

# **FREEDOM and FORM**

**OUR WORK IN THE GOSPEL**

**FROM THE VIEWPOINT OF CHRISTIAN LIBERTY**

NOTES OF A LECTURE GIVEN AT A PASTORAL CONFERENCE

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## FREEDOM AND FORM

A consideration of our work in the Gospel from the viewpoint of  
Christian Liberty

"I fear this iron yolk of outward conformity hath  
left a slavish print upon our necks" --Milton

### Introductory

This essay topic was assigned to me about seven weeks ago, when it became apparent that the original essayist would be unable to find time for the task. Since I was the one who had asked for a study on this subject, I did have some thoughts. But they were the kind of thoughts which are of a tentative nature, not yet ripe to the point where they suggest conclusions and programs. For that reason I had rather hoped to hear the thinking of others. Perhaps this will still come in the discussion which this study is likely to provoke. Meanwhile, I shall proceed to offer you a supply of propositions, observations and thoughtstarters. The time for research has been short, so supporting argument and illustrations are limited to what lay at hand. The judgments will therefore be of somewhat untested validity. In fact, I shall often have to plead guilty of what a learned jurist has called "the judicial process," according to which we tend to arrive at our conclusions by intuition, and then proceed to develop a logical basis for those conclusions. Yet we are bold to proceed, for a consideration of this topic appears to be long overdue.

Frequently conference essays aim to solve some specific problem of doctrine or practice. Such is not the case in this instance. There is something about our present circumstances, however, which urges the question, "How free are we in the matter of form?" We had a fresh beginning as a new synodical body. In many cases, our congregations were re-organized. What an opportunity this was! Here was a once-in-a-lifetime chance to re-evaluate our manner of doing things. New forms and patterns were crying to be tried, or at least considered. Were they? In a few instances they were--the method of administering our Japan mission program, for example. Some congregations did unload a few embarrassing practices like the Klingbeutel at Communion and the annual published reports of contributions. But there wasn't really very much change, was there? We have preferred the familiar feel of an old suit to that of a new one. Sometimes that old suit was miles too big, and never did fit very well, but our loyalty to it was resolute. One of our treasurers in the CLC took the time to trace the course of a single invoice before it was finally paid. He reports that it passed through the hands of no less than eleven people. Each gave the matter his attention before passing it on. In all, that bill travelled more than 5,000 miles at the cost

of some 65¢ in postage. The machinery which contrived this odyssey is, obviously, not one which we thoughtfully devised for our particular needs, but simply inherited; and it is not becoming, it seems, to judge an heirloom on the basis of practical criteria.

In such practical matters of administration there is not much at stake except efficiency and economy. There are other areas, however, in which our manner and our methods may have very much to say with regard to the coming of the kingdom to ourselves and to others. These areas we hope to explore. We hope that a natural tendency to justify oneself and the way he has done things will not deter us from this wholesome exercise.

## PART I

### The need for exercising our liberty in the use of form

It is of primary concern that we remain confident that we, as ransomed Christians, are completely free to establish any forms and patterns we may choose, provided that our exercise of this freedom is conditioned by brotherly love. The matter of forms is included in Luther's famous proposition, "A Christian man is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none."

"The Gospel creates its own forms," said Professor J. P. Koehler. This boldly stated proposition is a true reflection of what the Apostle Paul had to say, especially in his letter to the Galatians. "Jerusalem which is above is free, which is the mother of us all." (4:26) We are, praise God, no more servants, but sons, with the Spirit of His Son in our hearts crying Abba, Father (4:7). No longer does the Lord prescribe the form of our worship, the manner of our ministry, the place of prayer. Ceremony we may have if we choose to have it, but drop it if it becomes meaningless or perhaps too meaningful. Do what your judgment suggests in your life around the Gospel. If it is decent and orderly you may be confident in the doing of it. Beware a slavish submission to any form. You are out of character if you do not choose to do things the way you do them. When the Son has made you free, you are free indeed. John 8:36. We must cast out the bond woman and her son (4:30)!

It is a glorious thing when people are confident in this freedom. Hear Luther as he speaks on the matter of form in his notes on Galatians: "We are not bound by the ceremonies of Moses... much less by those of the pope. But because this life in the body cannot be completely without ceremonies and rituals, since there must be some sort of discipline, the Gospel permits ordinances to be established in the church regarding festivals, prescribed times, prescribed places, etc.. so that the people may know on what day, at what time, and in what place they should gather to hear the Word of God. It permits the appointment of certain lessons, just

as in school, especially for the sake of children and uneducated people, so that they can be taught more easily. But it permits such things to be established with the purpose that all things in the church should be done decently and in order (1 Corinthians 14:40), not that those who observe such ordinances should merit forgiveness of sins. Besides, they can be omitted without sinning, so long as this is done without offending the weak." (Pg. 448, Am Ed Luth Works, Vol 26).

One of our writers in the Journal of Theology who has long been concerned about the temptations that confront the orthodox, skillfully sums up the thought by saying, "God gave the WHAT to His people, but the HOW He left to their decision. In the days of the believer's minority, God told them more about the HOW..... In their majority the people of God were told clearly the WHAT and the WHERE, but the HOW was again left to them, the living children of God." (Pg. 34, Dec., 1963)

#### The Quest for Divine Prescription.....

With these general principles one expects agreement in Lutheran circles. And yet is it quite hard for us, sometimes, to adjust to this idea of complete liberty in matters of form. We are used to finding chapter and verse for what we believe and teach. It is a powerful temptation to try to do the same for our methods. It may be modesty which prevents us from saying, "In my opinion (or in my judgment) it would be wise to do this thing in this way." More likely, it is honesty. We know that our opinion is not prone to carry much influence, since we are not specialist enough, nor regarded as being wise enough in our own right, to carry the point that way. So we seek other authority. It may be sound argument, which appeals to reason for authority. It may be tradition, or the traditional figure who is invested with substantial honor in the eyes of the group (it's a clincher if you can say that Luther or CFW Walther did it this way). It may be the successful experience of others outside of our own group (this is not too common with us, who incline to be what one behavioral scientist likes to call "encapsulated." We hesitate to admit that the heterodox might teach us something in methods). There is, finally, the desire to seek some divine sanction for our methods in Holy Scripture, which would then give divine authority to the particular form which we choose to espouse.

This last is a matter of consequence.

One the one hand, we might well expect that any Christian community will be conditioned in its methods by biblical precept and example. Our "way" is cleansed by taking heed unto it according to God's Word. Our understanding is enlightened by this lamp-like Word. And there is no reason to restrict this understanding to insights in spiritual matters only. God's Book of Life, however, does not promise that it will show us the best way to finance a church building program --although it does give us

every reason for building places of public worship. The Word shows us why we are to assemble ourselves together in Christian fellowship, and what we are to do together --even, in very general terms, where we are to do this (Acts 1:8). But it does not prescribe for us the form of our organization and church government. Do we have the courage to say that the Scriptures do not tell us whether to organize, for example, under an episcopal or a congregational form of government? We may have many reasons for choosing the one instead of the other (a most compelling argument against the episcopal form sits in Rome), but none can say (nor should want to say) that God has bound the Church of the First-born to one or the other. The Bible student knows this, even while he is fully aware that the Acts of the Apostles and the epistles of the New Testament abound in illustrations of the way in which the Christians of that age organized themselves for their work. These examples are, to be sure, most helpful to us in determining our own methods. But they dare not be used in the sense of "legal precedents." In our weakness, in our natural quest for a secure feeling in our choice of methods, we often desire to be under such law. The slave, or the army man with his manual in hand, has --in a certain sense--the ultimate security. He need not exercise his own judgment. His decisions are made for him. Do we desire to be under law in any sense of that word? According to the flesh we do (as Galatians teaches us). But the Spirit of God dwells comfortably in freed men. Where that Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. That same Spirit would deliver us from the temptation to make of His Gospel revelation a "nova lex."

Blessings of this Freedom.....

This very freedom in form of the New Testament Church is a part of its strength. Since it is not dependent on or committed to any particular methods or structures, the Church can be such that the very gates of hell cannot prevail against it. Does the persecuting emperor of Rome by his decrees make larger assemblies of worshippers impossible? No matter, the Christians can function in their Gospel work quite as well in household churches (remember the 16th chapter of Romans with its many little churches "in the home."), Don't the people understand Greek and Hebrew? No matter, translate the Word into their own language! Can't they read at all? Then put the Word into hymns and sing the Gospel into their hearts. Does sickness keep someone from public worship services? No crisis. The Word is hid in their hearts and the tape recorder or radio can bring the sustaining voices of their fellow believers. Does your synod or your congregation no longer bear true witness to Christ? Then avoid them. Neither you nor the kingdom of God are inseparably wedded to anything that can be corrupted. Let us not forget, dear brother, that any form, any method, any organization can be, and most likely will be, abused. The Adversary invades and corrupts. Remember the Screwtape Letters of the late C.S. Lewis? They help one appreciate how gloriously

our Savior-God has out-maneuvered the wily foe by making His Church independent of rigid forms and formulae!

### Freedom and Variety

Because the Church is free to choose its own forms, it is able also to vary them to suit times, circumstances, and even the temperament of the people involved. This makes demands upon individual initiative and imagination. But the results when necessary departures are made are frequently exciting and therefore stimulating; refreshing and therefore delightful. "The joy of the Lord is your strength." (Nehemiah 8:10). Joy almost of necessity goes hand-in-hand with spontaneity. It is no accident that the great Epistle presenting our charter of freedom is heard on Laetare Sunday with its key-note of exuberant joy.

Nothing can kill the native joy of the faith in a person more surely than unsuited worship form. The mission among the Apaches in Arizona would have foundered completely if the early missionaries had not soon realized that it would be folly to try to force the worship life of the Indian into the rigid mold of our ultra formal liturgical service and our slightly ponderous chorales. Casual services held in the open round the camp fire are another thing. The formalist could never be happy working under conditions which do not even allow for a stable "membership" list.

Think how frequently we sacrifice interest and joy in favor of our accepted forms! How many good sermons haven't gone dead in the process of excessive division and formulation --contrary to to the nature of the preacher and the nature of the text! How refreshing it might be to end a sermon with a rousing Hallelujah, for a change, or to use a solid Amen after a Gospel declaration in the middle of the second part. We don't, of course, because the worthy Amen has become rather a signal for the congregation to stand up, or wake up, and for the organist to jump to the bench --just in case she wasn't already alerted by the hymn stanza just before the end. We all strive for variety, for change of pace, for something to pick up the spirits of our people. Usually, though, we discipline ourselves to finding variety within the established routines rather than by changing the forms themselves. We feel a little guilty if we are caught preaching a homily. Aren't we frequently too concerned about what long usage has judged to be "proper"?

### Liturgy

Think of our liturgy. For years I have been conscious of the fact that the terminal formula of doxology in the Gloria Patri and the collects is grossly misleading. An adult confirmand in one of our churches listened carefully and concluded that there is no end to this present world. I have known this, and I must still confess that I go right on repeating that grievous mis-translation of Ephesians 3:21, even though I could say

"forever and ever" or otherwise express the idea of the original ton aionos ton aionon.\* Why? A proper horror of liturgical farsing, perhaps. Possibly an awareness that the form of the corporate worship service is not the liturgist's option. Most likely it is an unreasoning tendency to conform to established usage, especially if something is in print. Is there anything more arbitrary than the rubrics of the liturgical books? Occasionally, "May." More often, "Shall." Liturgical scholars don't suggest "A Hymn for the Week." It is rather, "The Hymn of the Week."

Arthur Carl Piepkorn makes a case for it, calling liturgical conformity at its best "an intelligent and disciplined self-identification of the individual with the whole, with a view to affirming the common unity and to retaining time-tested rites which have proved their value through centuries of use and which, particularly in the Church, unite the present and the past in a fellowship of praise and prayer that is of the very essence of the Communion of Saints." ("Why Not Be Different" Pg. 16 of "Christian Worship")

Piepkorn does, however, warn that conformity "must not be merely lifeless imitation, slavish obedience to rubrics and canons, or blind ritualism." And he does advocate the exercise of distinctiveness and variety, pointing out very ably that we are all caught between two opposing forces, the desire to conform and the urge to be different -- the centripetal force of the group and the centrifugal force of our individuality. He states, "Distinctiveness, as long as it is not prideful and rebellious self-assertiveness, has its value as well, not merely because it is a morale factor that helps to create a sense of oneness among members of the group, but as a means for bringing out the individuality with which it pleases God to endow not only leaves, stars, and snowflakes, but also people and parishes." (ibid.)

With this fine introduction, Piepkorn proceeds to indicate where variety may properly be effected. This is limited, however, to such self-evident matters as building structure and design, with some cute seasonal variants like the Paschal Candle. In such matters as the historic collects, the observance of the cruciform pattern in the liturgy, vestments and other mechanics, any distinctiveness<sup>is</sup> characterized by liturgical buffs as "unjustifiable and indefensible idiosyncrasy." p. 32. In his search for authority to support his pedantry, the specialist may be content to demonstrate that something has been done a certain way for so-and-so-many centuries, possibly all the way back to Justin Martyr. But he would, if possible, go still farther and get divine sanction. There is an ominous sound to the initial point in what Dr. Piepkorn offers as his platform: "First, the Sacred Scriptures hand down few binding declarations relating to the ecclesiastical arts." (Pg. 11, Christian Worship) Do you know of any binding declarations of this sort?

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\* Compare also the unfortunate KJV rendition of Isaiah 45:17

It is passing strange that there should be so much interest in stylized ritual and ceremonialism throughout churches today--even among those of Reformed traditions--when otherwise the trend is strong toward the casual, the informal, the unique. Is it perhaps the deep-seated need for a feeling of security that is somehow satisfied in this manner? The regular ticking of the grandfather clock with its predictable pattern gives many people a comfortable feeling. A professor of liturgics was once heard to warn against a proposed substitution in a special service being planned by a committee. "Better not," he said. "You might disturb someone in his worship." We understand him. But it does remind one of those little cards you hang on the door-knob when you want to take a nap. An apropos variant need not violate the prayer of one hymn, "May I undisturbed draw near thee." It may rather help in drawing the heart and spirit to the Object of our worship...

#### Luther on this subject

We have come a long way (and not necessarily upward) from the view of a Luther, who could write in his free-wheeling yet responsible fashion to George Buchholzer, the provost of Berlin, "If your Lord, the margrave and elector, etc., will let you preach the Gospel purely, clearly, and genuinely without any human addition and observe and administer the two sacraments of Baptism and the blood of Jesus Christ according to His institution, and if he will give up the veneration of the saints so they will not be patrons, mediators, and intercessors, and (if he) will not carry around the sacraments in a procession and will not let daily masses be said for the dead, and will not let water, salt, and herbs be administered, and (if he) will let pure responses and songs in Latin and German be sung when they make the rounds in processions, then in God's name go around with him and wear a cross of silver and gold, and a beret or gown of velvet, silk, or linen. And if your lord, the elector, is not satisfied with one beret or gown for you to wear, then put on three as Aaron, the high priest, put on three robes, one over the other, which were grand and gorgeous and from which the church-robes in the papacy were called ornata (ornaments). If your Electoral Grace is not satisfied with one parade or procession for you to go around in with music and song, then go around seven times, as Joshua with the Children of Israel went around Jericho, shouting and blowing the trumpets. And if your Lord, the margrave so desires, then his Electoral Grace may leap ahead and dance with harps, kettledrums, cymbals, and bells, as David before the ark of the Lord when it was brought back into the city of Jerusalem. With that I am well satisfied, for such things, if only the abusus (misuse) is kept away, neither add anything to the Gospel nor take anything away from it. However, this should not be done as necessary for salvation, nor should it bind the conscience." (SL XIX, 1027. Quoted in THE FORM OF THE CHRISTIAN CONGREGATION, p. 3)

Our reverence for form--especially such form as is hallowed by long tradition--may be born of humility, aesthetic appreciation, or a proper

regard for the good work of the "fathers." But it may also be the result of simple inertia, a laziness which shuns the hard work of re-examination, re-consideration, and re-formulation. It may also be a fear of meeting the full impact of things said and written. When something is old it can be used without the discomfiture of personal involvement. So a Bishop Pike can make a what he calls a "liturgical recitation" of the Apostolic Creed and at the same time admit that he believes very little of this historic faith. For him the creed is as disassociated from modern religious reality as the old hand-powered coffee mill from the modern vacuum pack of choice blends. Perhaps you have heard the true story of an elderly German-born worshipper who came away from her first English service in somewhat of a shock. "Why," she exclaimed, "they actually said that Jesus descended into hell!" She had been saying the same thing herself for long years, of course, but it didn't sound so bad in German. If the content of our worship were to be expressed in the immediate form of contemporary English it might be that many in our day would not be able to get it out at all. But then, it might also happen that many would begin to "sing with understanding also." (I Corinthians 14:15). What do you suppose goes through the minds of worshippers and--for that matter--liturgists, when they say in the General Prayer (which, according to the rubrics, "shall follow") that God has preserved "the sacred ordinances of Thy house"? Why not say, "The Holy Sacraments" and let it go at that? Must not the dignity of a traditional form yield to the weightier matter of intelligibility?

There are those who suggest that many of our traditional forms are so rich in dignity and meaning that we should educate our people in them so that they can use them profitably. In some matters, this approach seems justified. Our devotion to the historic Lutheran chorale, for example, is not merely appreciation for the excellent musical form of these hymns, but the truly evangelical content which they convey. Were it not for this content, one might fairly question the wisdom of their use in frequency where the worshipping congregation is made up largely of adults of varying national and religious background, such as we find in an active mission congregation. The effort is worthwhile. But let us make it intelligently, and with the awareness that this form is not easily adopted by people of our present time and culture. R. Vaughan Williams they can grasp and use immediately. Philipp Nicolai will take a while.

Must we not urge discretion in these matters? The early church kept its requirements of Gentile converts to the barest minimum of what was necessary to ease the Jewish Christians through the transition, protecting their deep-seated sensibilities from a tortuous abuse by those with whom they would be worshipping. Surely our fraternal concern for initiates to our fellowship should make us careful to keep our forms from being too formidable.

## Bible Translations

One of the most sensitive areas where freedom and form is a consideration is that of Bible translations. While we have the promise of God that His Word shall abide forever, we know that the language forms by means of which that Word comes to people are fluid and ephemeral. The message changes not, but words do. Ours is not, like classical Latin and Greek, a constant mode of precise expression. New translations are, by the very nature of language, inevitable, unless we are in a position to give special instruction in a language form like Elizabethan English after it has ceased to be "a language of our time."

How hard it is, however, to abandon a cherished and worthy language form! We have committed substantial portions of Scripture to memory in a particular form. Our catechisms and liturgical books use that same form. We feel at home and secure in it (perhaps even a little insulated). Our every instinct fights against a critical evaluation of what we have used for so many years. We all know the technical limitations of the Textus Receptus with which the translators of the KJV had to work. We know that the errors of Calvinism explain some very unfortunate renderings (e.g. 1 Peter 2:8). We know that the excessive literalism frequently make vital thought-continuity completely obscure. We know that expressions like "prevent" and "conversation" mislead the listener of our day. Yet we incline to be very indulgent about these things and charitably overlook them, as we do the faults of a friend. It appears to me that we have, by and large, ceased to be critical of this form (and we must agree that it is wrong to practice an uncritical usage of any form, because of the human element involved).

In the case of rival forms such as the RSV and the NEB this is no problem. Here we are ready to make a critical judgment, or what is more likely, accept someone else's judgment, while we sit back to wait for a "Lutheran Translation" which we can safely, and again uncritically, adopt as a semi-official version. We do so want an official version! It is significant that the King James Version of 1611 is, at least in England, almost always called the Authorized Version, although there is no record of any authorization at any time, by the Crown or by convocation. In our circles we do not use the word authorized. But it does happen that critical use of the KJV or the substitution of a better translation for a certain text from the RSV or NEB is regarded with considerable suspicion. Sometimes the plea is made that we should not shake the confidence of the laymen in the translation they have been using for so long. Why not? Is confidence in the Word the same thing as confidence in a human form of translation? Do we help any person in his faith when we help him to uncritical acceptance of any form? "It is better to trust in the Lord than to put confidence in man."

One can begin to appreciate the wisdom of our tradition in ministerial training, stressing as it does the mastery of the languages of the Urtext. Our men have been prepared in such a manner that they are (or at least

should be) free of bondage to another man's rendition. The preacher who is not blessed with a working knowledge of Greek and Hebrew is, to be sure, at a great disadvantage, being dependent upon translations of others. He might live in something akin to panic until he can be persuaded by some authority that this or that version is completely "reliable." Given this kind of confidence, a man might feel secure, exempted from the need for critical usage, comfortable and--of course--bound and gagged by invisible bands.

In a congregation where there is an appreciation of our liberty in this matter, we would expect that the people will welcome the guidance of pastors (whom they have trained at great expense for this very thing) in the usage of current published efforts, without inhibiting them.

Such congregations are rare in our circles. Why? Is it not in large part this, that an image has been created which is well nigh indelible--an image of orthodoxy which is rigidly committed to a traditional form, while the corresponding image of the modernist in theology is generally identified with contemporary forms?

#### The Problem of Public Image

Orthodoxy is much identified in the public mind with what is "old fashioned." If a congregation calls itself by the name of a saint, worships in the traditional gothic church structure, uses the common cup in the Lord's Supper, vests its liturgist in simple black, calls the sub-story of the building "the church parlors," shies away from the use of visual aids, --then it is, in the public mind, quite clearly an orthodox church. If a congregation, on the other hand, dares to be different in such matters of form, it is easily judged to be liberal (in the unfortunately common sense of the word) and modernist. To be sure, we--intellectually--differentiate between loyalty to traditional forms on the one hand and loyalty to the unchanging truth of our Kerugma on the other. We agree 100% with Augustine when he said, "In essential things--unity, in indifferent things, liberty; in all things, charity." We know very well that judicious exercise of our liberty in the indifferent things, the matters of form, is in no way properly made an indicator of a departure from the truth which is "from everlasting." But the popular mind does not so distinguish. And in this very point is the dilemma.

We don't want to appear liberal, lest we discourage those seeking solid spiritual ground. We dread offending any who earnestly pray to be kept steadfast in the Word. So we incline to hold to the traditional forms with their attendant image as long as we possibly can. At the same time, we don't want our message to suffer from the stigma of being obsolete and antiquarian. We want the restless youth of our jet

age to know that our message is as modern as missiles. We want the unchurched prospect to know that everything about our Christian faith is not only up-to-date but capable for the future as well, so we would like to look as contemporary as our message is! Appearances do count, and they need to be reckoned with. In this dilemma, as in most dilemmas, the indicated course is apparently one of moderation.

### The Old Paths

At this point, if not much earlier, we are likely to think of a divine summons to "ask for the old paths, where is the good way, and walk therein." (Jeremiah 6:16). At a first hearing, this seems to justify the end-of-all-argument assertion of the traditionalist, "Wir bleiben bei'm Alten!" As we read on in that stirring chapter, however, it quickly becomes apparent that the Lord was not calling the people back to religious customs, but to the faith of the fathers. God says of this apostate people, "they have not hearkened to my words, nor to my law, but rejected it." (19) Actually, the people had been most finically scrupulous in the formal aspects of their worship-life. They had, in fact, sought the very finest substances for their sacrifices. "Incense from Sheba, and the sweet cane from a far country." (v.20) Yet the Lord asks, "To what purpose?" "Your burnt offerings are not acceptable, nor your sacrifices sweet unto me." The old paths? These were the paths of faith and suppliant obedience, according to which men find "rest unto your souls." (16) Let us note well that loyalty to form and tradition can go hand-in-hand with a complete rejection of God. Nor is proper, melodious chanting of "Lord, Lord" any insurance against a final rejection of someone by God. (Matt. 7:21)

### The Problem of Creeds

We might bridle inwardly at the reference to "creeds" as a problem. We think of them rightly as great treasures of the church. We know the base intentions behind the popular slogan, "Deeds, not Creeds!" We do not incline to sympathize, even, with people who stumble at creeds and refuse to join a church because of them--even though it be so respected a person as Abraham Lincoln. We cannot imagine subsisting as a church without those symbols by which we would have men to know that we are His disciples. It is by such symbols that we, in turn, recognize those with whom we may fellowship in the unity of the spirit and the bond of peace. How else, we might ask, can you effect such recognition?

Without having any scriptural alternatives to offer, we venture to say that our practice is many times unrealistic and fraught with great spiritual hazards. It isn't as crass as the medieval dictum, Eius regio, cuius religio, because the individual person is a voluntary associate of a certain congregation or church body, having examined its confessions according to the Word and having declared them to be his own by choice. His congregation, in turn, is a voluntary

associate of a synodical body, and so makes the public doctrine of that synodical body a part of its own confession. In theory the church member is well-informed and is personally committed to the position held by the church body in matters of controversy. In fact, however, we find that only a small fraction of the people involved have the energy or the interest to become well enough informed to form independent judgments. Nevertheless, they are identified in this fashion. The rationale behind this practice is mostly negative, but still valid in a logical way. If someone is an unprotesting member of a church fellowship group, he is partaker of its deeds, be they good or bad. Compliance is taken for conviction.

Just think what an accumulation of creedal formulae we call our own. To the ecumenical creeds add the small and large catechisms of Luther; to these add the substantial writings of the rest of the Book of Concord; update these with the Brief Statement, the CCF and the Articles on the Church and Ministry. If any man asks the reason of the hope that is in us, we have an answer for him! And the answers are in the most admirable forms--so correct that they withstand the bitterest attacks. No one need be ashamed of them. In fact, we expect our fourteen year olds and adult converts to be ready to suffer death, if need be, rather than fall away from the "confession of this church" (which, in the traditional rite of confirmation, Q. 8, is not limited to the minor confession which they have studied, viz. the SMALL CATECHISM). \*So far as our Christian church members are concerned, we must admit that this is largely a blind subscription, and will remain so, no matter how faithful the pastor is in educating his people or briefing prospective church members before they are accepted into the congregation. This is a relative thing, of course. Some will feel that they have succeeded in developing at least a solid core of informed laity in their congregations. Others who are doing more of their work among the unchurched in their communities will perhaps admit to being troubled by the fact of having so much strong meat on the table when the babes are in need of milk. At what point can you expect a total stranger to our Lutheran faith to identify himself in the Christian community with the total confession of our Lutheran Church? Twenty four lessons? The missionary knows that even such a superficial course is a formidable obstacle to many a prospect who is eager to be baptized.

The formal method of identifying Christians is, to be sure, a simple one. It is convenient and expedient from an organizational point of view. But such testimony by surrogate is also an accomodation of weakness. We cannot blame someone for telling the solicitor that he cannot contribute to the Scout program "because my church is against it." Haven't we actually encouraged this? He is loyal to a fault. He'll live according to

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\* Some careful pastors, we know, define "confession of this church" in terms of the basic confession of Jesus as the Christ, the Savior. I doubt that this is, however, the general understanding of the formula.

the rules of his church, but don't ask him to defend his position. That's the job of the professionals.

How far things have come since the time when a candidate for baptism could confess his faith by saying, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God." (Acts 8:37); or a young man with sight restored could satisfy the situation by saying, "Lord, I believe," when Jesus asked, "Dost thou believe on the Son of God?" (John 9:38); or when you could know that a spirit was of God if that spirit confessed that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh. (1 Jn. 4:2)

We rather incline away from the "personal testimony" sort of confession, according to which someone is urged to get up in a public meeting and say what Jesus means to him. We fear that the confession will become subjective and perhaps emotional. The content of the statement may lack substance or might be dogmatically incorrect. The form of expression may be clumsy. All this we can avoid by simply having people memorize the wording of the Apostolic Creed. This makes for splendid performance. But what has the meanwhile happened to individuality, to the fresh and powerful simplicity of someone like that man born blind, who made fools of the formalists of his day with his surprise confession, "One thing I know, that, whereas I was blind, now I see." (John 9)

I am reminded of the blind man who graced one of our congregations. He had lost both eyes in a shot-gun accident at the age of 21 years. Later, when recovered from total despair by the Christian hope that was shared with him by a concerned neighbor, this man found a unique and highly effective way of confessing his faith. He was often heard to say, "You know, I couldn't see until I had lost my eyes!" How can we keep the proper use of formal confessions from discouraging spontaneous and therefore patently genuine testimonials?

Let us consider and beware the temptation that formal creeds place before the pastor who might just think that his work is done when he has taught a creed and succeeded in getting someone to subscribe to it. Consider the instructor in the catechism as he may fall into the role of a drill-master rather than teacher--tempted to regard the performance of the public examination rather than the need of the child's spirit to be nourished with knowledge and understanding. If he is really performance conscious, you can be sure that he will require the youngsters to memorize his answers, or the catechism answers, rather than to hazard an attempt at free self-expression. Related concerns can easily inhibit us in adult Bible study groups. If we encourage people to respond to the Word and to contribute their own insights, we may <sup>spoil a</sup> well thought out and prepared lesson plan. So we lecture. In a formal way this is far more satisfying. But it doesn't exercise the spirits among our people. The gift that is in them is not stirred up. The frequent result, alas, is that the gift of utterance dies for want of use.

Consider also the hazard that is present with any form, no less in the case of creedal forms: The proclivity of venerating the form itself to such a degree that critical observation becomes almost impossible. How quickly someone can be branded as a "liberal" if he so much as questions the aptitude of an expression used in one of our confessional writings. If one were to ask, for example, if an article of the Brief Statement really says what we want it to say, he would likely bring his whole reputation among loyal Lutherans into question. Organizational expediency requires that no taint of suspicion shall adhere to a confessional symbol. We rather want to build confidence in these symbols for the good, we say, that would come of it. But in the meanwhile we just might become guilty of trusting these forms more than any human effort deserves to be trusted. The conclusions of his study were wrong, but we hope that it is acceptable among us that a Coiner should subject to critical review the Apostolic Creed's statement of the descensus ad inferos.

One cannot shake the suspicion that some, at least, of the problems in the matter of church and ministry arise from a chauvinistic inclination to contend for a form of expression once used by some honored teacher like Franz Pieper or Walther. We easily forget that what was once written, for example, in a polemic against a Grabau might not be suited for a general statement of universal applicability—however suited it was for its original purpose. Torn from context, a perfectly true proposition may become a premise for many a false conclusion. Consider Walther's Correct Form of an Evangelical Lutheran Congregation Independent of the State. If that last modifying phrase is forgotten, the whole perspective is lost. It dare not be forgotten. But tradition tends to forget the context of a situation since it is not essentially a part of the form itself.

#### Other Symptoms

Yet another disadvantage of having a vast treasury of fine forms is the fact that it does not encourage creativity. It can be assumed, we hope, that no one will accuse us of advocating the creation of new doctrine. We dare also to assume that all agree with the proposition that creativity in theology is not only desirable, but necessary if things are to stay alive. Mimicry is not mastery.

Do we encourage creative work? Let me list a few rather common observations. Perhaps you will agree that they form a pattern which makes a negative answer.

- 1) In the theological culture of Synodical Conference background there is not much readiness to lay aside existing formulations in favor of a fresh approach by way of exegetical depth study. If someone attempts this he risks the appearance of being an innovator in doctrine.
- 2) A disproportionate share of our scholarship focuses its energies on such stable, uncontroversial fields as the classical languages and history.

- 3) Seminal thinking and creative writing are not encouraged. Men of such a bent often feel somewhat like foreign bodies.
- 4) The scarcity of poetic and literary expression. Although Christian truth lends itself readily to artistic form, we favor the use of bare expressions, or what is worse, worn out archaism —lest we be misunderstood. The figurative speech of a Jewish prophet might be deemed too risky, though it is admittedly powerful.

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"Truth is strong next to the Almighty; she needs no policies, nor stratagems, nor licensings, to make her victorious.....give her but room and do not bind her when she sleeps!" --John Milton

#### "Church Practice"

Those who have opportunity to browse the publications of "conservative" Lutheran groups (The Lutheran News and SOC, for example) may have been struck by the militant manner against any departures from the traditional forms of church practice—what Galbraith would call the conventional wisdom of the Synodical Conference. The mood had an unaccustomed moment in the Northwestern Lutheran when that paper quoted with warm approval a letter of the English foreign missionary Roland Allen in which he declares, in part,

"From the earliest times the Church has always asserted her right to ordain the conditions on which she admits people to her privileges and to reject those who deliberately and persistently break her laws, which are the laws of God....." (our emphasis. Issue of Jan 26, 1964)

We submit that this is pure Romanism. To conceive of the Church as an entity which formulates laws and then declares these laws to be God's laws—what is this, except to climb right back into Moses' seat and tell the pharisees to move over?

This is not an isolated instance, although we hasten to say that this type of expression is not typical of the NWL. The Easter issue of that same publication portrays on its cover the symbol of the victorious Lamb, who broke out of death's dark prison to declare His success in bringing "out the prisoners from the dungeon, from prison those who sit in darkness," Is. 42:7. Turn to the first page, however, and you will be puzzled by an editorial piece which describes the confirmation class as a "conformation class." Our confirmands, says the author, have also been taught conformity, a conformity to the teaching and practice of the Lutheran Church, which he says are—in pattern and principle—perfect! Without at the moment entering the question of how valid might be the claim of perfection for the forms, or patterns, of principle and practice of the Lutheran Church, we would like to recall the very pertinent expression of the Apostle Paul in Romans 12, where he uses the word conform (sunscematizo). "Be ye not conformed to this present

age." You would expect him to follow this, in contrast, with what we should be conformed to—let us say, the pattern of principle and practice of the Christian Church? But this he does not do. Paul never showed interest in producing super-white sepulchers. He rather pleads for a metamorphosis "according to the renewing of the mind," so that you may be able to approve what is the will of God, the good, acceptable, and perfect.

### Conformation or Metanoia?

What a peril for orthodoxy! In our zeal for what is right and God-glorifying and spiritually healthy, we tend to establish thought patterns and conduct patterns, carefully deduced from Scripture. Then we ardently pursue the task of fitting people into those patterns, rather than calling them to metanoia and so equipping them in the Spirit to choose for themselves what is the good, and the acceptable and perfect. Let us remember how Paul warned Timothy to turn away from those who have the form (morphé) of godliness, but deny the power thereof, (2 Tim. 3:5)

Our sympathy goes out to the professor who is given the difficult task of teaching pastoral theology. Determined as he may be to inculcate principles, he will be pressured for an abridged edition of canon law to fill the student notebook. Let's be practical, our flesh says. Don't tell me why, tell me how. What is our position on dancing, both square and the other kind; what do I do if someone comes to the Lord's Table without registering beforehand? Can you hold fraternal life insurance in a pan-Lutheran company? What to do about table prayer when you dine with members of heterodox churches? Tell me, master. All these things I will do and will teach others to do likewise. The appeal of this approach is almost irresistible. We begin to define positions, and practices too. Gradually something develops which we call "orthodox practice." By means of this standard, churches and individuals are often judged.

### Place of Practice

It is not our intention to minimize the importance of church practice. It is certainly by such fruits as well as doctrine that prophets are to be known for what they are and judged. What a church body regards as right and what it does with self-approval is no doubt the surest commentary on what they proclaim. Nor do we despise the importance of offering people Scripture-oriented guidance in godliness. But the the trick is to do this without turning the church into a lawgiver and the pastor into a canon lawyer.

The Scriptures abound in illustrations of what can happen when morality is prescribed by men. The enemies of our Lord came with straight faces and actually faulted Jesus for healing a man on the Sabbath, since such activity was in violation of the formal definition of sabbath-keeping.

When men are preoccupied with paying their tithes of mint and anise and cummin they so easily forget the weightier matters of the Law— judgment, mercy and faith, and so qualify for the anguished woe of Jesus (Matt. 23). Blind we would be if we didn't know how easily we might neglect the weightier matters of soul-care while we assiduously keep what is sometimes called a "clean practice." The devilish thing about it is that we pride ourselves so much in our success at "conformation" that we don't even feel guilty about our other neglect.... If we have succeeded in getting that member out of the Masons, we tend to applaud ourselves heartily. Fine. But did the man renounce his idolatry in submission to his own sanctified will or in submission to mine? The "Church's," or God's will? Did he do it as a freed man in Christ or as a prisoner of ecclesiastical law? These, we know, should be the primary considerations. But such motivational research is hard work, and it may somewhat impair the performance. Fortunately our Lord does not seek performers.....

#### The Methods of Our Mission

A large chapter could be written about traditionalism in the methods we employ in bringing the Christian witness to ourselves and to others. We seem afraid to adapt ourselves until circumstances actually force us to do so. We discovered, perforce, that one can make tents and also preach the Gospel. But we haven't found quite enough courage yet to divide some of the traditional pastor functions among the priests of the congregation. Much remains undone, unless the public spokesman of the Word works himself to the point of nervous exhaustion.

Think also of our efforts at conducting a home mission program and a ministerial training program. The traditional methods are enormously expensive—more expensive, apparently, than we can afford. Are such methods the only way? Of course they are not. The most effective mission program in all recorded history was conducted on a mighty thin shoe-latchet. Shall our present, sorely needed witness die with us, or do we start conducting experiments? It wouldn't be the first time that necessity has become the mother of something very good.

#### Awakenings

In other circles there are occasional signs of flexibility, imagination and inventiveness. You have heard of the Wisconsin Synod experiment in mission work called the "Missioner Program." Its success may not be guaranteed, but at least an attempt was made. So far as we know, the idea was original with the Wisconsin Synod.

In Chicago a venture called the City Missionary Society is constantly experimenting with new tactics of evangelism in the difficult field of the Inner City. Former bars and store-front chapels house laymen and ministers living together in shared poverty on a welfare-scale budget. One of them, a Don Benedict, insists that the church must be willing to attempt new ways of serving. He raises the provocative question about

the traditional, formal Sunday service: "Who says that this is the best way to communicate the Christian faith?"

No institution is more tied to antiquated forms than the Roman Church. But they are most urgently considering what can be changed to their advantage without changing their essential character. Some of their leaders do indeed speak well on the subject of reform. Julius Cardinal Doepfner, for example:

"It (reform) also must be in the nature of renovation rather than revolution, preserving what is good from the past tradition while remaining open to future possibilities of development. We are in danger of resisting ideas, forms and possibilities to which perhaps the future belongs, and we often consider as impossible that which will finally manifest itself as a legitimate form of Christianity." (Quoted in Time, Feb. 7, 1964)

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In general review of this portion of the topic, let me say again that the freedom we should preserve and exercise diligently is not freedom from form, as though form were in itself something evil, but rather a true freedom in form.

Judge Learned Hand said it well: "Liberty lies in the hearts and minds of the individual." So far as the Christian is concerned the freedom we cherish is his birthright, the gift of God's free spirit. May nothing impede or impair it!

In our struggles to make judicious use of our freedom in our collective activities, it might be helpful to remember an observation of David Riesman, "One must live on two levels, that of practical reform and that of utopian vision, and in the dialectic between these levels, activity on the one may accompany temporary defeat on the other."

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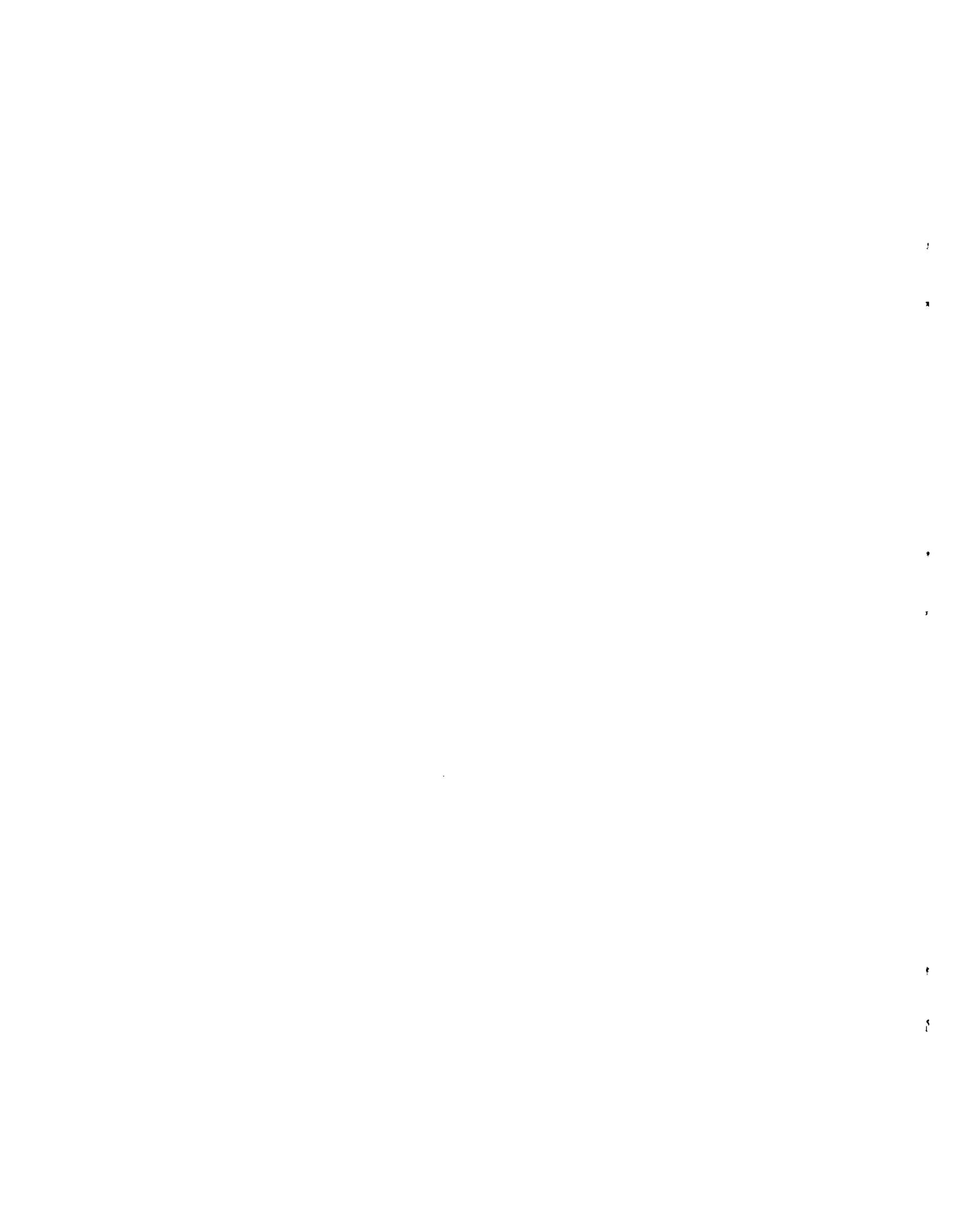
## Part II

### THE NEED FOR FORM AND ORDER IN THE LIFE OF THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH

This part, to be delivered in spring of 1965, will deal with such as the following:

- 1) The danger of disorganization in group effort;
- 2) The offense of disorderliness;
- 3) The Fourth Commandment presupposition of order and form;
- 4) Curbs against "ragged individualism"
- 5) The use of liberty as a cloke of maliciousness;
- 6) Good form and order a protection of the weak;
- 7) Preserving the treasures of the past and holding fast to them after proving them.





FREEDOM AND FORM PART II

"Liberty with order  
Democracy with order  
Independence with order"

--Pablo Casals

Somehow this terse expression of a remarkable man of our time, artist-philosopher Pablo Casals, serves very well to indicate the direction of this part of our consideration of the matter of Freedom and Form. It was expressed in the context of political concern. But it fits. The liberty wherewith Christ has made us free is not to be a freedom from form and order, but freedom in form. One might say, a freedom that loves good order and thrives in it.

Much thought is being given to the perils of organizationalism and institutionalism for the life of the Spirit. But we also need to worry about such converse evils as disorganization, disorderliness, and perverted individualism. Strangely, such seeming opposites can be companion evils which simultaneously bedevil the same individual or fellowship group.

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FORM and ORDER have been the instruments of much damage in the life of Christians. But they have so much to be said for them that one could easily become rhapsodic in rehearsing the blessings we enjoy from good form and order. The following may be cited as examples:

Formal Statements of Faith (Symbolical writings). According to the German text of the Preface to the Book of Concord (Trig. Concordia pp. 20f.), the Symbolical Books were composed and approved for the reason that according to them "the pure doctrine might be recognized and distinguished from the false and that restless, contentious men, who do not care to have themselves bound to any definite form of the pure doctrine, might not be free and unhindered to start, as they please, offensive controversies and to introduce and defend extravagant errors." While we know that many modern errorists within the churches refuse to be bound to their oath of ordination, saying that the historic symbols simply aren't relevant to our time, it is still evident that confessional statements have served to restrain many a haughty spirit. Or at least to expose such to an alert flock. On the opposite side of the picture, we know that many exponents of true doctrine have discovered one another and come to enjoy the blessings of fellowship

by this means. Think what the Formula of Concord accomplished in this regard for the distracted Lutherans of the late 19th century! Thankfully we remember how our own statements concerning church fellowship and church and ministry have served to unite men of similar mind and judgment in matters of faith.

Liturgical Form. Our formal observance of seasons and festivals, with their established lections, has certainly done much to hold the saving acts of God in proper prominence in public worship long after the preaching may have degenerated into mere ethical counselling or otherwise failed in its responsibility to sustain God's people with the Bread of Life. The same can be said about great hymns such as our Lutheran chorales. They are formulations. But their content is potent Gospel. They sing and make God's melody in the heart. How many Christians have gained boldness over against the Day of Judgment by the private singing of "Salvation unto us has come"!

While instructing people from heterodox communions, many pastors have been surprised to find that such people already have a perfectly correct understanding in a doctrine that is taught falsely in the official confessions of their former church. Perhaps they had heard their Shepherd's voice in the Scriptures that were read by liturgical requirement. We knew a lifetime Methodist who told us that she had always understood the doctrine of the Real Presence exactly as we teach it. She had heard the words of institution many times, and took them in their simple native meaning.

Church Practice. The advantages of uniform practice in the order of the worship service, the various pastoral acts, procedures such as membership transfers, hymnals, catechetical materials, church government and the like-- these advantages are most readily measured in terms of down-to-earth practicality and efficiency. Our society is constantly on the move. Some of our CLC churches have experienced as much as a 30% turn-over within the last five years. If our Christians had to become accustomed to a substantially different mode of church life with each move they made, they might easily grow discouraged with the effort. On the other hand, there is evidently a considerable measure of comfort to be taken from the familiarity of church custom "just like we did it at home." While some are deadened and bored by uniformity, there are many who function at their best within a familiar routine. This is quite evident to pastors who try to get out of the rut with an occasional free-form service structure such as a reading service for a festival. In our experience, a surprising percentage of the worshippers indicate a marked preference for the usual pattern of worship. They much prefer the predictable. They feel little

desire for variety, and do not find themselves stimulated in a constructive way by it. Patterned religion is compatible with a certain temperament. And this is not a rare type. Consider the vast popularity of polka music, for example, with its steady three-note bass beat. Consider the completely predictable rhymes of the average popular love song. The listener wants to know what is coming. He couldn't care less about surprises. Symmetry is in his make-up. For him it is painful to stroll along with another person without being in step with him. The tilted picture torments. The crooked part in the hair disturbs. The interruption in an ordered work-schedule ties the stomach in knots. People may have a strong disposition to orderliness. Or it may be a highly cultivated environmental trait in them. Whatever its cause, it is there in many, many people. And they are probably freed for their greatest potentials, also spiritual potentials, by the confinements of good form and order. Someone who is not so disposed will find it hard to admit this. If he does admit it, he is likely to be condescending about it. It is indeed difficult to appreciate the worth and value of a Gemuet that differs from our own.

#### The Matter of Propriety

Order as opposed to disorder is, however, not only a matter of taste or disposition. It is required of all that is done in the name of Christ in our Gospel work. Paul exercises his full apostolic authority when he declares, "Let all things be done decently, and in order." I Corinthians 14:40. Euschēmōn ( ) is an interesting word. Literally, "fair of form." It has in general usage overtones of dignity and beauty. Ugliness and vulgarity are ruled out by it. The raucous world is to behold any Christian assembly as one which conducts its affairs with studied concern for beauty of form. For its affairs are done in the name of a God who is the Creator of a handiwork that is exquisite, even under the curse. Consider the lilies of the field! We have reason to be concerned about what is decorous and proper--not, of course the stuffy, contrived propriety of Victorianism, but a propriety which reflects the beauty of God's world. The adverbial phrase, Kata Taxin ("in order"), is an expansion of the first thought, namely decency. Conditions in the Corinthian congregation at the time required a pointed remark about one phase of propriety: orderliness. The New Testament does not abridge our freedom by imposing specific order, although Paul gives the Corinthians a precise outline of how their church

meetings could be conducted ("If any man speak in an unknown tongue, let it be by two, or at most by three, and that by course; and let one interpret."). He is quite absolute, however, about women keeping silent in church. "They are commanded to be under obedience, as saith also the law." This is an order that God had established in the world when it was created - that the male should be the head of the female. It is not within the province of liberty for us to alter that. Women ruling in the church by public teaching of the men is not kata taxin, not according to God's order, and therefore not fair form.

Kata taxin, however, is not to be limited to natural order, divinely established order. It applies as well to simple routine, schedule, organization. - Zecharias came on duty kata taxin - according to the assignment schedule. There is no room for the haphazard in the church of God. Spontaneity is fine, but it must be disciplined to take its turn. Our confessions assert the need and the right to establish rules and regulation for Christian communities. "Bishops and pastors may make ordinances in order that things be done orderly in the churches" (par. 53, Germ. Text, Art. XXVIII of the Augsburg Confession). The emphasis in this reference is evidently not who should make the rules, but on the need for regulation. Roland Allen is wrong when he calls the laws of the church "the laws of God" if he is thinking of regulation in indifferent things. Nevertheless we must affirm the propriety of ordinances.

The Apostle Paul underscores the self-evident by reminding the reader: "For God is not a God of confusion but of peace" RSV, v.33. There is the rumble of anarchy in that sonorous word, akatastasias! It violates the very nature of God. He is a God intent upon peace...harmony...tranquility. All was upset and made painful in this world by the refusal of our first parents to abide in the ordered pattern of creature in his humble relationship to the Creator. God would make this order right again in Christ. Is it not therefore self evident that good order is becoming to the church of God? The Apostle even places the orderly-mindedness of the Colossians ahead of their steadfastness of faith when he cites the reasons for his particular joy in them. (Col. 2:5).

#### The "Methodists"

The most form-conscious church apart from Rome and Canterbury is Methodism. The fact that this church has done untold damage to the principle

of Christian liberty by its penchant for formalizing morality should not prevent us from appreciating some of their pet slogans. "The world will never be saved by organization, but it will never be saved without it." So they say, claiming that they love discipline while they cherish freedom. What they mean by discipline and what they mean by freedom, I do not know for certain. But the slogan brings together two concepts which dare not be separated. Our Christian activity will be glorious indeed when it manifests a perceptive concern and appreciation of both - discipline and freedom. Methodist Bishop Gerald Kennedy of Los Angeles speaks of this as a "strange combination," and then adds something worth pondering: "It is the discipline that makes the freedom possible."

#### Organized for Service

The New Testament does not prescribe any particular form of organization as would be universally required. It does offer some examples of simple organizational procedures set up by the apostles to meet the needs of the time. So, for example, a board of seven deacons was chosen to attend to the daily ministrations (Acts 6). We have already noted how Paul prescribed the organization of a worship assembly (I Cor. 14). When we note our tedious efforts to develop a satisfactory organization for the CLC and to formulate a system in a constitution, we might well wish for an astute apostle to speak with authority and say, "This is the way it will be..."

One might, for a brief moment, wish that Christians could do their work together without formal organizational structures. So much spirit and adaptability is stultified by rigid procedure! So frequently procedure is employed by cunning and unscrupulous men to gain an evil end! So often organized church groups become more concerned about their organizational interests than their true mission, and so violate the charter of their existence.

Is organization necessary?

CONSIDER:

1) The diversity of gifts and the need for sharing those gifts. The Holy Ghost divides to each man "severally as He will," endowing one Christian with some of His gifts but not all of them. The familiar Biblical illustration of the human body makes the point that we are truly interdependent, one "member" on another. Some parts of the body are more honorable than others, but each must serve the others and so serve the body itself as a

whole. "If the foot shall say, Because I am not the hand, I am not of the body, is it therefore not of the body? The eye cannot say to the hand, I have no need of thee." Even the exalted head of a body cannot say to the feet, "I have no need of you." "There should be no schism in the body, but that the members should care one for another." I Corinthians 12.

A healthy body is a marvel of coordination, each member functioning smoothly in its appointed task. On the other hand, there is nothing sadder to see than the grotesque distortions of a body in which the central governing member does not work.

This purpose of organization in the church, namely to pool the gifts of the individuals for the common good, points to the need for humility and a generous regard for the needs of others. We must stand ready to admit that we all need the spiritual talents of our brethren. A sense of self-sufficiency is wrong because none of us is self-sufficient. The Holy Spirit has seen to that. Leave anyone of us alone for a prolonged period of time without the gifts of others on tap, and he will suffer. Perhaps he will become distorted in vision, perhaps off-balance in stance, possibly even unable to carry on. Most certainly, he will be poor in spiritual gifts. The ludicrous idea of a body made of all thumbs carries the point. But it is hard to admit to ourselves that we need what others have. Somehow we have developed the idea that a minister of the Gospel can become a theological Allmensch. Some convince themselves that they are. Others are embarrassed if they must admit that they need the help of others, even though you don't have to be a universal genius in order to qualify as a "workman that needeth not be ashamed..." A good workman knows his limits... He uses the skills and experience of his colleagues. As a pastor of a congregation, he will - God willing - even recognize the fact that he needs the counsel and wisdom of his members, and not only in the so-called "practical matters"...

If the organization is to function, we must not only be humble about our own range of abilities and willing to be helped; we must be ready to share the benefits of our skills without restraint. "Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others." Phil. 2:5. This is not, of course, a natural inclination. But it is the intention of the Spirit sent by the Christ who did not despise the "servant form" in which He gave His life a ransom for many.

## F R E E D O M   A N D   F O R M

### Third Continuation Notes\*

#### "A Good Idea Leaves Nothing Untouched"

If you agree with this little proverb you will understand my feeling that there is no way to bring the subject of FREEDOM AND FORM to any easy, tidy close. It touches every aspect of our work in the Gospel, and the Gospel affects all of life, so where do you stop? Let these present remarks be regarded as a continuation rather than a conclusion.

#### Relevancy

We need to be careful, I think, in our handling of the matter of relevancy. If the plea for relevancy is a plea for a new God and Gospel it is most certainly evil, a form of apostasy. If, on the other hand, it is a lament that religion and life have been separated by the forms we use, then we must listen. The cry for deliverance from this trouble will be heard--even as it is now being heard--and deliverers will offer their services. So-called "non-denominational" movements like Young Life seem to have an enormous appeal for our youth. They offer everything which our formalized congregational life seems to frustrate: Quick relationships, free expression, spontaneity, and--most of all--this thing called guidance, a close relevance to the thought-world and problem patterns of youth. A discerning teenager of our congregation went to one of the meetings to have a look, admired the externals of the meeting, but decided never to go back. It was relevant but not religion as she knows it.

E. L. Mascall, in his "Secularization of Christianity," begins a defence of historic Christianity vs. Alitzer, Robinson, and the like with this sentence: "One of the most imperative duties with which the Christian theologian is confronted is that of relating the revealed datum of Christian truth--final,

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\*Used at a conference of the Pacific Coast Conference in October, 1967

absolute, and fundamentally permanent as he must by his Christian commitment believe it to be,--to the essentially incomplete, relative and constantly intellectual framework of the world in which he lives." Then he goes on to suggest that there is a vast and vital difference between a "Twentieth Century Church" and the "Church in the Twentieth Century."

### The Twentieth

What are some of the things which are distinctively Twentieth Century, that may well call for new design in the forms of our worship and work? We will list just a few:

+ + Level of education In the congregation I serve over half of all the confirmed members are college graduates and the proportion is going to increase as time goes by. (The other night I was chatting with a 12th grader about the Freudian hypothesis. The boy gave a cogent argument against its validity, concluding with the observation that he generalized too much on the basis of his own personal problems.... Before that chat I was not even aware that 12th graders know how to spell psychology, much less have judgments about it) I am not suggesting that we resort to "excellency of speech and of man's wisdom" in bringing the Gospel to an age of growing intellectual arrogance, but I do think we should review the forms we use, which for the most part were developed for an era when few people besides doctors, lawyers, and ministers had much beyond 8th grade schooling.

+ + Complexity of life. In an effort to find a reason why there is so much dissent in our society today, one pundit points to complexity as a cause. Whether we like it or not, he says, the age of simple alternatives is past. People see things more in shades of gray than solid black or white.

"That's an unfair stereotype," said the high school sophomore when I made a vapid generality about teenagers. And she was right. You can't get by with

the pat answers which were once offered with rhetorical certitude and received in solemn awe. The age of proverbs is past and many who live by them are in daily dismay. Try to live by Richard's Almanack and you will probably end up as poor as he was. Many widely heeded voices of our time are warning us that the "Aristotelian orientation" is not workable, that life today defies such a simplistic approach. We may not agree with them, but this is what modern textbook-writers are saying, and we better know it. The easy answers and pat formulations of yesteryear are not going to satisfy many in an age when secular textbooks have come to be so cautious as to speak guardedly of evolution as an assumption. Remember when it was described by the tyro teacher in Biology I as a "proven fact"?

Ours is a golden opportunity, for we have certainty to offer in an age of doubt. We have a Word which endures, even while heaven and earth and a whole passel of absolutes may pass away. Only let us not spoil it by being overly confident of our ability to state a sublime and eternal verity in a perfect proposition, neatly buttressed by a couple "proff passages." If people question the proposition, let us not be dismayed, or write them off as doubters. They may be challenging us, or more likely pleading with us, for more evidence in the Word--without any of the arrogance which demands a sign. In our adult inquiry classes we will likely have increasing numbers of candid people admitting--perhaps with regret--that they are not yet confident of the doctrine of creation by fiat. Let us not abandon hope for their faith because they are not of easy persuasion. Confidence and certitude grow; we must leave room for the growth. And just here we discover anew the wisdom of God in his manner of revelation, with its "divers manners"--frequent and various (Hebrews 1:1). God in His mercy has encoded His message in a tremendous variety of forms in order to reach us with the message of His grace in Christ. Maybe the disciple is of

a poetic temperament who can decode the imagery of Psalm 104, with its magnificent picture of God "walking on the wings of the wind" and "making the clouds His chariot." Fine for him then. If, on the other hand, he is a literalist by disposition and too long an exposure to the sciences of physics and engineering, then he may understand better the language of Colossians, which in a sense anticipated our day of explorations in the world of sub-atomic particles. "By Him" by Christ, "all things consist"--literally "Hold together" (Col. 1: 17). This he can understand the more readily. But it must be read in its setting of that entire letter of four chapters, with its glorious demonstration of Christ's preeminence in all things.

The Spirit has given us all the equipment we will every need in the Scriptures, also for our complex age. But we are going to have to work harder than ever before in using the resources at hand.

+++ The Anxious Age

What a paradox: The Affluent and yet Anxious Society. The age of social security, Medicare, union contracts, and the pill is also the age of epidemic suicide.

Last week in San Francisco they were jumping off the bridge at the rate of one a day. Wednesday was a double header, which made news only because the one victim was a staff member of the suicide prevention bureau. Worse in many ways, though less dramatic is the self-destruction by drug abuse which so often appears to stem from anxiety of one kind or another.

What does this suggest in the matter of forms? Perhaps we should school one another in the art of giving expression, especially in manner, to that peace which is the particular benison of those who are kept in heart and mind in Christ. Recently a well known nursing supervisor in Redwood City died of cancer at 34 years, leaving three children without a responsible parent to care for them. Her tranquillity of spirit in the face of such trouble was so manifest, and so manifestly related to her understanding of the Gospel, that people

still are asking, in effect, "What must I do to be saved?" Two days after the funeral a stranger called and said "I don't know what she had, but I know that I need it desperately!" She and her husband worshipped with us on Reformation Sunday and are starting a study course. Next Sunday we expect two school teachers to profess their faith at our altar--people who first entrusted their only child to us for teaching after observing the Gemuet of the woman who died. The point I wish to make is that we must recognize the power of non-verbal communication in sharing the Gospel. This person was not too inclined to verbalize her beliefs, and yet she found eloquent ways of communicating them by a modus vivendi. Such things as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control--such things cannot even be expressed in words, yet they convey a message of what the Spirit does for people, for they are a fruit of faith. Powerful communication in a world that knows not where to find the true fountainhead of these graces!

Formalism tends to be overconfident of words. In his biography of Woodrow Wilson, Reinhold Niebuhr makes the wry observation that the president, son of a minister, made the common mistake of ministers in trusting too much in words. People with less schooling are often more realistic about their ability to communicate verbally with success. Mia Farrow chides her friends, "You listen to what I say rather than to what I mean, and get me all wrong."

How often people listen to what we, as a confessing church, say--and get us all wrong. We say that we must avoid certain churches in order to maintain a clear testimony to our Christ and His Gospel. People so often get a different message out of it--"Think you are the only ones going to heaven;" "Think you know it all;" "Think there aren't any Christians in the other churches;" and so on. Obviously they assume we don't mean what we say. What is the solution? More words?

