "Amen" in the resurrection of Jesus. Now the whole world is to hear this gospel that many may be saved, until the Lord comes again to judge the living and the dead.

Jesus called his twelve apostles to a twofold ministry—that of being his witnesses and his messengers. They were his unique instruments, called to publish among mankind "what God has prepared for those who love him." This is a message that "no eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived....but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit," as Paul writes to the Corinthians (1 Cor 2:9,10). The apostles faithfully carried out the command of their Lord, "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Mt 28:19), beginning in Jerusalem (Ac 1:8). Therefore we hear of the first Christians in Jerusalem that "those [3000] who accepted [Peter's] message were baptized....They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer" (Ac 2:41,42). This outcome of Peter's Pentecost sermon, the only result known to us, shows us not only how God's Word accomplished its purpose and brought rich blessing to many hearts, but also how the Word created and defined a new Christian life. It is one thing to *come* to saving faith in the Redeemer Jesus Christ, and something more to *remain* in faith until death, as our Lord says, "He who stands firm to the end will be saved" (Mt 10:22). Accordingly, the Lord did not command only the preaching of the gospel, but he also added, "teaching them to obey *everything* I have commanded you" (Mt 28:20).

Permit me to present, with the help of God, as the faith, doctrine and confession of our *Ev. Luth. Freikirche* (ELF - Evangelical Lutheran Flee Church), what it is that Christ commanded his church to "obey." The reader will understand that, because of the comprehensiveness of Christ's command, this presentation is in outline form only. At the same time we must also take into account the present situation within our own church and relationships with our sister churches. Jesus says quite simply, "Teach them to obey everything."

- Thesis I. Christ's commission is a command to teach, since all that we hear and know of him is doctrine.
1. This command to teach applies first to the apostles.
 2. Through the word of the apostles it is valid for all time.
 3. Therefore it is valid also in our time.
- Thesis II. Christ's commission is in essence a command to feed his flock.
1. It applies in particular to the individual servants of the Word who have been called by the congregation.

2. Yet in respect to the acceptance and further proclamation of the truth this command also obligates every member of the congregation.
- Thesis III. Christ's commission binds us to the biblical Word of God.
1. It binds us to God's Word *alone* as the sole rule and guide of all teaching and of all teachers.
 2. It binds us to the entire Word of God
 - a) because, unconditioned by time, the Word remains forever true;
 - b) because, while the gospel is indeed the decisive statement of the sinner's salvation, the gospel is neither more nor less true than every other Word of God.
- Thesis IV. Christ's commission has the character of a confession
1. because it enables us to recognize where Christ's church is;
 2. because it sets bounds; and
 3. therefore until Christ returns, his church will be and remain the church militant.

Thesis I. Christ's commission is a command to teach, since all that we hear and know of him is doctrine.

God created man in his own image to live in fellowship with him, in a near and dear relationship to him as the Creator. A creature is not only dependent on the Creator for life itself, but also for how his inward life is formed, i.e., for the process of learning. God gave man wisdom and understanding. Thus man received the ability to listen to his Maker's kind instructions and to arrange his life accordingly for the glory of God. That did not come into consideration before the fall into sin, since in the beginning Adam and Eve lived by nature in perfect harmony with God's will and knew nothing else. After the fall, however, this ability to listen to God's direction was indispensable for salvation. In constantly increasing measure and with ever greater precision God revealed his will through the prophets, above all, his purpose to save mankind. He gave to the prophets whom he called an official commission to teach. He said to Moses on the occasion of the covenant ratification at Sinai, "I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and commands I have written for their instruction" (Ex 24:12). Moses was also to announce God's promise to the people of Israel, "The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him" (Dt 18:15).

Thus at all times God speaks to men to mark out the path that leads to their salvation. For that purpose he himself called men to make his salvation known; and for the same reason it is necessary unconditionally to hear and to follow the words of his messengers. Paul sums that up in the admonition and assertion he addresses to Timothy: "But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Tm 3:14-17). Here the apostle is acting in simple obedience to Christ, his Lord and Master. He is following Christ's command, "Teach them to obey everything I have commanded you."

Because Jesus Christ as the Son of God testifies to what he has seen in the Father's presence (Jn 8:38), his Word is identical with all the words of the Holy Scriptures revealed until that time; his Word has the character of doctrine. Again and again we hear in the Gospels that Jesus *taught*. To the Jews at the Feast of Tabernacles he says, "My teaching is not my own. It comes from him who sent me" (Jn 7:16). Indeed, also his signs and wonders have the character of doctrine, though they are also instruction to create faith in him as the promised Christ and Redeemer. Their purpose is that people may believe that he, Jesus of Nazareth, is the one whom God promised and sent.

Today—and basically it was no different already in the time of the founders of our confessional Lutheran churches—we again and again hear questions like this: Must we quarrel about doctrine or about doctrinal issues? Behind such objections stands the belief that there are so many other problems and tasks that are more important than doctrine; after all, "the main thing is Jesus!" It is incomprehensible how Christians and even Christian theologians can speak with such unrealistic naiveté. Later we shall investigate the roots of such

indifference to doctrine. In any case, what Christ bequeathed to his disciples is a command to teach, a commission full of power, promise and authority.

1. Christ's command to teach applies first to the apostles.

"Teach them to obey everything I have commanded you," Jesus says, addressing his disciples. In his inconceivable mercy God comes to the aid of our inborn human unbelief and distrust. He does not keep to himself, as if it were a secret hidden beyond the clouds, his Word about the reconciliation of the world through the blood of his Son, but he confirms it through witnesses. It is important to confirm a matter among people by the testimony of two or three witnesses (Mt 18:16); Jesus called not only two or three but twelve eye- and ear-witnesses. John emphasizes the high value of such testimony: "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life.... We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ" (1 Jn 1:1,3). In his high priestly prayer the Lord prays just for these witnesses alone when he says to the Father: "I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world. They were yours; you gave them to me and they have obeyed your word.... For I gave them the words you gave me.... Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world. For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified" (Jn 17:6, 8, 17-19).

Jesus disregards any human qualifications for such witnesses. Indeed, he rejects all the standards of human philosophy for judging the qualifications of teachers (consider the high standards of classical Graeco-Roman philosophers at that time or also those of the rabbinic schools!). Christ takes his disciples into this unique ministry, to teach his good news and to live constantly in his Word, that is, to live sanctified lives. The apostles taught with unique and normative authority, setting the doctrinal standard, excluding all contrary doctrine (*norma normans*). Since such teaching is the office and work of the Holy Spirit, there can be no error either in the substance or in the manner of their teaching. The Father in heaven fulfilled the promise Jesus gave to the disciples, and to them alone, "The Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you" (Jn 14:26). Thus the word of the apostles in all its parts is God's inerrant and infallible Word. The apostles' word in the Bible does not merely by God's condescension contain his Word, as many believe. Paul too, as "one abnormally born," appeals to the fact that he, like the other apostles, has received direction and instruction from the Lord himself. Since Christ did not say, "By the power of your own understanding and diligence make the best you can of it," but rather commanded his apostles, i.e., specified for them and entrusted to them what they should teach, Paul must confess, "Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!" (1 Cor 9:16).

Therefore we must believe and follow the truth of the apostolic Word in its entirety. Any diminution of the content or of the total of the apostolic teaching means disobedience to Christ himself. To be disobedient to Christ means unbelief. Certainly, Jesus recognizes that we again and again waver and stagger, that we are disobedient and unbelieving. Therefore we can only pray with the publican in the temple, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner" (Lk 18:13), or with the father of the epileptic boy, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!" (Mk 9:24). Such a sincere confession is a return to the Lord, repentance, faith; it shows a will to trust wholly in Christ.

2. Christ's command to teach is valid through the word of the apostles for all time.

If Christ authorized his disciples in a unique manner to proclaim his truth, that is true in a very specific sense: "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." This command includes doing mission work and giving pastoral care with the Word of Christ, which creates and preserves spiritual life. When our Lord says, "Teach *them* to obey everything," the objects of the teaching are simply all the people in the

world, and especially those "who will believe in me through their [i.e., the disciples'] message," as Christ prays to the Father in John 17:20. In all ages, therefore, people must cling to this Word and let themselves be bound by it.

Again, that means the whole Word, undiminished by a single letter. "The main thing, is Jesus Christ"—certainly, since he is the central subject proclaimed by the Bible. That is why the Lord chose witnesses and messengers to proclaim him who is the Truth everywhere in this dark world until the end of time. Everything that he entrusted to his apostles they wrote down under the Holy Spirit's inspiration, so that it could be passed on to later generations. Now human beings, no matter in what age they live, can cling to that message with certainty in their hearts. It is not that they have *perhaps* been saved from their sin but that they *are saved*. For their preservation in faith, Christ's command, "Teach them to obey everything," also includes direction for a holy life in Christian freedom and separation from the ways of the world. Therefore, no matter whether the times are characterized by Christianity, atheism or any other ideology, God's Word never loses its power, validity and exclusivity; it remains the only right guide to eternal life and for Christian living. Not one word of it, not even a jot or tittle, will be abrogated, as Christ says of the revealed will of God: "Until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 5:18,19). The Word God gave through the apostles and prophets—no more and no less—remains his Word. For in Christ the prophecies which revealed God's plan of salvation come to their conclusion; he has provided everything that is necessary for our salvation. "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son" (He 1:1,2).

Only the very last day is still coming. For the redeemed the end of the world will mean passing from faith to sight. Then at last we will see the glory of Christ in his heavenly kingdom. But the world's end will mean the beginning of everlasting damnation for those who have not believed and obeyed the gospel. Until then Paul's admonition remains in effect, "We have confidence in the Lord that you are doing and will continue to do the things we command" (2 Th 3:4). Just before that the apostle urged, "So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter" (2 Th 2:15).

3. Christ's command to teach is valid also for our time.

If Christ's command through the word of the apostles remains valid for all time, naturally it is valid today. Let me, nevertheless, add a few words on that point. In theology distinct theological tendencies, or schools—since schools were created and are still created—have flourished one after another. As examples we mention Schleiermacher and his pantheism—a Weltanschauung which sets nature equal to God; Bultmann and his demythologizing—a denial of miracles; and Barth with his dialectic—one utterance means both a Yes and a No at the same time. Today, after all these theologies have blossomed and faded, we find in the theological marketplace a mixture of them all. Well adapted to the currents flowing from all these sources is today's "liberation theology." For most men, the theology of the Holy Scriptures, the doctrine of the living God and of his Christ, no longer seems to suffice to overcome the problems which oppress all humanity. Worry about this world's tomorrow increasingly leads to the secularization of theology and the church.

This fact of secularization is recognized not only in circles outside the church but also in the churches around us. The result is that biblical concepts like gospel, love and unity are taken over for man's own program of saving the world. A wide range of more or less distorted content separates the world's false "gospel"—as that term is used in its broadest sense—from the clear gospel of Christ. Thus arises confusion the like of which has never been seen in the previous history of the church—a sign of the last times, as Christ announced. Therefore, we must be especially watchful and pay close heed to the true doctrine which Christ teaches through his apostles. Just now, in a time full of sentimentality, of demolished and fluid ethical norms, a time which favors grand movements toward unification, we should listen to Peter: "We have the word of the prophets made more

certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts" (2 Pe 1:19).

Thesis II. Christ's commission is in essence a command to feed his flock.

God gave us his Word and the doctrine of his Word, and Christ commands us to teach it, i.e., to give instruction, using law and gospel, for one purpose: to bring sinners in this world to repentance and to everlasting life. He no longer sends such help just to his chosen people of Israel but to all humanity. The Word of reconciliation is preached according to Christ's mission command, and whoever believes has everlasting life, becoming a member of the Lord's body, his church. Furthermore, the Word is constantly proclaimed so that the sinner who has come to faith remains a believer until the end of his life. Jesus says, "He who stands firm to the end will be saved" (Mt 24:13). No one finds the right way by his own strength, nor can he by his own power remain obedient to the gospel unto everlasting life. The Holy Spirit "calls us by the gospel, enlightens, sanctifies and keeps us in the one true faith." This happens always and only by the grace of God in Jesus Christ. He invites and calls us with his voice, points the way, leads us onward and warns us about the dangers of error. God leads us on our way by his means of grace.

The Bible in many passages compares this to feeding a flock. God himself cites the vivid comparison: he and his people are Shepherd and flock. What Isaiah and Micah prophesied, "See, the Sovereign LORD comes with power....He tends his flock like a shepherd" (Is 40:10,11); "he will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD" (Mic 5:4)—this was fulfilled by Christ himself for all those who seek eternal comfort and salvation. Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd" (Jn 10:11). Still today he remains the invisible Shepherd of his flock. A Christian has the absolute need of being tended and led in the right way, for the danger of being fleeced or led astray is great, much greater than people will usually acknowledge. To one of his apostles the Lord himself once needed to say, "Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail" (Lk 22:31,32). That same apostle Peter now warns us, "Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour" (1 Pe 5:8). That is why the Lord instituted the shepherding office. Three times he gives the same apostle his threefold command, "Feed my sheep" (Jn 21:15ff.).

1. Christ's command, essentially a command to care for souls, applies especially to individual servants of the Word called by the congregation.

Already in the Old Testament God called certain men to feed his flock with the Word. God placed his Spirit upon the prophets and had them speak, admonish and comfort in his name. Making known the will of God was not their only task. By means of the revealed Word they were also to lead the people of Israel in God's way of salvation. Their real task was leading God's people in his right way, so that Israel might arrive at the goal and be preserved from straying on the godless path that can lead only to God's angry judgment. Unless the dangers are pointed out with proper warnings, no one can remain on God's saving way. Further, only such persons understand and truly desire the comfort of the Word who know that the Old Adam in them delights in sin and that the secular world around them stands in hostile opposition to God. Thus all human beings—this includes the godly—must rely on divine help.

Therefore it is an essential mark of a true pastor that he watches over the souls God has committed to his care. The Lord says to the prophet Ezekiel, "Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel; so hear the word I speak and give them warning from me" (Eze 3:17). If one compares the blessed promises which God gave Israel, the central promise of the Christ as well as the promises of earthly blessing, with the admonitions, warnings and threats which God spoke through the prophets, then the seriousness of the danger of straying from the right way becomes clear. We become aware not only of the danger itself but of Israel's actual and repeated falling away from God's saving way. In an age when the Lord was directly revealing his will, Israel did not want to recognize the dangers. Furthermore, false prophets lulled the people into a false security.

Therefore God did not restrict the command he gave the prophets, the shepherds of that time, to instructing the people in a minimal faith, as if they should just believe pro forma in the living God or even merely believe there is just one true and living God. The prophets were to teach the people to obey all God's commandments, the first table as well as the second. After the covenant was ratified at Sinai God commanded Moses, "You stay here with me so that I may give you all the commands, decrees and laws you are to teach them to follow in the land I am giving them to possess" (Dt 5:31). And Moses told the people, "Be careful to do what the LORD your God has commanded you; do not turn aside to the right or to the left. Walk in all the way that the LORD your God has commanded you" (Dt 5:32,33).

Now that Christ, the true Good Shepherd, has come, the gospel invitation goes out to all, Jews and gentiles. Whoever believes and is baptized is saved, but whoever does not believe is condemned. The means by which the flock is gathered and tended remain the same: God's Word. The Word must be heard, and therefore it must be preached, "Teach them to obey everything I have commanded you." The flock of Christ must be led to green pastures as the members are taught, instructed in the gospel and encouraged "to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts" (Ac 11:23)—as Barnabas said when he came to Antioch and saw that the gentiles too were being filled with the Holy Spirit.

Also for the sake of their growth in sanctification it is necessary that individual Christians, and the whole Christian congregation as well, be constantly encouraged and admonished. Paul writes to the Thessalonians: "You know what instructions we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus. It is God's will that you should be sanctified" (1 Th 4:2,3). The office of shepherding is committed to individual members of the congregation through and according to God's Word. Paul directs Timothy, "The things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others" (2 Tm 2:2). He admonishes the Ephesian elders whom he has summoned to Miletus, "Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood" (Ac 20:28).

The office of pastor today is essentially a teaching office. Caring for souls is indeed nothing but confirming believers in faith, leading them to repentance—all by means of the Word of God. Therefore the pastor administers his office properly only when he holds to everything that Christ has commanded. Human qualifications are of little importance here, since what is involved is passing on the Word of God with which the church has been entrusted. Naturally, because the Word is to be spoken, those who preach it must speak intelligibly; as Paul said, they must be "qualified to teach others." Yet as far as the presentation of the message of Christ as such is concerned, people cannot by nature grasp the mystery of Christ. Understanding is and remains God's gift. God has not committed the gospel to natural man. Thus he also does not submit it to any human evaluation, whether the evaluator be a member of the congregation, a pastor, an elder, or the congregation as a whole. Only the Holy Scriptures, together with the sacraments of Christ, are the authorized means for feeding the flock. Of course, pastor and people will accompany the preaching of the Word with constant prayer and intercession.

Christ's command to feed the flock must indeed be carried out under the difficulties peculiar to each age: poverty or wealth, war or peace, false doctrines of the early Christian centuries, of the Middle Ages, of modern times. The enemy of God skillfully adjusts his tactics to the mentality of the current age. Yet Christ's command remains the same for his disciples and through them for the pastor today: "Teach them to obey everything I have commanded you." The servant of God's Word who would serve according to the Word must take to heart Paul's charge to Timothy, "Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage - with great patience and careful instruction" (2 Tm 4:2). In the following verses the apostle gives the reason for his charge: "The time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths." Preaching on selected topics that itching ears today desire to hear in order to avoid stepping on people's toes and to allow them the broadest possible range of religious opinion—that is not leading the members of the flock according to the will of Christ but

simply misleading them. The large churches around us bear eloquent witness to this. The world is not interested in heaven or hell and thus does not wish to be offered these alternatives as the most important *either-or*.

But we need not look only at others. All people, all Christians, the congregation as such and pastors as well, must struggle against the self-deception of making it easy for themselves by thinking only of the here-and-now. To bind oneself wholly and entirely to the Lord's "teach them to obey everything" can be very difficult. It can lead to many trials and to much offense. This can be seen already in the situations of the early New Testament churches. The *Seelsorger* who measures his ministry only by Christ's command to "teach them to obey everything" cannot, for the sake of the souls entrusted to him, close his eyes to danger. Therefore, it is astounding to hear from pastors in some churches with which we are in fellowship: "Don't worry. Show more trust. Every pastor is bound by his ordination vow. Therefore the congregation will surely continue to hear God's Word." True indeed! Thank the Lord for his comforting promise, assuring us of victory: the gates of hell will not overcome his church (Mt 16:18). His church is the band of those whom he alone knows by name. To us, however, who do not know people's hearts, his church remains hidden. To be sure, we need not worry about tomorrow and its uncertainties regarding the future quality of our lives. But we should be deeply concerned about "things above" and about continuing to work out our salvation with fear and trembling (Php 2:12). That is Christ's command and the pastor's concern, as Paul said to the Ephesian elders, "Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock" (Ac 20:28).

If we did not have God's clear Word and the lessons of church history, we would probably also be satisfied with the often-heard motto, "The main thing is Jesus." Then we would also tolerate all the theological movements which bear the name of Christ. But from church history, as from the history of Israel, we learn what the outcome is when God's Word is not preached, heard and obeyed in every point. Christ through the word of the apostles did not tell the pastors just to proclaim what each might consider most important and to hold the congregation only to that. He said, "Teach them to obey everything." Unlike the malefactor on the cross, we have not yet finished our course. We must continue to fight the good fight of faith. It is simply a devilish minimizing of the danger when we are directed to contend only against massive enemies like atheism, as if Satan would not employ his temptations against our own hearts and also within the Christian congregation.

To the Christians in Corinth Paul wrote as a true *Seelsorger*: "Your boasting is not good. Don't you know that a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough?" (1 Cor 5:6). What he is concerned about is the serious moral lapse of an individual member of the congregation. Because the congregation tolerates that, he asserts that the whole body is in danger of falling from grace. The apostle must set them right: "Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness?" (2 Cor 6:14). How much vexation Paul brought on himself by his unwillingness to yield! Yet he remained steadfast, as a faithful watchman over all the souls in his care: "Expel the wicked man from among you" (1 Cor 5:13). He did not pay attention to majorities, or to feelings or to the possibility that he might be misunderstood.

In the same way Paul calls upon Timothy to resist the beginnings of false teaching and to exercise his ministry faithfully in doctrinal matters, without fearing men: "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth. Avoid godless chatter, because those who indulge in it will become more and more ungodly" (2 Tm 2:15,16). Here Paul does not mean avoiding general conversation, perhaps about the weather, but he is warning about involvement with false doctrine: "Their teaching will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, who have wandered away from the truth. They say that the resurrection has already taken place, and they destroy the faith of some" (2 Tm 2:17,18). Surely one would expect that these people believed in the cross of Christ and in his resurrection. Yet through the false belief that there would be no future resurrection of the dead they lost the blessed hope the gospel gives. That hope is at stake, and therefore Timothy must faithfully tend the congregation, must give attention to and contend against even the beginnings of false doctrine.

2. Christ's command to feed his flock places an obligation upon every member of the congregation, since it involves acceptance and further proclamation of the true Word.

Hearing the Word and doing it constitute obedience. Moses commanded his people to obey the promised Savior long before Jesus Christ made his appearance: "The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him" (Dt 18:15). At the Transfiguration God said concerning his Son: "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!" (Mt 17:5). Hearing, that is, perceiving the living Word of God, is necessary if we are to receive the gospel, as Paul confirms, "Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ" (Ro 10:17). Furthermore, properly hearing the Word is the constant precondition for proper action. Having the true, clear gospel and, with one's heart full of the gospel, desiring to do everything the Lord expects—that is truly hearing the voice of the Good Shepherd.

After his warning against false prophets, the Lord shows his Christians that there is also a kind of faith in him which will be exposed as false and vain when he returns. This is the faith which for its own confirmation seeks miracles—we see it in many enthusiasts—a faith which at the same time treats some of the words of Holy Scripture with indifference. Surely, some hearing of the Word is going on, and the name of Christ is used for adornment, but the Word is not being heard in humble submission to "teach them to obey everything," the doctrine which Christ through the word of his apostles entrusted to the congregations then as he also does now. "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven" (Mt 7:21). And three verses further on: "Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on a rock" (Mt 7:24). Thus every Christian for the sake of his eternal salvation is bound to the proper preaching of law and gospel.

Proclamation in any form is actually "preaching." To be sure, the pastor in a special sense must give an account of his stewardship over the Word he teaches (and may God have mercy on us all!). But according to the Word of Christ every believing and baptized Christian of sound mind is also summoned to pay attention to the Word. Surely, it is a sign of these last times in which we live that knowledge of God's Word has practically disappeared. I do not mean to say that every Christian must be able to explain the Bible in masterful fashion. No, that is a gift only the Lord can grant. Yet every Christian can and must recognize what is written in the Bible in clear, generally understandable words and thus what must be believed and obeyed without reservation as the binding Word of God. We are speaking, of course, about mature Christianity. Christians arrive at such maturity when they are set free by the Word of truth, as Christ says in John 8:31: "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (Jn 8:31,32)—free from sin and at the same time free from the influence of devilish lies and false doctrine. By the same standard a congregation can also evaluate its own called pastor: not by how well he proclaims God's Word, but by whether he preaches Scripture truth in all of his work, not only in the pulpit but also, for example, in the religious instruction of the children. The congregation can also perceive whether the pastor constantly perseveres in *doing* the Word of God.

What is principally involved is the gospel, with the glorious comfort and solidly based hope it imparts. Yet also included are all the other individual doctrines. They serve the purpose of preserving the certainty, power and comfort of the good news of salvation in Christ every day until our life's end. The church is so dear to Christ that he "gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless" (Eph 5:25-27). Therefore, each congregation should receive its spiritual nourishment from the Spirit of Christ, who speaks through his written and orally proclaimed Word. Just because through baptism the true faith brings a believer into fellowship with Christ himself, each Christian should let the Spirit remind him to renounce everything that does not agree with such fellowship. To persistently disregard pastoral admonition in any part of the Christian doctrine of the Word of God is to despise the grace of God, to consider his Word a lie. Of those who refuse to love the truth Paul says, "For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie and so that all will be condemned who have not believed the truth but have delighted in wickedness" (2 Th 2:11,12).

Yet mark well: we are not speaking about any and every error, even every error in doctrine. These occur again and again, and they will continue to occur. But the situation must be measured by whether the person is personally challenging God, and by whether he is fundamentally willing to be corrected by means of the biblical Word. It must be very clearly stated again that on this earth there is no perfect congregation. The kind of spiritual audacity that would claim the contrary has appeared in church history now and again and is easily recognized. But just because there is no perfect congregation in this world, according to the biblical truth *simul justus et peccator*—we are at the same time righteous and yet sinners—it is necessary to bow with obedient and humble hearts before the Word of Christ, "Teach them to obey everything I have commanded you." That is why we must exercise church discipline and doctrinal discipline.

Thesis III. Christ's commission binds us to the biblical Word of God:

1. It binds us to the Word of God *alone* as the sole rule and standard of all teaching and of all teachers.

Intentionally and for good reason this statement was taken into the *Einigungssaetze*¹ as Thesis 1.2. It is stated in the Epitome of the Formula of Concord (1,7): "We believe, teach and confess that the sole rule and standard according to which all doctrine and all teachers alike must be discerned and judged are the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures of the Old and New Testament alone"—scriptural proof-passages follow. Such a statement, then, no matter in which document it is written (e.g., in the *Einigungssaetze*), continues to remain a valid, binding norm because it is scriptural. Since Christ commanded his church to teach his Word and to obey it in practice, no theological opinion may have the status of God's Word unless it agrees exactly with the written Word. Therefore in all matters concerning which the Word of God takes a position the Word is normative. The sense which the words of a Bible passage express, according to the context and the rules of language, is the doctrine which Christ through his apostles commands us to believe. No Christian and no teacher or church may depart from it. It is not a learned man's name or the name of a church that serves to guarantee pure doctrine; what is said or written must agree with the biblical Word: If it does not agree, and the theologian or the church is not willing to be corrected by the biblical witness, then a person's name and reputation will lead others astray. That means yielding to the devil. Luther observed in a sermon on Matthew 4:1-11 on the occasion of the gathering of the princes at Smalcald in 1537:

All heretics know how to deck out their lies and errors with the Scriptures. In that way they trick the people and fool them into believing that their teaching is the pure truth, and soon they openly work great harm, for their word, says St. Paul, spreads like gangrene. Yet their folly cannot stand for long; with time it must come to light. The reason for this is that they either let the Word of God go or they interpret it according to their own pleasure so that with them it must mean whatever they want it to mean....Here we must exercise the art, not an art within the capacity of flesh and blood, but the Holy Spirit's art, namely, that we surely and rightly handle the Word of God and distinguish whether their mouths are speaking truth or falsehood. For the devil also knows his art and employs it even against the greatest master, against Christ himself. Therefore you should not be quickly intimidated when the false spirits and heretics strut about and say, "Here is the Scripture, here is God's Word, etc." But compare Scripture with Scripture, as Christ does here.²

Further, from the *Einigungssaetze*, Foreword 1.1: "Granting any right of human judgment over God's Word in the Scriptures, and drawing doctrine from any source except the Holy Scriptures destroys the authority

¹ The *Einigungssaetze* were the statements which formed a basis for doctrinal agreement among German Lutheran free churches in 1948. See John Vogt, "The Lutheran Free Churches of Europe," *WLQ* 85:2 (Spring 1988), 127-138 and correction in Winter 1989, 75 (Translator).

² *SL* XII, 1276-1291; *WA* 45:25-47.

of the proclamation of the gospel." In obedience to Christ's command, "Teach them to obey everything I have commanded you," the *Ev.-Luth. Freikirche* gives this truth full sway over word and deed. In the present controversy with our sister-church, the *Selbststaendige Ev.-Luth. Kirche* (SELK)³ as previously with the *Alt-lutherische* (Breslau) sister-church, when departures from biblical doctrine have become apparent, we have tried to argue and admonish according to the simple sense of what God's Word expresses and commands. We acted thus not out of contentiousness, as is now and has often been charged in earlier generations, but simply because Christ commands it in his commission to the church. And we have also constantly begged for correction from the Holy Scriptures if we have made mistakes or false accusations. For, of course, false accusations in such matters would be serious sin. But we have waited in vain for such correction, and we still are waiting today.

To take one of many possible examples: if the doctrinal discussions held early in this century between the *Ev. Luth. Freikirche* and what was then the Breslau Synod are compared with the present controversies, one can easily judge who wanted to remain with the clear words of the Scriptures and who has yielded to the spirit of the times. In 1913 the sainted Dr. Otto Willkomm⁴ wrote in the Foreword to his booklet, *Bist du, der Israel verwirrt* ("Are You the Troubler of Israel?"):

What is involved in the continuing separation of our free church from the other free churches is not just a quarrel about words, but a controversy about important truths, yes, about basic principles. Above all, this is true regarding the position we take toward the Scriptures and toward the Confessions of the Lutheran Church....If we grant the validity of good intentions and zeal for God's glory as arguments for stilling doctrinal controversy, the result would be that we would permit not the objective truth of the clear word of Scripture but rather the subjective veracity and piety of the theologian to decide the worth of the doctrine he represents. This would lead from a foundation built on the rock, God's truth, to a foundation built on the sand of human judgment and emotion. But that would be the end, not only of all doctrinal controversy, but also of all certainty about the truth. It would prepare the way for a union on the broadest possible basis. From this may God graciously preserve us!

Under Point 4, "The Appraisal of Pure Doctrine as the Law of Teaching," he amplifies this: "This is the next accusation. What should we understand by this?...Enmity on the part of the liberals, Methodists and 'positive' theologians against the so-called slavery to the letter and the doctrine that holds to the letter of the Word..." Then he writes:

But that this accusation should be raised by Lutherans who are zealous for doctrine which agrees with the Confessions and for the unity of the Lutheran Church we cannot understand. The explanation probably lies in this, that our accusers understand something different by "pure doctrine" than we do. We understand it to mean the Word of God itself, as it is written: "Your statutes stand firm" (Psalm 93:5; Luther: *Dein Wort ist rechte Lehre*). In this sense the apostle speaks when he commands us to keep away from those who "cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned" (Romans 16:17). [Willkomm then adds other Bible passages.]

Between the Word of God and pure doctrine there is no difference; pure doctrine is the pure Word of God! Should this then hinder unity if we hold fast to the truth as to a law that cannot be broken?...Since our adversaries want to be subject to the whole Word of God and also to these words, they must understand something different by "pure doctrine." Just what, they do not say....Thus our adversaries do not understand by "pure doctrine" the Word of God itself, but the presentation of doctrine which the most prominent theologians of the time have made, which

³ The ELF terminated fellowship with the SELK at the convention in which this essay was presented (Editor).

⁴ President of the *Ev. Luth. Freikirche*, 1879-1907 (Editor).

perhaps has been deposited in the confessions of the church....[But] all departures from the truth which have occurred in the course of the centuries have their cause in this, that someone has not granted the validity of the simple sense of the Word.⁵

I have cited these quotations because the theological questions at issue have been placed on the plane of opinions, various views of theological problems from differing angles, which can be allowed and should by no means divide the church. The chief articles of the Christian faith, we are told, stand incontestably firm. All other views are said to be—thus a new and current conception—differing *theologoumena*, individual opinions about God and his Word.

Let us attempt to investigate this concept which would apparently claim toleration within the church for all the current doctrinal questions which face our sister churches. The Roman Catholics, the Reformed, the Baptists, the Lutherans certainly hold very different *theologoumena*. Let me initially take over this concept without hedging it. Every confession has its own distinctive, indeed, fundamentally different doctrines, e.g., concerning justification, sanctification, sacraments, church, ministry, etc. But a *theologoumenon*, an individual opinion about God and his Word, means that one would approach a statement and on the basis of a rational process of reflection and elaboration attempt to comprehend its sense. Implicit in this concept is the method by which I approach the statement. From a theological point of view—presented for the present with the utmost simplicity—the different angles from which the individual confessions view the Holy Scriptures can indeed be shown to be distinctive *theologoumena*, in the papacy the Scriptures are approached on the basis of and through the ecclesiastical tradition of popes and councils; among the Reformed on the basis of what is manifestly rational; so also among the sects, sometimes with supplemental revelations. I have consciously simplified, for when it comes to all the various shades of liberal theology which have entered all the churches and for the most part dominate them, it is human reason which has been exalted as master over the Holy Scriptures.

The Lutheran Reformation and the Lutheran Church have resisted this. So do we! For we do not approach the Holy Scriptures from a rational starting point, but we let the Scriptures stand as our basis, norm and master. Scripture interprets itself. "The witness of the Scriptures is the witness of the church. For the church can have no opinion of its own; it is subject to the Scriptures."⁶ If we permit Holy Scripture to be the only rule and standard of all teaching and all teachers not only on paper but in actual practice, then what is the meaning of this concept, *theologoumena*? It seems to mean the current ecclesiastical "home base," perhaps the doctrine which is taught in the SELK, the *Altlutherische Kirche*, the *Lutherische Freikirche*. That would mean that differing doctrines have and are rightly permitted to have validity in sister churches.

The discussions of recent years have unfortunately confirmed this understanding. We cannot be satisfied when appeals are made again and again to the Scriptures and the Confessions and critical approaches to the Scriptures are collectively rejected, but then the *theologoumena* of critical theology are employed. The result in the theological discussions until now—to mention just one example, concerning the historicity of the Book of Jonah, toleration of the challenge to historicity by the questionable means of form criticism, as employed by liberal theology—stands against the command of Jesus, "Teach them to obey everything I have commanded you." In speaking about the last judgment the Lord made doctrinal statements about Jonah. According to the simple sense of the words, either one must regard Jonah's story as the account of what actually occurred, or one has a certain *theologoumenon*. But on the latter basis one can judge neither doctrine nor teachers. Who in this matter is standing by the clear, words of Holy Scripture?

a) Christ's command binds us to the whole Word of God, because the Word is unconditioned by time, eternally true.

When Christ brings the request to his heavenly Father, "Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth" (Jn 17:17) and when he says concerning himself, "I am the way and the truth and the life" (Jn 14:6), these are

⁵ Pp 26 ff.

⁶ Willkomm, 37.

examples of assertions that contradict human reason. Such matters can be grasped only by faith. Reason cannot comprehend the essential nature of the triune God or the salvation of the whole world through the cross of his Son. These truths are given us word for word by the apostles and prophets. After Peter has confessed at Caesarea Philippi that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, the Lord says to his apostle, "This was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven" (Mt 16:17). Man can indeed search for truth—all philosophers are engaged in such a quest—but man will not find the only absolute truth, that is, God himself in person and in his Word. He "lives in unapproachable light" and "no one has seen or can see" him (1 Tm 6:16).

Thus in all matters concerning the divine nature and the origin and destiny of man, sin-darkened human reason must be directed to what is revealed through the Word of God. In such matters the fundamental corruption of man (original sin) reduces to zero his natural capacity for understanding, which, according to Romans 1:19,20 can recognize only that the works of creation come from the hand of the living God. Nor can this capacity be changed through an increase in man's understanding of natural law. Yet that is currently a widespread opinion, as principles from human theories of knowledge are being employed to get at the root of scriptural truth. Here the starting point is false—again a strange *theologoumenon*. Because God's Word is the truth, all searching for a "real" truth within the Word is philosophical speculation. It has nothing to do with a search for the truth or acceptance of the truth in a biblical sense. It is rather the old attempt of the Adversary to subject the truth of God's Word to reason or feeling. Many would judge the truth of the Bible, whether Old or New Testament, by comparing it with modern philosophical criteria. They compare the degree to which men, e.g., the biblical writers in their time, could comprehend their intended message with the way the same matters are seen from a scientific or socio-political viewpoint today. This is fundamentally wrong; it is not faith in the Word of truth. "God is not a man, that he should lie, nor a son of man, that he should change his mind" (Nu 23:19). "For the LORD is good and his love endures forever; his faithfulness (Luther: *seine Wahrheit*) continues through all generations" (Ps 100:5). "Everything he does is right (Luther: *all sein Tun ist Wahrheit*) and all his ways are just. And those who walk in pride he is able to humble" (Dn 4:37).

When Christ commands the disciples, "Teach them to obey everything I have commanded," he does not circumscribe his words in any way. He does not reduce the content of any Word of God to a restricted scope, e.g., to the "real goal" of some statement. This manner of thinking is not founded in the Holy Scriptures, for God does not himself diminish his truth and thus contradict himself, but rather it is the unbelief of modern biblical criticism which does that. The emphasis or goal toward which a preacher proceeds, the scope of his message, beginning from a text, is being confused with the text itself, which unchangingly presents the warning or the comfort of the revealed truth. Thus we cannot understand the complaint of the SELK that "literary form...does not destroy the force of the scope [=purpose] of a text"; that even though the historicity of a text be challenged, the "theological statement it makes is not changed at all."⁷ That would mean that only the goal is important, not the fact that what the Bible says actually happened.

First, no pastor in the *Evangelisch Lutherische Freikirche* is of the opinion that God has given any statement in the Bible just *because* of its historicity, or that historicity is the principal concern of exegesis, whether the subject is the creation account or Jonah or Matthew 24 ("the stars will fall from the sky"—verse 29). Such a thought would be pure foolishness. Secondly, however, we cannot understand how the truth of the Word is to be divided into two parts, the one to be grasped only by faith, the other from a scientific point of view. The sense of the above accusation can only be justified if doubts may be allowed about the truth of the Word of God in some of its statements. But that is false doctrine, which cannot be tolerated. God's Word itself, also as contained in Christ's command, forbids it.

Paul conforms to Christ's commission when he writes to the Corinthians: "My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power....For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man's spirit within him? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God

⁷ Proceedings of a Discussion between SELK and ELF, Berlin, September 5, 1988, #27.

has freely given us....The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Cor 2:4, 5, 11, 12, 14). The Holy Scriptures differentiate strictly between divine revelation and human wisdom (Mt 11:25, 26; 1 Cor 1:27). Therefore, this is the faith the apostle is to teach, pure and without doubt, bound only to God's Word and to his Word in its entirety. "Guard what has been entrusted to your care. Turn away from godless chatter and the opposing ideas of what is falsely called knowledge, which some have professed and in so doing have wandered from the faith" (1 Tm 6:20, 21). To the Ephesian elders Paul confesses, "I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God" (Ac 20:27).

If God's Word, according to its own witness, is forever true, yes, if it does not pass away even when heaven and earth pass away, something further must be said about the factuality of biblical accounts. God has graciously made it easy for us human beings to believe all things that Christ taught and to live according to his teaching in the certainty of faith. He has given us in writing the account of his plan for men, for the world and for his people, telling us what he has done and what he still will do. We would say today that he has given us factual accounts, dictated by the Holy Spirit himself, of what has happened until now and he has permitted these accounts to be handed down to us. The disciples emphasized the value of being eye- and ear-witnesses of the Lord's works, his death and resurrection, that we may believe: "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life" (1 Jn 1:1).

Similarly, the account of God's acts in history which has been handed down to us has no other purpose than this, that we may believe. When God is preparing Moses and Israel for the exodus from slavery in Egypt, he says to Moses, "Now you will see what I will do to Pharaoh" (Ex 6:1). And then he reminds the Israelites, in order to invite them to believe and to confirm their faith, "Commemorate this day, the day you came out of Egypt" (Ex 13:3).

Thus the truth of the Word of God—what he says and what he does—is indivisible. Christ is the Word made flesh, the Truth, completely one with the Father and with the Holy Spirit. Accordingly, also in Old Testament times Christ acted with the Father. Paul writes that Israel "drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ" (1 Cor 10:4). When Christ therefore refers to any historical acts of God in the Old Testament, his words are true and are to be believed as describing what actually happened. Any other conception of doctrine blasphemes the truth of God. Theological opinions and experiments, which we are constantly hearing about today, not only lack importance; they arrogantly cast doubt on the truth revealed by God himself. Concerning them let Jeremiah speak God's stern word: "Let the prophet who has a dream tell his dream, but let the one who has my word speak it faithfully....Therefore...I am against the prophets who steal from one another words supposedly from me" (Jr 23:28,30).

b) Christ's command binds us to the whole Word of God, for though the gospel is the decisive Word about the salvation of sinners, it is nevertheless no more and no less true than any other Word of God.

The Lord Jesus commands his disciples in Matthew 28:19, 20 to "make disciples of all nations . . . teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." What it is above all that they are to teach he sums up in the words, "Preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned" (Mk 16:15,16). Thereby he shows that the doctrine of justification stands in the center of all revelation.

That we lay such stress on the doctrine of justification and its connection with all other doctrines is not only of practical importance. This emphasis also has a good, firm basis in the Scriptures. The whole Bible from beginning to end, Old as well as New Testament, emphasizes nothing more powerfully than the doctrine of justification. Every Christian Bible student knows this. All the other doctrines are handmaids to this one, in order that people may know Christ and be saved through faith in him. God's eternal plan and the immediate purpose of all his deeds in human

history have this in common: their purpose is to save us....The prophetic books of the Old Testament bear constant witness to this truth. Thus Jeremiah 33:8,9,16: "I will cleanse them from all the sin they have committed against me and will forgive all their sins of rebellion against me. Then this city will bring me renown, joy, praise and honor before all nations on earth that hear of all the good things I do for it; and they will be in awe and will tremble at the abundant prosperity and peace I provide for it....In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. This is the name by which it will be called: The LORD Our Righteousness." Accordingly, then, it is the forgiveness of sins through the LORD, who is our Righteousness, which brings him praise and renown among all the nations. Proper preaching bears witness to this Lord. We point also to Romans 12:6: 'If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith' [NIV margin: in agreement with the faith; Luther (12:7): *Hat jemand Weissagung, so sey sie dem Glauben aehnlach*]. Here the expression 'faith' comprehends the whole of Christian doctrine and at the same time shows the close connection between all doctrine and the doctrine of justification. Finally, when we read in Galatians 1:9, "If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned," and further in Galatians 5:9, "A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough," it is plain that even what appears to be the most insignificant false doctrine can lead to another gospel. It is clear, then, that we act rightly when we do not only condemn the gross and direct violations and denials of the doctrine of justification itself, but also every other doctrinal error. The Confessions and early teachers of our church agree with this. From the Apology we hear the following testimony (IV,2): "In this controversy the chief topic of Christian doctrine is treated, which is of especial service for the clear, correct understanding of the entire Holy Scriptures, and alone shows the way to the unspeakable treasure and right knowledge of Christ, and alone opens the door to the entire Bible, and brings necessary and most abundant consolation to devout consciences, etc."⁸

Thus the Reformers rightly called the message of the sinner's justification through faith alone the chief article of their confession. Yet the same measure of truth applies to this doctrine as to any other words of Scripture. How could it be otherwise? "For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (Jn 1:17). It was not with the gracious coming of our Savior that the Words of God *became* true. What God promised from the beginning is true, i.e., his promises were fulfilled. What he predicted happened. What God truly prophesied concerning the Christ, the Restorer of all things, though given in specific historical situations, became reality, true in the sense of actually happening. That is the basis for Jesus' commission to his church: because everything that pertains to the salvation of the human race has come to pass according to all the words of Holy Scripture, therefore "go into all the world," therefore "teach them to obey everything I have commanded you." "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples," says the Lord (Jn 8:31)! Accordingly, a person risks his eternal salvation when he judges according to his own opinion what he considers to be of greater or lesser importance. For by the very term *gospel* in Scripture may be understood "the entire doctrine of Christ which He proposed in his ministry, as also did His apostles."⁹

To believe in Christ is nothing less than to believe everything which is written in the Holy Scriptures. And to believe means to accept the written Word with a childlike trust. In this and no other sense the well-known Article VII of the Augsburg Confession is to be understood. The proper task of the church is to let the gospel of the sinner's justification have free course, as well as to let the law drive men to the gospel. And in connection with both law and gospel countless scriptural terms need to be understood in their historical contexts. Augustana VII places the emphasis on the gospel in contrast to *adiaphora*, which are not necessary for the unity of the church. It does not contrast the gospel with the other parts of the Scriptures. Whoever does that, as we often observe today, makes of the gospel and the other parts of Scripture a dual truth and offends against the

⁸ This rather lengthy quotation has been taken from Friedrich Brunn's synodical essay of 1887, Thesis 1, to show that the *Ev. Luth. Freikirche* continues today to hold the same understanding of Scripture as it did then.

⁹ Formula of Concord, Epitome V, 6; *Concordia Triglotta*, 802; Tappert, 478.

majesty of God. The Lutheran Confessions demonstrate that AC Article VII, "Of the Church," flows from the center, the doctrine of justification, by which everything else stands or falls (*articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*). All other doctrines are bound up in the doctrine of justification. Only in this way can we understand why every doctrine which teaches otherwise must be condemned.

Thesis IV. Christ's commission has the character of a confession.

Permit me to say a few words first about the basic principles of a confession. The roots of confessional faithfulness in doctrine and practice lie in the understanding of what a confession is. To confess something means that a person takes a stance of wholehearted conviction toward the content of the confession and also bears public witness to his conviction. In the secular sphere, where there are confessions of many kinds—political, for example—this means making certain ideas one's own on the basis of a subjective understanding. The subjective understanding is indeed in itself an opinion, but it appeals to a truth considered to be incontestable (cf., e.g., the dialectical materialism of Marx, Engels, Lenin). With the words "considered to be" I place a question mark after all "truth" as defined by a secular ideology or philosophy, that "truth" which forms the basis of confessions in the secular sphere. Yet there is something which belongs to the essence of a confession which gives it a status above that of a mere opinion: it excludes. To be a confession it must exclude contrary ideas.

Because "this world in its present form is passing away" (1 Cor 7:31), and in this world "everything is meaningless" (Ec 1:2), the only lasting truth is the Word of the living God and our confession of him and his Messiah, Jesus. Wherever and whenever God's Word is proclaimed, this proclamation becomes confession. A true Christian confession is always equivalent to what the Holy Scriptures say, since they are the fundamental norm and source of the confession. When people depart from the content of biblical statements, as the sects have done again and again in the course of church history, the Holy Spirit has always given his true church the gift of clear doctrinal definitions. We see the gift of the Spirit in the formulation of confessions during the early Christian centuries and again in the Reformation period. The fathers struggled to find unequivocal expressions, drawn from the Word of God, which would not be subject to misunderstanding. The unequivocal nature of the expressions—that also belongs to the essence of a confession—excludes contrary opinions, i.e., condemns them. The exclusion of error takes place through language that is not subject to misunderstanding or, if that is not sufficient, through added condemnations. It should be plain from everything said above that this is what it means in the obedience of faith to hold fast to the command of Christ, "Teach them to obey everything I have commanded you."

Furthermore, as concerns unity in believing, teaching and confessing everything in the Holy Scriptures: surely the gospel may not be torn out of the total context of divine revelation as if it were another truth over against the rest of Scripture. The confessions of the ancient church bear witness to this unity of the truth. What true Christian could wish to assign to the First or Third Article a different kind of truth than to the Second?

Today doubt is being cast on many biblical truths which until now were uncontested in the Christian church. It is not only the right but also the duty of Christ's church to formulate anew, precisely according to the Word of God, the statements which are being emptied of truth and filled with false understandings. We think, for example, of the doctrine of creation as opposed to the theory of evolution. New doctrinal formulations are not necessary to rescue the truth of the Scriptures; that endures forever and does not depend on our human efforts. But we must teach clearly for the sake of those to whom we preach the Word, so that they come to the true, saving faith and are not deceived. Naturally, such teaching is necessary also for the sake of those who already stand in the true faith, "until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming" (Eph 4:13,14).

1. Christ's command has the character of a confession, since it enables us to recognize where his church is.

We cannot state here the whole doctrine of the church, since that would go far beyond the topic assigned for this essay. There is indeed just one true church of Jesus Christ, as Paul says in Ephesians 4:4-6: "There is *one* body and *one* Spirit—just as you were called to *one* hope when you were called—*one* Lord, *one* faith, *one* baptism; *one* God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all." This one true church remains hidden from human eyes, "for you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God" (Col 3:3). Luther writes on Galatians 5:19: "Therefore we correctly confess in the Creed that we *believe* a holy Christian church. For it is invisible."¹⁰ Again he says, "The church is a hidden thing which one may neither perceive nor see, but must grasp only by faith through baptism, sacrament and word."¹¹

Therefore it is false and contrary to the Scriptures to teach with the Roman Catholic Church or with the enthusiastic, perfectionistic sects that the visible church alone is the church of Christ and, in consequence, that outside this church there is no salvation. But it is equally false when today theologians who call themselves Lutheran confuse the marks of the church (*notae ecclesiae*, according to AC VII) with the church itself and raise the charge of splitting or even of mutilating the body of Christ when others act according to his command and avoid those who persistently cling to doctrine and practice which are contrary to Scripture. That is not scriptural and Lutheran but Roman Catholic thinking. It is not a mere matter of theory or just a confession of the lips when we give attention to Christ's commands to keep his Word ("If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples," Jn 8:31), to confess the faith ("Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven," Mt 10:32), to exercise love ("By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another," Jn 13:35) and to "obey God rather than men" (Ac 5:29). These words require public, practical, recognizable fulfillment, and then one also can see something of the true church of Christ. We cannot indeed examine hearts, and therefore there will always be hypocrites in the church. But we can measure words and actions by the Word of God.

Luther writes on 1 Timothy 1:3-11, the "Sermon on the Summary of the Essence of God's Commandments" (1525): "As I have previously taught and said often and at length, and as I continue to say, the two principal parts of Christian doctrine are faith and love (as St. Paul also everywhere writes and declares), and I know nothing else to preach.... Faith is directed toward God, works toward one's neighbor. Faith soars over all laws and is not under law; works take place under the law and are servants of the whole law."¹² As the Reformer here gives a summary definition and evaluation of the will of God, he would express at the same time which part pertains to the recognition of an orthodox church. Faith is rooted and founded in the Word of God alone. Faith is also strengthened from the same source. It finds in the Word alone its security for the last judgment. Encouragement for a Christian life also proceeds from the Word. Therefore the preaching of the pure, unadulterated Word of God is the unmistakably recognizable mark of an orthodox church. Every distortion or even toning down of the clear Word—insofar as it is not just a passing aberration (it dare not reach the status of claiming validity as a permanent condition in the church)—erases this mark as time goes by and demolishes more and more of the divine truth, until even the principal article of the Christian faith is undermined and falls. Then, even though the church wants to continue bearing the name "Christian," it is that in name only; it is no longer "church." The same principle naturally applies to distortions of the sacraments as well.

And what shall we say about the love which must be exercised by believers according to Christ's unconditional command? Woe to anyone who would in any way weaken this clear injunction! "We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, 'I love God,' yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen" (1 Jn 4:19,20). The only question is how "love" is to be understood. Sad to say, it has been terribly emptied of its meaning and has become purely a matter of feeling—even among Christians! Having fellowship with one another and showing mutual

¹⁰ LW 27, 84; SL IX, 702; WA 40², 105,106.

¹¹ LW 41, 211; SL XVII,1338; WA 51, 507.

¹² SL IX, 858, 861; WA 17, I, 102ff.

love is often confused with sentimentality. Further, one is not supposed to show love for the sinner by naming his sin and helping him toward repentance, but there is supposed to be some kind of "love" for the sinner which is accompanied by justification of his sin! Often even the falsification of the Word of God is seen as at worst a weakness and not sin. By means of such "love," falsely so called, the sinner naturally cannot be helped to repentance. At best, it serves an empty moralism. Of course, such "love" is not a mark of the true church. True Christian love, as Paul asserts in 1 Corinthians 13, his well-known song of songs about Christian love, "does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth" (v 6).

The requirement of true love may not be relaxed. Admonition? Certainly! That again is God's Word. Yet in this world the doing of the law is subject to imperfection. In his Commentary on the Letter to the Galatians Luther writes:

Doctrine is heaven; life is earth. In life there is sin, error, uncleanness, and misery....Here love should condone, tolerate, be deceived, trust, hope, and endure all things (1 Cor. 13:7); here the forgiveness of sins should have complete sway, provided that sin and error are not defended.¹³

And again Luther says:

We are surely prepared to observe peace and love with all men, provided that they leave the doctrine of faith perfect and sound for us. If we cannot obtain this, it is useless for them to demand love from us. A curse on a love that is observed at the expense of the doctrine of faith, to which everything must yield—love, an apostle, an angel from heaven, etc.! Therefore when they minimize this issue in such a dishonest way, they give ample evidence of how highly they regard the majesty of the Word. If they believed that it is the Word of God, they would not play around with it this way. No, they would treat it with the utmost respect; they would put their faith in it without any disputing or doubting....

Therefore let us leave the praise of harmony and of Christian love to them. We, on the other hand, praise faith and the majesty of the Word. Love can sometimes be neglected without danger, but the Word and faith cannot. It belongs to love to bear everything and to yield to everyone. On the other hand, it belongs to faith to bear nothing whatever and to yield to no one....

By the grace of God our doctrine is pure; we have all the articles of faith solidly established in Sacred Scripture. The devil would dearly love to corrupt and overthrow these; that is why he attacks us so cleverly with this specious argument about not offending against love and the harmony among the churches....

If they let us have the Word sound and unimpaired, we are prepared not only to exercise charity and concord toward them but to offer ourselves as their slaves and to do anything for them.¹⁴

Thus Luther. And if even the holy apostle Paul confesses of himself, "What I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing" (Ro 7:19), then in the Christian community here on earth there will again and again be found vexation, quarrels, friction and similar offenses. If, therefore, love were the unmistakable mark of the church, then there would not be a single place where we could in faith recognize the church of Christ.

This remains true: "Teach them to obey everything I have commanded you" means nothing less than urging that Christians are to be found only there where God and salvation in his Son Jesus Christ are in fact proclaimed as the only way to heaven. "Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it," says our Lord Christ (Mt 7:13,14).

¹³ LW 27, 41; SL IX, 649; WA 40², 52.

¹⁴ LW 27, 38, 42, 46; SL IX, 645, 650, 655; WA 40², 48, 52, 57.

It can be proved that efforts to unite the largest possible number of Christians into organizational unions always take place at the expense of the *everything* in the Lord's command, "Teach them to obey everything I have commanded you." A part of the truth is silenced; partial truths are presented as a sufficient doctrinal consensus; and at the same time—this is quite symptomatic—dangers are considered to be harmless. A broad and general confession, something that everyone, indeed in a certain limited range, may nonetheless fill with various theological opinions, has only the outward appearance of a confession.

The churches in the world, also the large Lutheran churches, have certainly drawn closer together, but not on the basis of unity in what they believe, teach and confess, as enjoined in God's Word. They are rather united above all in this world's concern for the morrow: what shall we eat, what shall we drink, what shall we wear? Naturally, I have reduced this to its lowest common denominator. But such doctrine has nothing to do with Christ's commission to teach!

Christ's church, then, can be recognized only where we find the pure proclamation of the Word of God and the scriptural administration of the sacraments. But it is not a question of where this is declared on paper, but of whether this confession is also attested in practical action. The content of such practical confession is also attested is called ecclesiastical practice, which includes everything a church does or leaves undone in ecclesiastical matters. Whatever an individual member of a congregation does is not to be termed *ecclesiastical practice*. It rather consists of the *syn-hodos* commanded by Christ, our "walking together" in faith, doctrine and confession, as Paul writes to the Philippians: "If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded" (2:1,2). And he urges the Corinthians similarly to agree with one another, "that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought" (1 Cor 1:10).

When those things are concerned which Christ has commanded his church to obey—and not things he has left open—i.e., in matters off the Word of God and right conduct according to the Word, an ecclesiastical fellowship may not do as it pleases and proceed arbitrarily. If a church nevertheless proceeds in such a manner, it cuts itself off from the *syn-hodos*. If an ecclesiastical fellowship surrenders even a single point of the whole confession, it becomes untrustworthy in the other articles of faith. It confuses believers. Such a step awakens the impression that the individual articles of faith do not matter as long as the confession as a whole is preserved. But then again the confession has become a mere piece of paper, truth with a false bottom under which error can smuggle itself in. That such an attitude involves a fatal fallacy is proved by the territorial churches, also the Lutheran *Landeskirchen*.

Ecclesiastical practice is applied especially in matters of church fellowship. Church fellowship, of which altar fellowship is one form, presupposes fellowship in faith. Such fellowship in faith is based, as we have seen, on the normative doctrine of the Word of God and hence also on the defense of the truth, namely, the rejection in actual practice of whatever does not agree with the Word of God.

2. Christ's command has the character of a confession because it sets bounds.

We have arrived here at a subject which many Christians have always failed to understand, have misunderstood or have simply rejected. As explained above, since a proper Christian confession is drawn exclusively from the Word of God and is bound by the Word, it establishes boundaries. It sets limits over against worldliness and false fellowship of faith. When Christ as our Good Shepherd says about his sheep in John 10:5, "They will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger's voice," he expresses the same thought as the apostle's admonition to the congregation in Rome "to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them" (Ro 16:17). "Run away" and "keep away from them" do not mean "tolerate" and "remain there"!

Naturally, first and foremost, since every Christian and every pastor, too, is imperfect and subject to error—indeed, a whole congregation or church can stray—we must take to heart what Paul writes to the

Galatians, "Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently" (Ga 6:1). Such patient love is necessary; it is enjoined by the Lord. Grappling with questions concerning doctrine, that is, contending for the gospel treasure entrusted to the church, is required of the divinely established teaching office. Pastors are responsible for the souls committed to their care by Christ. Since "a little yeast works through the whole batch of dough" (1 Cor 5:6), and souls can to their own harm become accustomed to statements which are doctrinally false, the correction of false doctrine is always a most pressing requirement, whether it concerns an individual pastor, a whole congregation or even an entire church body. When in spite of zealous contending for the truth the parties do not arrive at oneness of spirit; if indeed one side declares doctrine or practice which is plainly contrary to the Word of God not to be false and thus to be tolerable in the church and the matter is considered to be settled; then whether the matter concerns an individual person in the teaching office (doctrinal discipline) or an entire fellowship, obedience to Christ's command requires action, since he himself sets the limits of the *syn-hodos*. In such a case there is in fact no more walking together on a common path.

Again, because it is very important: a congregation or church does not immediately cease to be orthodox if doctrine contrary to the Scriptures is found in it. But a congregation or church body may not grant to doctrine and practice contrary to the Scriptures and the Confessions the right to a continued existence in its midst. If that right is granted, then the boundary of orthodoxy has already been crossed.

The view has been repeatedly expressed that the bounds of Christian fellowship are reached only where Christ is not proclaimed as the true Son of God, the Redeemer, true man and true God. The ostensible proof for this position is 2 John 7-11: "Many deceivers, who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh, have gone out into the world. Any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist. Watch out that you do not lose what you have worked for, but that you may be rewarded fully. Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God; whoever continues in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take him into your house or welcome him. Anyone who welcomes him shares in his wicked work."

Particular statements of the Scriptures must always be understood in the context of the whole Word of God, as has been shown earlier. It goes without saying that this particular passage is fully clear and understandable. But if we read carefully, we will note that John writes about the doctrine of Christ as an identifying mark. This doctrine is not restricted to the true incarnation of the Son of God but it includes everything he said and did.

Nor is this the only place in Scripture which sets the bounds of fellowship, for the Lord commands us through his apostles, "Do not share in the sins of others" (1 Tm 5:22), that is, separate yourselves from them. When we hear this warning which Paul gives to his fellow-worker Timothy, and when we thereupon read his whole first letter to Timothy, we recognize various partial expressions of false teaching and lifestyle which persistently disregard the truth. The apostle not only warns against them, but he commands, "From such withdraw yourself" (1 Tm 6:5, Textus Receptus). That is addressed to the whole congregation which Timothy serves, since without letting himself be misled he should persevere in teaching and in living according to his teaching. Specifically, what is involved are false teachings some of which apparently are quite far removed from the principal doctrine of the Christian faith, for example, the commandment not to marry or not to eat various kinds of food (1 Tm 4:3). But how does Paul describe such teaching? He calls it a matter of abandoning the faith, following deceiving spirits and things taught by demons, and adds, "Such teachings come through hypocritical liars" (1 Tm 4:1,2). If Timothy proceeds against such teachings, Paul says to him, he will be "a good minister of Christ Jesus, brought up in the truths of the faith and of the good teaching that you have followed" (1 Tm 4:6). Furthermore, in his teaching office and service as a pastor, when he speaks the Word of God, he is to avoid all unclear chatter which leaves questions open and refuses to say Yes or No to them, that "unhealthy interest in controversies and quarrels about words" (1 Tm 6:4), which leads to wandering from the faith (1 Tm 6:20).

In exactly the same way it can be proved from the letter to the Galatians or the letters to the Corinthians that persistently holding fast to or tolerating false doctrine and unscriptural practice sets limits to Christian fellowship, limits commanded by Christ himself. To the Galatians Paul writes the unvarnished truth: "You who

are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace" (Ga 5:4). This is the firm letter of a pastor who cares for souls; it must lead either to repentance and a return to true Christian liberty, or to a division between the truth and false teaching. That would mean separation. At the end of the letter the apostle writes: "Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is a new creation. Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule, even to the Israel of God. Finally, let no one cause me trouble" (Ga 6:15-17). Paul has said with such fundamental clarity everything that concerns the spreading false doctrine among the Galatians that he does not want to debate it further. "Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness" (Eph 5:11). "What fellowship can light have with darkness?" (2 Cor 6:14).

In Corinth it is not so much a doctrinal question that is at issue as the toleration of a false practice. A member of the congregation has fallen into the serious sin of incest, and the congregation is tolerating it. Would anyone say this has something to do with the principal article of the Christian faith, the justification of the sinner? Certainly it does, for Paul says to the Corinthians: "I have written you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people—not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters.... You must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy,... With such a man do not even eat.... Expel the wicked man from among you" (1 Cor 5:9-13). And in 1 Corinthians 6:20, "You were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body."

In his second letter Paul expresses his joy because the congregation has acted and in that way cleansed itself of open sin. Thereby the congregation as a whole has remained in grace. The church has acted according to the word of the prophet Isaiah (52:11), which Paul considers equally valid for the New Testament people of God: " 'Therefore come out from them and be separate,' says the Lord. 'Touch no unclean thing' " (2 Cor 6:17). Many other examples could be cited, but that is enough at this point. It is only important here to prove that all doctrinal questions which are plainly settled by the Word of God impinge upon the central truth. Exclusively positive teaching which neglects the defense of the truth and separation from error makes a congregation's Christian confession into self-deception.

3. Christ's command has the character of a confession, and therefore Christ's church remains until his return the church militant.

Today we hear again and again that all contention in one's own church and between our churches must finally be ended. It is said that people are tired of contention; rather, we ought to bear with one another in mutual trust and love. On this topic we have heard from Luther in his comments on Galatians about the capacity of Christian love for gentleness, patience and the mutual bearing of one another's weaknesses. But we have also heard how love is misused if it is set in opposition to God's clear Word. Love which is concerned for the salvation of the sinner and his preservation in the grace of Christ cannot and will not shut its eyes to spiritual dangers. It is a devilish lie which announces, "Peace, peace....when there is no peace" (Jr 6:14). Jeremiah warns his people against false prophets, who speak contrary to what God says and in such a way lull people into a false security. In Jeremiah's time the message concerned an outward danger, or better, the punishment decreed by the Lord for Judah. His message was rejected by the false prophets as mad raving. Jeremiah contended with God's Word for the salvation of his people, but the people would no longer listen. The prophet with his divine message became an offense.

Today, if we may venture the comparison, the situation is similar. What we are concerned with is not an outward danger but spiritual danger to souls. Christ would warn us against being misled by false teachers. He commands us to teach that every departure from his Word deceives souls. Yet we hear from representatives of the sister churches whom we could name, "Don't worry." But Paul writes to Timothy, "Fight the good fight of the faith." In Hebrews 12:1 it is written, "Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us." And Paul again, to the Philippians: "Conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel, without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you" (Php 1:27,28).

Many other Bible passages describe the battle of faith. Doing battle for the truth—and naturally, contention only in that sense—pertains not only to Christ's command as it concerns our own individual salvation. It is also for the sake of those who through Christ's mission command are to be brought to eternal life that we need to contend for the purity of the Word of God. They too must struggle against all the wiles of the devil. If it were not for him who is "a murderer from the beginning" (Jn 8:44) and who with deep guile and great might desires to pull people down to destruction, we would not need to use the Word of God as a weapon. Church history teaches that the church's peaceful ages have always been characterized by a sluggish faith. Such periods were thus also the times that favored false doctrine. Since the devil cannot tolerate the Word of God, even a single Word that God has given, he will not rest from his seducing and confusing. But also "he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep" (Ps 121:4).

Our Lord Jesus Christ still speaks today just as he did then to his disciples, "Teach them to obey everything I have commanded you." Thereby he commits to us his powerful, saving means of grace, Word and sacraments. In them he grants to his church its only comfort in an evil world. In them he also provides our only means for recognizing spiritual danger. Only in the use of his means of grace, that is, through continuing in his Word and doing it, has he promised us that we will reach the goal. May God in his grace help us to that end! Amen.