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by

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The God-ordained Participation of Christians in the Local Congregation

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In the prophecy of His servant, Amos, the Lord caused to be penned by inspiration of His Holy Spirit the following earnest warning: *“Behold, the days come, saith the Lord God, that I will send a famine in the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord; and they shall wander from sea to sea, and from the north even to the east, they shall run to and fro to seek the word of the Lord, and shall not find it”* (Amos 8:11-12). While we cannot establish definitively on the basis of the text that this warning is a “rectilinear” or direct-line prophecy of the famine that is raging in our own day and time, the *conditions* which the Lord describes through His prophet are strikingly similar to what is *commonplace* on our own spiritual landscape in this twenty-first century of grace. In these latter days of sore distress, as we see all around us the *“signs of the times”* (Matthew 16:3), the clear evidence manifested in the geo-physical, socio-political, and above all, psycho-spiritual conditions which our Savior described, for example, in Matthew chapter 24, Mark 13, and Luke 21, all pointing to the imminence of His return for judgment, we are struck particularly with the dearth of faithful Christian **preaching and teaching** on the part of those who purport to be His mouthpieces! And this dearth is widespread indeed—extending quite literally *“from sea to sea, and from the north even to the east.”*

“He that hath My Word,” says the Lord through Jeremiah, chapter 23, verse 28, *“let him speak My Word faithfully.”* It certainly goes without saying that one cannot preach and teach what he does not have at his disposal. Nevertheless, *“false Christs and false prophets”* (Matthew 24:24) cannot rightfully excuse their unfaithful preaching and teaching with the lame claim that the Word of God in its purity was not available to them. *“Heaven and earth shall pass away, but My words shall not pass away”* (v. 35), said our Lord Jesus (Cf. Isaiah 40:8; I Peter 1:23, 25). The sad, yea, the shocking *irony* is that, in this technologically advanced age, the Word of God is *plentifully* “available,” so that virtually everyone is able to “have” it. Unlike circumstances in the world going back into antiquity, when manuscripts of the Scriptures, even of single books, were copied by hand onto sheepskins and kept locked away as treasures to be *owned* but seldom *used*, and in contrast to the situation after the invention of the printing press, when copies produced with moveable type were expensive and not in plentiful supply, we now have entire Bibles in print on paper, mass produced and marketed so inexpensively, that literally everyone can well afford to “have” his own personal copy of the Scriptures for as little as a dollar! Moreover, for those who have access to computers (as so many do today), the Scriptures in digital formats of all kinds are readily availability from diskettes, CD’s, and DVD’s, not to mention instant access from postings on the Internet. Yes, people “have” the Word of God in more plentiful supply than at any other time in the world’s history. But that ready availability of the Scriptures—in whatever format—has not resulted in an equally corresponding use of the Word; nor has the mere availability of God’s precious “*Oracles*” produced more wide-spread understanding of the doctrines which shine forth from its pages. And, more often than not, those whose office it is to “speak” the Word speak *about* it, as if they were referring to a textbook or reviewing a best-selling novel. They don’t *cite* Scripture passages as God’s own proof for what

they teach, neither do they *expound* Scripture in their preaching in order to set forth to their hearers “*the doctrine which is according to Godliness*” (I Timothy 6:3), the doctrine which rests firmly upon “*the foundation of the apostles and prophets*” (Ephesians 2:20). When such “preachers” give only lip-service to Holy Scripture, neither knowing nor understanding—perhaps not even *caring*—what the Word of God actually *says*, is it any wonder that they end up “*teaching for doctrines the commandments of men*” (Matthew 15:9), “*with good words and fair speeches deceiv[ing] the hearts of the simple*” (Romans 16:18)?? Indeed, those who speak and use God’s Word *UNfaithfully contribute* to the dearth or “*famine*” of the hearing of God’s Word, inasmuch as perverted and skewed Scripture is of no profit whatsoever but contributes only to the hearers’ “*destruction*” (II Peter 3:16b).

Where, if only here in our own country, “from sea to shining sea,” as our borders have been lyrically described, is the Word of God regularly and consistently preached and taught in its purity so that it can be both heard and learned with spiritual profit? I can recall at least eight such places, can’t you?? By God’s grace, we have eight state-side pastors who have studied to show themselves approved unto God, workmen that need not to be ashamed, rightly dividing between the Law and the Gospel as they proclaim and teach the Word of Truth (II Timothy 2:15). There *may*, indeed, be *others*, of whom we are not aware, others in whom we would greatly rejoice if we could learn their identity. But, at least there isn’t yet a TOTAL famine “*of hearing the words of the Lord.*” We have, at present, at least the eight! “*But,*” as Philip asked the Savior concerning those five barley loaves and two small fishes in the boy’s sack lunch, “*What are **they** among so many?*” (John 6:9). To say that there is “a shortage” of faithful pastors in our land would be a gross understatement. A panic-ridden person, “*run[ning] to and fro to seek the word of the Lord,*” would just about have to stumble upon one of them in order to find him. Fortunately we have a Conference web-site and a published church directory to make the search a bit easier for sincere seekers. “*The harvest truly is plenteous, but the laborers are [oh, so] few,*” our Savior tells us (Matthew 9:37); nevertheless, by God’s grace, those few laborers have been *sent forth into His harvest* (v. 38) and are out there *to be found*. No one is hiding.

And yet there are those—and we hear *of* them (and occasionally *from* them) on a regular basis—who dismiss the impending famine and the scarcity of faithful preachers as a mere **inconvenience**. “It’s too bad that you people don’t have a congregation closer to where we live. We’d probably come if it weren’t such a long drive. We’ll just have to look for something closer—even if it’s not quite what we had in mind.” And they **keep** “*run[ning] to and fro to seek the Word of the Lord,*” and never find it where, in their estimation, the benefits of hearing God’s Word outweigh the inconveniences of getting there. And so, they make what many of them refer to as “the sacrifice” of not hearing the Word of God in its purity because of purely *temporal circumstances* which compete with *spiritual benefits* for top priority in their lives. Concerning this particular matter, more will be said later on in our essay when we explore, on the basis of Scripture, the validity of such choices.

One of the chief reasons for this essay is to address the claim of many far-flung “*sheep having no shepherd*” that, since they are “*scattered abroad*” (Matthew 9:36), they can take comfort in the fact that their hearing of the preached Word and their participation in a local Christian congregation is not truly **necessary**. They recognize according to Scripture that the Word of the Gospel, “*the Word of reconciliation*” (II Corinthians 5:19b), is the *means of grace* in whatever form and through whatever venue it reaches sinful men. It is an efficacious means of grace because of what it *IS* and because of what it both *ANNOUNCES* and *CONVEYS*, and its efficacy is in no way dependent upon the *form* or *manner* in which it is dispensed. Hence, the *preached*

Gospel (Mark 16:15-16; Luke 24:47; Romans 10:17) is a means of grace, but so is the *written* Gospel (John 5:39; 20:31), the Gospel pronounced as a *personal absolution* (Matthew 9:2), the word of the Gospel *resident in the heart* (Romans 10:8), as well as the Gospel presented in *symbols, types, and pictures* (John 1:29; John 3:14-15; Galatians 6:14). And, of course, we do not, we cannot, dispute that blessed and comforting truth, because “*it is written*” (Matthew 4:4, etc.). Nor do we, nor can we, ascribe any special power and efficacy to the *preached* Word over the same Word in other forms. The reader may wish to consult Dr. Pieper’s extended discussion on this point (*Christian Dogmatics*, III, pp. 106-108), as well as the statement in our Lutheran Confessions (*Formula of Concord, Thorough Declaration*, II, *Triglot*, p. 901).

Nevertheless, one truth of Scripture never militates against another truth; for there are no contradictions either in God or in His Word (Numbers 23:19; John 10:35). The blessed truth that the Gospel (and the Sacraments which present and seal to us the promises of the Gospel) are the efficacious *means of grace* in whatever form and venue they are faithfully presented does not detract from or militate against or give cause to despise the blessed truth that God has established the assembly of the local congregation as the only divinely-ordained external fellowship, and that He has ordained that those whom He has *called out* [ἡκκλησία] of darkness into His marvelous light (I Peter 2:9) gladly participate in that local church. Neither does the blessed truth that the *means of grace* are efficacious when used privately detract from, militate against, or give cause to despise His command that His local flocks establish in their midst the pastoral office of public preaching, teaching and spiritual oversight for the edification of the body of Christ in that place and for the welfare of their individual souls and the souls of their children through the *public* ministration of the Means of Grace.

It is, therefore, to dispel all contrary views and to encourage those who are “*scattered abroad*” to seek out an orthodox congregation and faithful pastor with which to unite as fully-functioning members of a local church, that we offer this essay and present, on the basis of Holy Scripture,

The God-ordained Participation of Christians in the Local Congregation.

I.

In the first part of our essay, we shall explore how the Lord, out of lovingkindness to lost mankind in Christ, purposed to communicate to men His will and grace for the salvation of their souls, and how He intended His precious Word to be used jointly and severally by His people and proclaimed also to others. In this section, we will distinguish three specific periods in the history of the Christian Church and how God’s method of feeding “*the people of His pasture and the sheep of His hand*” (Psalm 95:7) varied from time to time, became more specific as to its content, and finally resulted in His ordinance of the local Christian congregation and its pastoral ministry for the declaration of His entire counsel (Acts 20:27-28) and for the spiritual nurturing of His local flocks (I Peter 5:2-3) .

We read in the opening verse of the Epistle to the Hebrews that God varied both the time and the manner in which He declared His Word and will unto men (“*God...at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers...*” Hebrews 1:1). Initially, He communicated to men *directly* and *orally*, as He did to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Before their wanton disobedience, whereby they fell into sin and lost the image of God in which they had been created, they enjoyed the perfect and blissful knowledge of their Creator and were perfectly attuned to His will as revealed to them in His Law, which He had written into their hearts when

He made them (Romans 2:15). But He had pronounced His blessing upon them *orally* (Genesis 1:28-30), instructing them in *words* which they could *hear* as to their procreation, as to their dominion over His creation, and as to their sustenance. He also specifically instructed them *in so many words* regarding the two trees in the midst of the garden to exercise and to test their willing obedience, stating His prohibition that they not eat of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, and warning them in plain words of the consequences that they would bring upon themselves, should they disobey Him. And, after they willingly yielded to the tempting voice of Satan and despised and rebelled against the Word of their God, He again dealt with them *orally* as, in the application of the Law in its fierceness, He pronounced His righteous wrath upon them and doled out His punishments—the very least of them being the *temporal* consequences recorded in Genesis 3:16-19. After all, “*sin [had] entered into the world, and death by sin*” (Romans 5:12). *Spiritual death* had been the immediate consequence (Genesis 2:17b), *temporal death* the natural consequence from that time on (Genesis 3:19b; Ecclesiastes 12:7), and *eternal death* the ultimate consequence (Romans 6:23). God also informed them *orally* of His plan of redemption, the first word of the Gospel [*Protevangeliium*], according to which the woman’s SEED would destroy the power of the devil by freeing them from the guilt and consequences of their sins (Genesis 3:15). It was by faith in this *orally*-promised SEED and in the Word of Reconciliation *orally* committed to them for their comfort and assurance that Adam and Eve were restored to God’s family, adopted as His children, and made heirs of everlasting life. This was, properly speaking, the beginning of the Christian Church.

God continued to manifest Himself to fallen mankind, to make known to them His will and grace, to promulgate His Word to them, and thus to build His Church *orally*, for about 2,500 years. There were no *Scriptures*, no *written* Word of God; nevertheless Adam and Eve *orally* taught their children to know Him, to believe in the Savior, and to worship Him (Genesis 4:3-7; cf. also Hebrews 11:4); men began “*to call upon the Name of the Lord*” in organized preaching, teaching, mutual exhortation and worship already at the time of Enos, Adam’s grandson (Genesis 4:26). God *spoke* to Noah and revealed to him the coming deluge, and Noah preached repentance to the people round about him for 120 years, to no avail (Genesis 6ff.). God appeared to Abraham and revealed to him *orally* justification by grace, for the sake of his Seed (to be descended from Isaac), through faith; and “*Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness*” (Romans 4:3). God manifested Himself *orally* in a dream to Jacob at Bethel, confirming to him the promise of the Savior, and revealing to him by means of the imagery of a ladder between earth and heaven that promised Seed as the only Mediator between God and men, the only Way to everlasting life (Genesis 28:12-17; cf. also John 1:51). And finally, after about 500 years of virtual silence during the captivity of the Children of Israel in Egypt, God appeared to Moses and spoke to Him out of the burning bush on Mt. Horeb (Exodus 3), and called him to deliver His people out of bondage to Pharaoh and to bring them safely to the Promised Land of Canaan. The fact that God communicated to Moses *directly* and *orally*, as through a mediator, was of some comfort to the Children of Israel at that time, since they were essentially ignorant of God in spite of information presumably passed down to them by *oral tradition*. They feared His wrath because of their sins and had not yet learned of His longsuffering mercy and grace to them in the promised Redeemer (Exodus 20:19; Deuteronomy 5: 22-33). Moses himself had to ask the Lord on Mt. Horeb: “*Behold, when I come unto the children of Israel, and shall say unto them, ‘The God of your fathers hath sent me unto you,’ and they shall say to me, ‘What is His Name?’ what shall I say unto them?’*”

But the *strictly oral tradition* was quickly to give way to a *written record* that the people could have held before their eyes, that they could have rehearsed for them, that they could keep

inviolable as His permanent revelation, that they could teach to their children and proclaim to their enemies. It was just after the Exodus from Egypt that God, *for the very first time*, committed His Word, specifically His holy Law, to *writing* with His own finger on two tables of stone (Exodus 31:18), and thereafter moved Moses, His prophet to whom He spoke face to face “*as a man speaketh unto his friend*” (Exodus 33:11) “*to write, and put into his mind the very thoughts which he expressed and the very words which he wrote*” (Cf. Q/A 10, *Exposition of the Small Catechism*, 1943 Ed. on “verbal inspiration”). The five books of Moses or *Pentateuch*, commonly referred to by the Jews (including Jesus Himself) as “*the Law*,” together with the Book of Job and the single psalm written by the Prophet Moses (Psalm 90), comprised the first “*canon*” of the Scriptures, God’s *written* revelation. The Old Testament Church was, from that time on, bound to that written Word, which was to be preserved and observed inviolable (Deuteronomy 4:2; 12:29-32; Joshua 1:7; 23:6; etc.). Only God Himself, from time to time and in various manners (Hebrews 1:1), added to those original Scriptures the writings of His other prophets “*given by inspiration of God*” (II Timothy 3:16), including also the poetical books of David and Solomon, and the historical books. It was that Old Testament “*canon*,” “*Moses and the prophets*” (Luke 16:29), “*the Holy Scriptures*” (II Timothy 3:15), which comprised God’s authoritative, inerrant, clear, and all-sufficient revelation to mankind until the writings of the evangelists and apostles, also verbally inspired by the Holy Ghost (I Corinthians 2:13) were added, and the entire Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments became the “*foundation*” upon which the Church was and is ever to be anchored, edified, and preserved (Ephesians 2:20).

Throughout the entire Old Testament era —beginning with the early period (up to about 1,500 B. C.) during which divine truth was revealed only by means of *direct oral communication* from God Himself, continuing through the middle period (1,500 - ca. 1,000 B. C.) during which only *the written Pentateuch* authored by Moses, namely, “*the Law*,” as well as early historical books (Joshua, Judges, Ruth, and I and II Samuel), and the poetical books (Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Solomon), were the source and standard of spiritual truth, and finally the later period (ca. 1,000 - 400 B.C.) when the manuscripts of the major and minor prophets completed the Old Testament canon —throughout the Old Testament, the primary and day-to-day responsibility for *teaching* the Word and will of God to others lay with Christian parents, who were to “*teach them diligently unto [their] children, and ...talk of them*” in the course of their everyday lives, in their homes, on the street, from morning to night, “24/7” as we commonly speak today (Deuteronomy 6:6-7, etc.). And that responsibility still holds today, as Christian parents, particularly the fathers, are charged with “*bring[ing] up [their] children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord*” (Ephesians 6:4). There was no Old Testament office of “*pastor and teacher*” (Ephesians 4:11) charged with the instruction and oversight of God’s people in local flocks. There were, however, “*prophets*,” men chosen by God to proclaim specific messages to the people at particular times, regarding particular coming events and visitations, and concerning particular circumstances, to admonish the people generally for their idolatry and unfaithfulness, and, most notably, to “*give witness [to the coming Messiah], that through His Name, whosoever believeth in Him shall receive remission of sins*” (Acts 10:43); but the prophets were not instructors, *Seelsorgers*, shepherds, and overseers.

The Rabbis, referred to in the New Testament Gospel accounts of Matthew and John were not incumbents of an ecclesiastical office, or of *any* office for that matter. They were what we would call today “laymen” who made their living at some trade or occupation but who were particularly well-versed in the Scriptures, perhaps specially trained and mentored by other Rabbis, and usually gifted with the ability to speak and to engage people in discussions. They were therefore well-respected in the local community as “teachers of the Law.” They read publicly from the

sacred scrolls, expounded the Scriptures, offered prayers according to a set liturgy or ritual that was commonly recognized from community to community and even from country to country where the Jews had been dispersed, and they conducted seminars about spiritual and ethical matters taught in the Torah as well as in other Rabbinical writings.

From what we know from the Scriptures, there was no Old Testament counterpart to the local Christian congregation. The word “*congregation*” in the Old Testament Scriptures usually refers to the entire *visible assembly* of God’s people (as determined by their heritage and/or profession) as they comprised a cohesive unit during their wanderings in the wilderness —true believers and hypocrites alike (See the repeated use of this word, for example, in the Book of Exodus). “*Congregation*” also designates the large assemblage of people gathered for public worship at the Tabernacle (“...*the tabernacle of the congregation*,” Exodus 33:7 and numerous other passages in Exodus and Leviticus) —and later at the Temple in Jerusalem (II Chronicles 29:28), also gatherings of the people for other purposes, political and social (as, for example, following the conquest of the city of Ai, Joshua 8), as well as gatherings of the decision-making assemblies in Israel (II Chronicles 30:1ff.). In general, therefore, the word in the Old Testament signified a *large assemblage* of the people, having “come together” or “congregated” for a particular purpose.

Scripture tells us nothing about the development of the *local synagogues* as to their origin, nor of any command of God to establish them. [The word “congregation” (from the Latin) and the word “synagogue” (from the Greek) mean basically the same thing.] They were, however, strictly *local* worship places and study centers where the Scriptures were read on the Sabbath day, discussions were held, guest Rabbis were given opportunity to speak, prayers were offered, and the local Jews conducted worship services on a regular basis. Even though it had eventually been rebuilt by Herod the Great, most Jews, because of distance, were able to visit the Temple in Jerusalem only rarely, perhaps only at the time of the great festivals (Passover, Pentecost, etc. Cf. Acts 2). When the 12-year-old Jesus with Mary and Joseph traveled from Nazareth to Jerusalem for the Passover, they were en route for probably the better part of a week on foot; and yet Nazareth was not regarded to be a great distance from Jerusalem. Jesus, as well as Stephen (martyred in Jerusalem), and especially St. Paul on his various missionary journeys, were frequent visitors and even invited guest preachers in the synagogues of the Jews, making use of such opportunities to testify to the person and work of God’s Messiah, the “*Son of David*,” Jesus Himself, and the truth of the Gospel. Historians tell us that synagogues originated during the Babylonian exile after the destruction of Solomon’s Temple by Nebuchadnezzar (about 586 B. C.) because sacrifices could no longer be offered, priests could no longer function at the altars, and the Levites could no longer chant the Psalms. Since the exiled Jews were anxious to keep alive for themselves and to enkindle in their children the knowledge of God and their remembrance of Jerusalem and of the Temple as the focal point of their heritage, they assembled regularly, but at least every Sabbath day, to read the Scriptures, to pray, and to comfort one another in the evil day (R. Brasch, *The Judaic Heritage*. New York: David McKay Co., 1969, pp. 226ff.). Assembly in the local synagogue was deemed a sacred privilege for every Jew; even hundreds of years later after the reconstruction of the Temple; and, since the Jewish church was still the true visible church of God when Jesus walked visibly among men and even in the early years of the Christian era (as witnessed by the participation of the apostles and other early Christians in its services, Acts 3:1ff., 18:21; 20:6, 16; 21:26-28; etc.), Jesus Himself was in regular attendance (Luke 4:16ff.; 6:6; 59; John 18:20-21), demonstrating in His *active obedience* His love for the Word of God and the place where His honor dwelt (Psalm 26:8; 122:1) —even though the synagogue, as such, was not instituted or mandated by God.

On the other hand, local churches or congregations of professing Christians, the local assemblies of those who confess Christ as the only Savior of sinful mankind and rely solely upon His vicarious sacrifice as that payment-in-full which propitiated God's justice and purchased remission of sins and reconciliation with God for every sinner, those congregations have been *ordained of God*, instituted by the Lord of the Church for very specific purposes. It is not our purpose in this essay to treat the Doctrine of the Church in all of its aspects. Nevertheless, for the sake of clarity and a right understanding of the nature and purpose of the Christian congregation and its pastoral ministry, a few summary statements concerning the Doctrine of the Church are certainly in order.

Early on in this section, we observed that the Christian Church had its beginning, properly-speaking, when God first proclaimed the Gospel of salvation to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. This signaled the establishment of His *Kingdom of Grace* in which He offers, gives and seals to penitent sinners the forgiveness, life, and salvation which, in eternity already, He decreed, granted and declared for the entire world in view of the perfect vicarious satisfaction of divine justice that His only-begotten Son would earn on behalf of every man (II Corinthians 5:19, 21; Romans 3:25; I John 2:2). The Gospel or "good news" of this accomplished reconciliation was to be not only the vehicle for announcing this salvation to all the world (Psalm 98:2; Mark 16:15; Luke 24:47), but it was to be the very means whereby the Holy Spirit of God would work in men's hearts the faith to accept and believe, rejoice and take comfort in it (II Thessalonians 2:14; I Peter 1:23; Romans 10:17; Galatians 3:26). And it is *faith* and *faith alone*, that is, confidence of the heart in the mercy of God which remits sins for Christ's sake totally apart from the works of the Law, personal trust in the accomplished reconciliation of the world by God unto Himself in Christ, that makes a poor sinner a member of the **Holy Christian Church**, the **Communion of Saints**, the *Una Sancta*, the mystical and invisible body of Christ, and an heir of everlasting life. Nothing but faith makes a person a *member* of the Christian Church (Galatians 3:26; Mark 16:16a; Ephesians 2:19-22), and nothing but unbelief *excludes* and keeps him *out* of the Christian Church (Mark 16:16b; Romans 8:9). And since faith is resident in the heart (Romans 10:10a) and unable to be seen by man (Luke 17:20-21), only the Lord Himself knows who is and who is not a member of His Church (II Timothy 2:19).

The Scriptures also speak of "*the Church*" in a *local* sense, that is, the congregation of those believers who live in a *specific locality*, assemble regularly for the public use of the Office of the Keys, and establish the Pastoral Office in their midst according to God's institution (I Corinthians 1:2; Romans 16:16; I Corinthians 11:16; Acts 14:23, 27; I Corinthians 14:23; etc.). Scripture itself refers to this *local Church* as **God sees it** (who alone knows the hearts) when it speaks of the *true believers* in that place—as does St. Paul when he addresses the congregation at Corinth as "*them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints*" (I Corinthians 1:2). But Scripture also speaks of this local Church as **men see it**, consisting of those who *profess true faith in Christ* and function as true brethren assembled together in a body which can be identified, numbered, addressed, heard, seen, and dealt with (Matthew 18:17; Acts 2:42; I Corinthians 5:13; etc.). Hypocrites who assemble with the local congregation and artfully disguise their unbelief under a pretense of fellowship are not truly members of that church in the sight of God; and their charade, which is indiscernible to the rest, is a lie to God Himself, for which they alone, not their fellow-members, will have to give account (Cf. Ananias and Sapphira, Acts 5).

In clear opposition to the false, unscriptural position of the Wisconsin Synod, the Church of the Lutheran Confession, and any other body that joins them in supporting it, namely, their claim

that the local congregation has NOT been specifically instituted by God in contrast to other groupings of believers, we hold on the basis of clear Scripture that the formation of local Christian congregations or “*churches*” and membership is **ordained**, that is, **commanded** by God, and that the local congregation is the **only God-ordained external fellowship of believers**. (Titus 1:5; Acts 20:28; I Peter 5:2-3; I Corinthians 11:23-29; Hebrews 10:23-25; Colossians 3:15-16; Matthew 18:15-17; etc.)

Moreover, it is God’s will that professing Christians who regularly assemble together about the Word and Sacraments not only **form** *local churches* or congregations according to His divine ordinance (or to **join** them where they already exist), but also **call men** properly equipped with the qualifications set down in Scripture (I Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9) to undertake the **Public Ministry** among them and thus establish the **Pastoral Office** of preaching, teaching, and spiritual oversight for the public administration of the Keys in their midst (Titus 1:5; Acts 20:28; I Peter 5:2-3; etc.). Where this is NOT done, there is something “*lacking*” among them, St. Paul asserts in Titus 1:5.

As we noted previously, the *Means of Grace*, specifically the Gospel, and the Sacraments through which the Gospel promises and its benefits are offered, given, and sealed to men, are *efficacious* in whatever form and venue they are employed, provided they are used in their *purity*; for a perverted Gospel, and bogus Sacraments administered contrary to Christ’s own institution, are not means of grace *at all*. Thus, the Word of God *privately read and studied* dare not be deprecated as being less valuable, less efficacious, than the *preached* Word, lest the Office of the Ministry *itself* be made an *absolute necessity* which gives the Gospel its power unto salvation. The same warning applies in the case of Baptism. When a layman baptizes in a case of urgency (as well he should under such a circumstance), the blessings and power of Holy Baptism are in no way diminished merely because the Sacrament was not administered by “a called and ordained servant of the Word” [the wording of the absolution, *TLH*, p. 16]. Nevertheless, the Pastoral Office of preaching (II Timothy 4:2), of teaching (I Peter 5:22-3; Acts 20:28), of the stewardship of God’s mysteries (I Corinthians 4:1ff.), of spiritual oversight (Hebrews 13:17; I Thessalonians 5:12b), of public admonition (II Timothy 4:3; I Thessalonians 5:12c), and of the general care of precious souls committed to the Pastor’s charge by the Holy Ghost (Acts 20:28; etc.), should not be despised as superfluous. Luther comments rather bluntly concerning those whose attitude is: “The Ministry?? Who needs it??” He writes:

Some smart wiseacres say: But we have books from which we can read it just as well as hear it from the preacher in church. You read down the devil on your head, who is then controlling you. If our Lord God had known that the ministry was superfluous, He certainly would have been so wise and sage not to have had Moses preach to you. ...He would also in our day surely tell the preachers and pastors to stay at home. (Martin Luther, *Sämtliche Schriften*, St. Louis Ed., III, p. 1736.)

In these latter days, when we are struck with the *scarcity* of truly orthodox Christian **local congregations** and the *dearth* of faithful Christian **preaching and teaching**, and when many who are concerned about their souls’ welfare and their need for spiritual nourishment find themselves geographically isolated from an assembly of true brethren and the ministrations of a faithful shepherd, it is, oh, so easy to despise, that is, think little of, the local Christian congregation as the ordinance of God it is for the spiritual welfare of His people (Hebrews 10:25), and to lull oneself into an aura of false spiritual security by going into “denial” about the need for pastoral care and feeding, as if the lack of a faithful shepherd is not the lack that the

Lord Himself says it is (Titus 1:5)! God had ordained the local congregation so that His people can carry out the obligations and privileges which He has enjoined upon them for their own welfare and blessing and to the glory of His grace! And God has ordained the Pastoral Office of the local congregation so that His people can be regularly nourished and built up in their faith, cared for and watched over by a faithful undershepherd of the Lord Jesus, and comforted in times of trial and affliction. Therefore, it is not an *adiaphoron* as to whether those who claim to be Christians are “free” **to join** or **not to join** a local Christian congregation and to participate with their brethren in the exercise of discipleship. And it is not an *adiaphoron* as to whether a professing Christian “needs” to have the Word of God preached to him, to be taught the precious doctrines of Holy Scripture, to be watched over by a faithful shepherd, to be reproved, rebuked, exhorted with all longsuffering and doctrine by one who has the rule over God’s local flock with His Word (II Timothy 4:2ff.). Rather, the Scriptures are clear as crystal in setting forth as a sacred responsibility and privilege **the God-ordained participation of Christians in the local congregation**. In the second part of our essay, we shall consider in detail *what* that participation involves and *why* God has ordained it.

II.

In order to determine *what participation* in the local congregation involves, we need to examine, on the basis of Scripture, what particular *functions* are assigned by God Himself to, and are served by the local Christian “*church*” or congregation as, an *assembly* of believers — functions which cannot be performed by an *individual* believer. What are those functions which, by their very nature, assume the existence of a *group* of Christians? What functions, in other words, using a *contemporary* expression to describe what is going on, — what functions are “interactive” and therefore are incapable of being carried out by a believer who is isolated from true brethren? We identify from the words of Scripture the following *group* or interactive functions:

1) God intends and had ordained that His Word not only be read in private study, but that it be *heard* with the ear and thus impressed upon the mind and heart, upon the intellect and will (Matthew 11:15; 13:9, 15; Mark 4:9 and 23; Luke 8:8; Revelation 2:7; Isaiah 55:3; Luke 11:28; Romans 10:14b,17; etc. Compare also Deuteronomy 30:10ff., as well as the frequent admonitions of God’s prophets to “*hear the Word of the Lord*” – e.g. Jeremiah 26:1ff., etc.).

2) God intends and has ordained that His people *gather together* or *assemble* with their brethren, not only for the hearing of God’s Word, but for mutual exhortation, instruction, and admonition of one another with the wisdom of Holy Writ (Hebrews 10:25; Colossians 3:16, etc.), with “*the doctrine which is according to Godliness*” (I Timothy 6:3), “*the apostles’ doctrine*” (Acts 2:42). See also II Timothy 3:16, etc. concerning the profitability of Scripture for such “interactive” (and not just individual) functions as “*doctrine, reproof, correction, instruction in righteousness.*”

3) God intends and has commanded that His people “*submit*” themselves to spiritual “*overseers*” and “*watchmen*” for their souls (Hebrews 13:17; I Thessalonians 5:12-13) whom He has placed over them (Acts 20:28) for their souls’ nurture, edification and safety. That office presupposes the existence of a *group* or *assembly*, the “*church of God*” (Acts 20:28), the “*flock of God*” (I Peter 5:2), and assumes that the individual Christian is not to be his own overseer.

4) God intends and has commanded that, in the exercise of the Office of the Keys, particularly in *the admonition of manifest and impenitent sinners*, not only *individuals*, not only

“one or two more,” but “the church” or local congregation of the brethren be involved (Matthew 18:15-17) for the gaining of a brother from his sins for heaven. (See also James 5:19-20.) Note that the “one or two more” are NOT “the church” in Matthew 18:17, but are the assembly of even more brethren to whom they are to go in a last effort to rescue a sinning brother. Moreover, in the last extremity, when a manifest sinner is “excluded from the Christian congregation” (Luther), this is to be done by the assembled brethren, not merely “one or two” (I Corinthians 5:4-5)

5) God intends and has ordained that the Holy Sacrament of our Savior’s body and blood be celebrated as the exercise of *brotherly communion* and interaction in the context of the *local congregation* (I Corinthians 10:17; 11:17-21; 33). There is no command and not one instance recorded in Scripture of “self-communion” apart from those who “*come together*” (I Corinthians 11:20); and so-called “private communion” is really the *public* administration of the Sacrament by the Pastor on behalf and in the name of the entire congregation, not as the exercise of his personal authority and privilege (Roman Catholic).

6) God intends and has ordained that *sacrificial worship and the praise of His holy Name*, both with the voice and with offerings of love, be offered up “*in the congregation*,” that is, in the assembly of His people (Psalm 84; Psalm 66:13-14; Psalm 96:8; Psalm 116:12-14; etc.).

7) God intends and has commanded that His people give *testimony to their unity* in His Word and to their fellowship with one another on that basis of that unity by their joint worship, joint prayer, joint communion, joint church work, joint support of His kingdom, and the practice of joint benevolence, all in the context of the local Christian congregation. Note that the passages which prohibit fraternization with the *heterodox* infer fraternization with the *orthodox* (I Corinthians 1:10; Amos 3:3; Ephesians 4:3; Acts 2:42; II Corinthians 6:14-18; Galatians 6:6-7; Galatians 6:10; I John 3:17; 4:21; etc.)

8) God intends and has ordained that His people, *congregated*, that is, *assembled together*, as a local “*flock*,” establish in their midst *the Pastoral Office* as instituted by the Lord of the Church for the care, oversight and edification of His mystical body, the true believers, and that something is “*lacking*” when this office has not been established (Ephesians 4:11-12; Titus 1:5).

Moreover, the God-ordained, specified *qualifications* and *duties* of **Christian pastors**, as these are clearly set down in Scripture (I Timothy 3:2-7 and Titus 1:6-9; also Acts 20:28; I Peter 5:2-3), presuppose and infer a *gathering or assembly* (a *congregation*, a local *church*) to which the Keys have been especially entrusted, in the name and on behalf of which the Pastor, by virtue of his call, publicly administers those Keys as the servant of *Christ* and steward of His mysteries (I Corinthians 4:1), also as the servant of *the people* for Jesus’ sake (II Corinthians 4:5). Among **the duties of the Pastoral Office** we number, on the basis of Scripture, the following, which are specified in the *Diploma of Vocation*:

1) To proclaim to the members of the congregation, jointly and severally, the Word of God in its full truth and purity (II Timothy 4:1-2).

2) To administer the Holy Sacraments in accordance with their divine institution (Matthew 28:19; I Corinthians 11:23-29).

3) To discharge toward all the members of the congregation the functions of a pastor, overseer, and curate of their souls; to feed the church of God, rightly dividing between Law and

Gospel in accordance with Holy Scripture; in particular to visit the sick and the dying; and to admonish indifferent and erring members (Ephesians 4:11-12; Acts 20:28; II Timothy 2:15).

4) To guide the members of the congregation in applying the divinely ordained discipline of the church in accordance with the Word of God (Matthew 18:15-17; I Timothy 5:20; Galatians 6:1; Titus 1:9-13).

5) To do whatever is possible to promote thorough Christian education in the congregation for young and old; to instruct prospective members in the Word of God, as this is rightly set forth in the Small Catechism of Dr. Martin Luther, thus preparing them for communicant membership (John 21:15-17; I Corinthians 11:28); and to continue edifying by constant instruction in the Word of Christ those who are communicant members (Acts 20:28; I Peter 5:2-3; II Peter 1:12; 3:18).

6) To urge the members of the congregation to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Ephesians 4:3; I Corinthians 1:10), and to warn and guard them against all errors and errorists in doctrine and practice (Ezekiel 3:17-21; Matthew 7:15; Romans 16:17-18);

7) To serve the members of the congregation as an example by his Christian conduct; and, by the grace of God, to do all that is possible for him to do, within the limits of his calling, for the upbuilding of the congregation and for the general advancement of the kingdom of Christ (Titus 2:7-8; II Corinthians 3:4-6; 4:1-18).

All of our congregations, at some time in the recent or remote past, sent a *Diploma of Vocation* or Call Form with these or very similar words to their respective pastors, conveying to them the Solemn Call of the Holy Spirit —mediately through the local Christian congregation— to undertake the public ministry of the Word and Sacraments among them. Such a call form cites both the passages upon which the Doctrine of the Call is based, the passages according to which we hold that the Pastoral Office is divinely instituted by God and the only divinely-ordained office in the Church, and the passages which prescribe both the Pastor’s duties toward the members of his flock and the duties of the members toward the ambassador of Christ in their midst. In Luther’s words, “this is no child’s play!” Both the local Christian congregation and the Pastoral Office of that congregation have been **ordained**, that is, **set up** and **commanded**, by God Himself. They are His creations, His institutions, for the ultimate welfare and salvation of precious souls; and they dare not be regarded as anything less!

Your essayist now respectfully begs your kind indulgence in permitting him the bluntness that we so admire in Dr. Luther. You no doubt recall the quotation from Luther cited earlier in our discussion. He began with this sentence: “Some smart wiseacres say: ‘But we have books from which we can read it just as well as hear it from the preacher in church.’” —We have heard “smart wiseacres” say a lot more than that concerning the local congregation and its ministry! Their “little knowledge” of “God’s Word and Luther’s doctrine pure” has become a snare to them; and they, echoing the “*gainsaying of Core*” (Jude 11b) [*i.e.*, Korah (Numbers 16:3)], take issue with our Scriptural position on **the God-ordained participation of Christians in the Local Congregation** and label it “legalistic,” “papistical,” “false doctrine and practice,” “*teaching for doctrines the commandments of men,*” and the like. “*Ye pastors take too much upon you* in requiring this of us, *seeing all the congregation are holy, every one of them.* We are Christians, after all, kings and priests before God, right where we are, where God Himself has planted us—even though we’re isolated from any orthodox local congregation and pastor. Our participation in a local congregation, our having the ministrations of a faithful pastor, are not necessary for salvation! So don’t you dare lay such participation on our conscience, as though God Himself required it! *Wherefore lift ye up yourselves above the congregation of the Lord?!*

You're making yourselves lords over God's heritage!" —Make no mistake about it: This is no exaggeration! Our files are *full* of such comments, such arrogant charges, such preposterous accusations! And the Wisconsin Synod and the Church of the Lutheran Confession, who claim that neither the local congregation nor the Pastoral Office has been ordained of God, have not done such "smart wiseacres" any favors! They have only fueled their fire and emboldened their sharp tongues with their false and pernicious doctrine. *The gainsaying* [the *opposition*] of *Korah* is a more common occurrence than one would imagine; but the punishment of God for such arrogant speech against the Lord and His servants is uncommon indeed, as we read of what happened to Korah and his mob in Numbers 13:32-33. The Lord tells us: "*He that hath My Word, let him speak My Word faithfully*" (Jeremiah 23:28); and we would be less than faithful, yea, we would be downright *unfaithful* and *unprofitable* servants, if we were to deny what God in His Word enjoins! This we refuse to do!

As to the statement that "membership and participation in a local congregation is *not necessary to salvation*," we have no argument with it —provided that it is not used as a smokescreen or "*sheep's clothing*" to cover over and to justify disobedience to clear injunctions of the Word of God. The claim that "having a faithful Christian pastor to preach and teach the Word in its purity, to admonish gainsayers, to warn against wolves, and to comfort the afflicted is *not necessary for salvation*" should not be regarded by me or by any other faithful pastor as a personal slap-in-the-face. The statement is correct *as it stands*. However, if that Scriptural statement is "*wrested*," that is, *twisted* (II Peter 3:16b), to infer that the Pastoral Office and its functions are not God-ordained, and that a Christian can just *ignore* both the office and its God-given responsibilities as inconsequential [or, as Luther said it best, "superfluous"], then the curtain comes down of the "show of right." The show is over, and the thoughts of the hearts stand revealed.

A few examples should suffice:

- Salvation is by grace alone through faith alone. Good works are the fruit of faith — God desires, yea, has "*ordained*" (Ephesians 2:10), "*that we should walk in them.*" But they're not necessary to salvation. So we can just forget about them altogether. Right??
- The Lord's Supper is not necessary to salvation *either*. So we don't need to partake of it— often or even at all. Right??
- Faith in the literal six-day creation of the world is not essential to salvation *either*. So we can just deny it. Right??
- Not letting the kids join the Scouts, making sure they don't attend dances, and keeping them virgins until they are married are not necessary for salvation *either*. So we don't have to be concerned about such things. The kids can just do what they *want*. Right??
- Keeping God's Law is not necessary for salvation *either*. So we can simply ignore His commandments. After all, we are not under the Law but under grace. Right??
- Avoiding false teachers and refusing fellowship with the heterodox is not essential to salvation *either*. So we can just forget about Romans 16:17 and Titus 3:10 and those

pesky “unequal yokes.” Right??

One of the differences we have with the Lutheran Churches of the Reformation centers on their claim that there are “exceptions” to God’s ordinances — exceptions that we can make on the basis of “extenuating circumstances,” the claim of “poverty,” “apostolic precept” (the L. C. R.’s idea that, since one or more of the apostles did not follow it, we don’t have to either), and so on. Here’s a “newsflash” for the L. C. R. theologians: **God requires what He requires** ...whether it is necessary to salvation or whether it is the expression of His will for us in our lives of sanctification. He does not give us the right to determine which of His laws and ordinances we may choose to obey (Deuteronomy 12:32), nor does He grant us “Christian liberty” to take exception to them. The L. C. R. makes “practical” use of this perversion of Holy Scripture when they do not require the full financial support of their pastors. Only a few of their fifteen pastors are fully supported; most have full- or part-time secular jobs in addition to their pastoral work. “But most of the congregations are so small!” “But the pastors want to show that they are not greedy of filthy lucre.” “But the pastors are willing to make that sacrifice for the good of the Lord’s kingdom.” “But the pastor needs to work so that he can help out the church’s bottom line.” “But the people just can’t afford to support their pastors.” “But the Apostle Paul sewed tents!” — “*Even so hath the Lord ordained,*” writes Paul himself to the Corinthians, “*that they which preach the Gospel should live [i.e., have their living] of the Gospel*” (I Corinthians 9:14). That is God’s ordinance. And the L. C. R. thinks that we have such a “strange” and “legalistic” teaching on this matter! Well, take it up with the Holy Ghost! “*To obey is better than sacrifice*” (I Samuel 15:22).

Now in our present day and age, when a person’s so-called “comfort zone” is more important to him than anything else, when his personal freedom to “do his own thing” is treasured above responsibility to others (even over responsibility to God), when his own “personal business” is no one else’s business (not even the Lord’s), when his job, his home, his lifestyle and his temporal welfare in general occupy a higher priority in the “grand scheme of things” than the health and security of his immortal soul, we can understand exactly what was “going down” when the invited guests in Jesus’ parable about “*the kingdom of God*” and the Gospel invitation to salvation “*with one consent*” —all of them agreed and “on the same page” — “*began to make excuse*” (Luke 14:18) —the standard Gospel Lesson for this Second Sunday after Trinity.

And what “*excuses*” did they make? Why, excuses that they apparently thought would be regarded as completely reasonable by their would-be Host —assuming that He was just as fixated on the mundane things of this life as they were! “*The first said, I have bought a piece of ground, and I must needs go and see it. I pray thee, have me excused*” (v. 18). Everybody knows that a person’s **real estate** is the most important thing on his priority list! Right?? —“Sorry I can’t be in God’s House more regularly, Pastor, but you know what a long drive I have to come to church. I know it’s a sacrifice, but I live in such a great neighborhood; and I wouldn’t give that up for anything! I got a great house for the money, the schools are the best in the county, and the crime rate is so low out there. *I pray thee, have me excused.* —Besides, a person’s frequent attendance at services doesn’t get him into heaven any sooner, does it??”

“*And another said, I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to prove them. I pray thee, have me excused*” (v. 19). A person has to take care of his **investments**. Everybody knows that. —“Sorry I can’t be at the voters’ meeting again this time, Pastor; but I bought this boat, and Sunday afternoons are the only time I have to work on it. Good stewardship, you know. Wouldn’t want to waste God’s money, right? *I pray thee, have me excused.* —Besides,

Hebrews 10:25 doesn't apply to voters' meetings, Bible Classes, and optional activities like that. It's only the regular worship service, right Pastor?? And I'm usually there, at least most of the time."

"And another said, 'I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come.'" This excuse assumes that it's the wife who doesn't want to come. Maybe that's true if the fella married a girl who wasn't a true Christian, who didn't "*love the habitation of [God's] House*" (Psalm 26:8), who wasn't "*glad*" when her groom said unto her, "*Let us go into the House of the Lord*" (Psalm 122:1). "Sorry, Pastor, that I can't be more active in things at church. It's my wife, you know. She wants to spend Sunday at her folks' place; and I can't really do anything about that. You know how it is, Pastor. You're married. It's a sacrifice you have to make sometimes to save your marriage. Marriage is an institution of God, you know; and there are only two legitimate reasons for divorce. And church attendance isn't one of them. *I pray thee, have me excused.* —Besides, participation in the local congregation isn't really necessary for salvation, right?"

That poignant parable of the Lord Jesus could have scripted a 21st Century soap opera entitled, "*Sorry, but you know how it is!*" — "*With **one consent**, **everybody agreeing** that "there are simply so many legitimate extenuating circumstances that should be understood, accepted, and validated as 'really important' excuses, that people ought not 'judge one another' about matters that are none of their business."* —But we ask such people: Why make the excuse in the first place, and even say you're "sorry," unless, of course, you're guilty and you know it? By stating the reason you have come up with, you make it another person's business because you now expect him to pass favorable judgment upon your completely *lame* excuse. Notice that Jesus did not validate even ONE of those excuses! The Host in His parable did not say, "You're right. I completely understand." He was justly angry and said: "*None of those men which were bidden shall taste of My supper!*"

"Do I **HAVE TO** participate in a local Christian congregation?? —Do I **HAVE TO** join the Voters' Assembly? —Do I **HAVE TO** be in church every Sunday?? —Do I **HAVE TO** partake of the Lord's Supper more than twice a year?? —Do I **HAVE TO** *hear* God's Word *in person*?? Can't I just get *tapes*? —Do I **HAVE TO** be in Bible Class?? —Do I **HAVE TO** fill out my Sunday School worksheet? —Do I **HAVE TO** learn ALL of the passages?? —Do I **HAVE TO** be in Confirmation Class for three whole years?? —Do I really **HAVE TO** come to church? Can't the church come to me —via the Internet? Or on tapes or CD's? How about a telephone hook-up? ...you know, so that I don't **have to** leave the comfort of my home and actually **go** somewhere??" —What is the matter with such questions? ...for Christians? They are all motivated by the Law! They all express resentment at **having** to do something rather than gladly and willingly, yea, cheerfully and eagerly, taking part in those things that the Lord in love has ordained as **great privileges** for our soul's welfare and blessing, *not* to punish us but to strengthen and preserve us steadfast in His Word and faith unto our end. Would we expect *the same* questions regarding **temporal things** that are really **important** to us??

How would *these* sound, for example? "Do I **HAVE TO** participate in order to be on the soccer team? —Do I **HAVE TO** join the union in order to get benefits?? —Do I **HAVE TO** go to work every day? —Do I **HAVE TO** eat a balanced meal more than twice a year? —Do I **HAVE TO** hear that singing sensation *in person* at her concert? Can't I just get *a tape*?? —Do I **HAVE TO** be *present* to win that drawing? Can't they just *send* me the prize? —Do I **HAVE TO** accept the entire Christmas bonus? —Do I actually **HAVE TO** go to the hospital for my surgery?? Why can't they operate on-line? Maybe they could just send me the instructions, and I could operate

on myself!! I wish I didn't **HAVE TO** go to the final game of the playoffs. I really appreciate these free tickets; but couldn't I just watch it on T.V.?"

If such questions seem so nonsensical regarding the things of this world, how can the very same questions or excuses seem right and completely legitimate when it comes to the things of the spirit?? The answer is simple: Jesus tells us in Matthew 6:21, "*Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.*" A person will find time to do what he really values. He will make sacrifices for things that are important to him. He will travel hundreds of miles to take advantage of opportunities that are significant to him. Unless he is critically ill, he may even get out of a sickbed to participate in an event or activity that is "too good to pass up." A person will sell his house and move his family to another city for the sake of a job promotion. A student will leave home and relocate cross-country, to a place where no one even knows his name, to attend a prestigious college or university —especially if he has a free-ride scholarship. A father will spend literally thousands of dollars to take his children to *Disney World* —in addition to the thousands he already spends on park district programs, tennis, swimming, or piano lessons, soccer shoes, and that *Play Station*. *Why??* Because all those things are **important** to him. Why will he **not** make the very same sacrifices of time, travel, relocation, and money for the things of the spirit?? Three verses after the Savior's statement above, he tells us: "*No man can serve two masters. For either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will hold to the one and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and Mammon.*" Note that the Savior does not forbid us to have money, to make investments, to own a house, to buy our children tennis lessons, to send them to soccer or band camp, to pay their way through college. and provide them with a pricey wedding reception. BUT He does NOT permit us to let such earthly things **compete** with our **service to Him and His kingdom** so that we feel we have to choose between them. He points out in that well-known text that anxiety over and service to the things of this world is **idolatry** —fearing, loving, and trusting in other persons or things as we should fear love and trust in *God alone*. "*Seek ye FIRST the kingdom of God and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.*" Notice that the Savior's guarantee does not run the other way around!

Instead, He urgently bids us to invest in the things that belong unto our peace (Luke 19:42), to our spiritual welfare for time and eternity, saying in Isaiah 55: "*Ho, everyone that thirsteth, come ye to the waters; and he that hath no money, come ye, buy and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Wherefore do ye spend money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which satisfieth not? Hearken diligently unto Me, and eat ye that which is good; and let your soul delight itself in fatness. Incline your ear, and come unto Me. Hear, and your soul shall live. And I will make an everlasting covenant with you, even the sure mercies of David*" (vv. 1-3).

When professing Christians "*with one consent...make excuse*" for not participating in the local congregation —in spite of the *ordinance of God* that they do so out of gratitude to their Savior for His grace, out of love to Him for His Word, and out of concern for their own great blessing, they demonstrate to *themselves, to their children, to their brethren, and to the world* that "their heart is not in it." What an offense! (Matthew 18:7). "*This people draweth nigh unto Me with their mouth, and honoreth Me with their lips; but their heart is far from Me,*" said our Savior in Matthew 15:8, quoting the Lord through Isaiah in the 29th chapter of his prophecy, verse 13. Their problem is that they do not appreciate the Gospel, and they despise God's precious means of grace.

But what is even more grievous an abomination than the loss of "*first love*" (Revelation 2:4) and the love of many "*wax[ing] cold*" in these last evil days (Matthew 24:12) is that some actually

dare to blame God Himself for the conditions in their lives which make their participation in the local congregation a sacrifice too great to make. Adam, up-in-the-face of God Himself, dared to accuse Him in similar fashion, Genesis 3:12, saying: “*The woman whom Thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat.*” Well, shame on God!! If He hadn’t in love provided Adam with a *perfect* helper, created her in *His own image*, and brought her unto the man for his comfort and loving companionship, Adam would never have sinned! Rubbish!! But we have in very recent years heard the same vicious twist laid on God Himself as the efficient cause for people ignoring His divine ordinance that they participate in the local congregation. We have paraphrased here some striking examples of this kind of reasoning: “**God** gave us these circumstance which now keep us from assembling ourselves together with true brethren for mutual exhortation in the Word.” “**God** gave me the health problems which keep me from coming to His House.” “**God** ‘planted us’ here in the city where we live far away from an orthodox congregation; and our relocation would despise His ‘planting’. **He** obviously doesn’t want us to move.” “We have lived here for so many years that, if we moved, we would **die!**” “**God** has caused the real estate market to be so ‘soft’ that we can’t get a good price for our land. So it is **He** that is keeping us from selling out and moving elsewhere.” “God has shown us that electro-magnetic force fields in metropolitan cities are dangerous to our health, and so **He** wants us to stay out here in the ‘boonies’ where that errant power is not so strong.” —Do such people think that God is some kind of ‘nut’ that He would ordain something for the good and blessing of His children and then **prohibit** them from utilizing it! “*God is not a man that He should lie! ...Hath He said, and shall He not do it? Or hath He spoken, and shall He not make it good??*” (Numbers 23:19).

We have explored these **questions** in our discussion and have discovered in the precious pages of our Bible these **answers**:

- **Has God ordained the participation of Christians in the local congregation?** Yes, of course He has, as we have clearly seen from the abundance of passages we have studied.
- **Has He ordained that participation for good and salutary reasons**, namely, for the welfare of our souls and for our great blessing in time and eternity? Yes, indeed He has, as is clearly evident in the passages we have explored.
- **Has He ordained that participation as a legalistic and punitive measure** to upset our lives, **OR as a great and glorious privilege** that we should value and exercise in joy and gladness of heart? Clearly the latter, according to all the passages that we have considered.
- **Does He fully expect us to comply with that ordinance out of love to Him who first loved us?** Yes, this is His will for us, His children by faith in Jesus, even our sanctification, as is plainly evident in His Word.
- **Has He permitted us, for whatever reason, to set aside His ordinance in favor of some other expedient?** He has NOT. Exceptions to God’s ordinances are made by God Himself, and we see no such exceptions in His Word regarding *this* ordinance.
- **Does He expect us to make sacrifices in order to bring forth fruit in this area of sanctification?** He does indeed, and the passages are numerous to demonstrate that as we well know.

• **Has the Lord promised *abundant gracious blessings* to us Christians as the result of our participation in His local church and our shepherding by its pastor?** He certainly has—blessings both *temporal* and *spiritual*, enumerated in a whole host of clear and absolutely certain texts of His Word.

In summary then: The local Christian congregation and its ministry have been *ordained by God* for the **welfare** and **blessing** of His dear children here in this world—**for the regular hearing of His Word**, whereby faith is created and strengthened in the heart (Romans 10:17; Isaiah 55:10-11; Luke 11:28; etc.); **for the nourishment of our souls** on the “*milk of the Word*” for growth in grace and knowledge, so that we can increase in strength of faith (I Peter 2:2; Colossians 3:16; John 5:39; II Peter 3:18; etc.); **for our careful feeding and oversight** by Christ’s chosen undershepherds, His pastors, whose duty it is to feed us in the pure pastures of His Word and to watch for our souls (Acts 20:28; I Peter 5:1ff.; Hebrews 13:17); **for regular celebration of the Lord’s Supper with our brethren** in accordance with Christ’s command (Luke 22:19ff.; Acts 2:42; I Corinthians 10:17; 11:20ff.); **for sacrificial worship and praise of God** in our joint prayers, in our hymns of praise and liturgy, and in our thanksgiving for all His benefits to us, both with our words and with our offerings of love (Psalm 66:1-2; 13-15; Psalm 84; Psalm 96:8; Psalm 116:12-14; etc.); and **for the opportunity to testify to our unity** with those with whom we worship (Amos 3:3; Ephesians 4:3; Acts 2:42; I Corinthians 1:10; Romans 16:17; etc.).

Knowing what great blessings our gracious God and Lord richly and daily provides us in our local churches under the watchfulness of faithful shepherds and stewards of His mysteries, how *grateful* we should be for their existence, how *eager* we should be for their continuance, how *enthusiastic* we should be for our own participation in their functions, how *dedicated* we should be in their support, and how *careful* we should be that we never take them for granted. If and when we are ever confronted with the prospect of having to relocate our residence, of choosing a college or university to attend, of volunteering for service to our country in the armed forces (particularly when such service is not required of us), let our FIRST consideration be, regarding ANY prospective location: **Is there in that locality a truly orthodox Christian congregation with which I can unite and in which I can be an active participant according to God’s ordinance?** If not, STOP! Do not deliberately forsake the assembling of yourself together with your brethren contrary to your Lord’s earnest plea and exhortation! To do so would be to commit a terrible sin against your God, who earnestly desires your salvation; and you would thereby place your soul in jeopardy of damnation! Hear once more the exhortation of the writer to the Hebrews, whose words were penned by inspiration of the Holy Ghost, and consider them together in their proper context:

“Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering; for He is faithful that promised. And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner [or habit] of some is, but exhorting one another, and so much the more, as ye see the Day approaching. For, if we sin willfully after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sin, but a certain fearful looking for of judgment and of fiery indignation which shall devour the adversaries. He that despised Moses’ Law died without mercy under two or three witnesses. Of how much sorer punishment, suppose ye, shall he be thought worthy, who hath trodden underfoot the Son of God, and hath counted the blood of the covenant wherewith he was sanctified an unholy thing, and hath done despite unto the Spirit of Grace?”

And yet, the motivation for our confident and cheerful compliance with this ordinance of God, in spite of inconvenience, difficulty and even the necessity of great sacrifice, dare never be the threats and compulsion of His Law —clear and certain though they be— lest we bring upon ourselves His wrath and displeasure, but *“the love of Christ [which] constraineth us”* (II Corinthians 5:14) *“both to will and to do of His good pleasure”* (Philippians 2:13-16) to the praise of the glory of His grace. For THAT is the test of true discipleship: Continuing steadfast in His Word and faith unto our end (Luther, 3rd Petition), not because we have to, but for His great love’s sake, confessing with His Apostle John: *“Unto Him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in His own blood, and hath made us kings and priests unto God and His Father, to Him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.”* (Revelation 1:5-6). To that blessed end we pray with the hymnwriter:

Lord, may Thy pastors faithful be,
not laboring for themselves but Thee!
Give grace to feed with wholesome food
the sheep and lambs bought by Thy blood,
to tend Thy flocks, and thus to prove
how dearly they the Shepherd love!

Oh, may Thy people faithful be,
and in Thy pastors honor Thee,
and with them work, and for them pray,
and gladly Thee in them obey,
receive the prophet of the Lord
and gain the prophet’s own reward.

So may we, when our work is done,
together stand before Thy throne,
and joyful hearts and voices raise
with one united song of praise
with all the bright celestial host,
to Father, Son, and Holy Ghost!

Amen.

(TLH 493, 2, 3, 4)

Soli Deo Gloria!