

The Form of a Christian Congregation by C.F.W. Walther

A Survey and Outline

Walther, C.F.W. *The Right Form of an Evangelical Lutheran Local Congregation Independent of the State: A Compilation of Witnesses from the Confessional Writings of the Evangelical Lutheran Church and the Private Writings of Its Orthodox Teachers*, second edition. 1864. Translated by John T. Mueller. 1961. Published as *The Form of a Christian Congregation*. 2005, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House.

“At the same time this work furnishes proof that our venerable orthodox teachers, though belonging to state churches and ruled by consistories, nevertheless, influenced by their doctrines of the church, the ministry, church government, and the like, did not conceive of a local congregation independent of the state in any different way than it is here presented. In conclusion, the reader might be reminded that this work offers no untried new experiment in church polity, but that it represents a church organization which is in existence here for twenty-four years already and in which by God’s grace a not inconsiderable, annually increasing number of congregations, firmly united in one faith and confession and also outwardly joined in works of [Christian] love, have been edified with richest blessings and are being edified today.” *Author’s Preface*

Introduction –

§ 1 – An Evangelical Lutheran local congregation is an assembly of believing Christians at a certain place among whom the Marks of the Church are present.

Note 1. The Marks of a true congregation are the Marks of the Church.

Note 2. Teaching according to our Confession makes a congregation one of our own.

Note 3. A truly Lutheran congregation needs neither a definite organization nor a fixed ceremonial

Note 4. In a true congregation there is always an admixture of non-Christians.

Note 5. The name does not determine whether a congregation is truly Lutheran.

Note 6. Mere acknowledgement of the pure Word of God or the Confessions does not make a church Lutheran or orthodox.

§ 2 – A congregation is independent of the state when the latter allows it to rule itself in all things.

Note 1. It is important that the government of a country should belong to the church, and this may become beneficial for the church.

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- Note 2.* These are precious doctrines to which our church has always adhered in obedience to God's Word.
- a. Church and state are two different powers, not to be intermingled.
 - b. Believing governmental persons are in the church.
 - c. The state is outside the church, the church is in the state.
 - d. Members of the church must obey the state as citizens and subjects.

Note 3. The church consists of people of all classes. In matters pertaining to the rule of the church no class may be excluded.

§ 3 – In order to know when an Evangelical Lutheran local congregation is rightly constituted, it is necessary to learn from God's Word what its rights and obligations are; and how these rights and obligations are to be rightly exercised.

Chapter I – Concerning the Rights of an Evangelical Lutheran local congregation (ELlc) Independent of the State

§ 4 – The rights of an ELlc are embraced in the Keys of the Kingdom of Heaven, which the Lord gave to His whole church.

Note 1. That all church rights and powers are embraced in the Keys of the Kingdom of Heaven is clearly set forth in...

Note 2. The Keys were given to the whole church originally and immediately, not mediately through an ordained ministry.

Note 3. A local congregation need not be externally joined to other congregations to possess and exercise all rights of the church.

Note 4. There are also mingled with every Christian local congregation non-Christians, who have no part in the power of the Keys.

§ 5 – With the Keys of the Kingdom of Heaven every ELlc has all the church power it needs.

Note 1. The authority to elect and ordain ministers is proved from the fact that the Keys have been given to the church, and not merely to certain persons.

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Note 2. The Keys to the Kingdom of Heaven, or the entire church power, belong to all true Christians, especially by virtue of their having been anointed with the Holy Spirit.

Note 3. Believers as the Bride of Christ, the Mistress of the House, also have the Office of the Keys.

Note 4. Christians must have the power of the keys because they are Christ's Body and Christ dwells among them.

Note 5. Christians have the power of the keys or of the church because they are Christ's brethren, and brethren of one another.

Note 6. Believing Christians possess the power of the church.

Note 7. Together with the keys, the highest jurisdiction has been given to the Church, to all believers.

Chapter II – Concerning the Duties of an Evangelical Lutheran Congregation Independent of the State

§ 6 – The congregation should see to it that the Word of God dwells richly and has free course in its midst.

§ 7 – The congregation should see to it that purity of doctrine and life is preserved in its midst, and therefore it is to exercise church discipline in regard to both.

Note 1. The congregation has the care for the doctrine, and therefore jurisdiction over it.

Note 2. The congregation is duty bound to exclude and ban such as despise all admonitions.

§ 8 – The congregation must make it its concern that all its members are well taken care of in their bodily needs and do not suffer want.

Note. Citation from Luther's *Church Postil*

§ 9 – The congregation must see to it that all things are done decently and in order, both before the Lord and before men.

Note. On Augustana XXVIII – Bishops and pastors making ordinances that things be done orderly in the churches.

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§ 10 – The congregation has the duty to devote itself to the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace and love also with the orthodox church beyond its area.

Note. Citations from Kromayer and Luther

§ 11 – The congregation has the duty to do what it can in order that the whole church may be built up and promoted.

Note. The witness of Luther to this.

Chapter III – Concerning the Exercise of the Rights and Duties of an Evangelical Lutheran Local Congregation Independent of the State

A.

Part One – Concerning Congregational Meetings

§ 12 – Orderly public meetings of all independent local congregations are necessary for the conscientious, salutary and God-pleasing exercise of their rights and duties.

Note. Luther on congregational assemblies.

§ 13 – Only adult males are to actively participate in speaking, deliberating, resolving and voting in such congregational meetings.

Note 1. Gerhard cites Acts 15:22 in support of this. 1 Corinthians 5 shows this. Calov cited in support of this.

Note 2. Young men and minors should not speak in public congregational meetings.

§ 14 – The congregational administration of externals is the concern of those who in general preside over the congregation.

Note. All offices in the church have been instituted by God together with the office of the ministry of the Word.

§ 15 – Matters to be considered and resolved in congregational meetings are: Questions of doctrine; filling of congregational offices; church discipline; public offenses; quarrels among church members; matters pertaining to good order and ceremonies; and the like.

Note. Hesshusius, Gerhard, and Dannhauer attest to this point.

§ 16 – Matters of doctrine and conscience are to be resolved unanimously according to God's Word and the Confession of the church.

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Note 1. Every member, not a majority, must subject himself to the Word and the Confession.

Note 2. Luther and Gerhard on ἀδιάφορα.

§ 17 – The meeting must be publicly announced ahead of time.

Note. Citation from the Formula supporting this.

§ 18 – The essential transactions of the meeting should be recorded by a secretary.

§ 19 – The minister begins and closes the meeting with prayer

Note 1. Chemnitz on the office of the public ministry.

Note 2. A citation from the *Saxon General Articles* on the lay reading of appointed pericopes at prayer offices.

B.

Part Two – Concerning the Exercise of the Duty of a Congregation to See to It that the Word of God Dwells Richly and Prevails in Its Midst.

§ 20 – The congregation exercises this duty especially by establishing and maintaining the public ministry in its midst.

Note. This is not left to the option of the congregation.

§ 21 – The election and calling of a pastor.

Note 1. Christian congregations have always chosen their ministers under the guidance of pastors already active in the ministry.

Note 2. Since the right to vote belongs to the whole congregation, the voting must be done by those who represent the congregation.

Note 3. Chemnitz shows how the election of a minister should take place according to God's Word – that Call be regarded as Divine.

Note 4. The chief bulwark against ministers becoming lords over the congregation is the binding of ministers to the Symbolical Books of the church.

Note 5. Ordination is only the ratification of the call extended previously.

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§ 22 – Regular Sunday Services and Services on customary festive days are necessary in order that the Word of God may dwell richly in a congregation.

Note 1. Outward observance of Sunday and other festive days not divinely ordained.

Note 2. Regarding the necessity and benefits of the celebration of feasts and the like.

Note 3. Regarding [exegetical] examinations at church: Pastors and ministers of the church publicly and privately instruct the children and youth in God's Word.

§ 23 – It is necessary in order that the Word of God may dwell richly in a congregation that members permit their pastor, as steward of the mysteries of God, to baptize their newborn infants without delay; that they permit their betrothed publicly to be blessed by God's Word and prayer at their marriage; and finally that they permit him to give their dead a Christian burial.

Note 1. Lutheran fathers against the delay of infant baptism.

Note 2. Chemnitz on confirmation (preparation for Communion)

Note 3. Those who in a truly Lutheran church desire to go to the Lord's Table first announce their names and present themselves for Christian interrogation.

Note 4. The Augsburg Confession clearly declares that "confession is not commanded in Scripture, but was instituted by the church"

Note 5. Concerning the diligent use of the Holy Supper Luther writes: "We are to force no one to believe or to receive the Sacrament"

Note 6. That the blessing of the betrothed by the church is rightly retained:

- (1) The example God has given us
- (2) The apostolic command
 - a. the general rule
 - b. the particular command
- (3) The indoctrination of the newly married couple
- (4) Its benefit, namely ratification in the presence of God
- (5) The ancient institution by the church
- (6) The ascent also of the heathen

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Note 7. Concerning the duty of the congregation to call ministers to visit the sick and the dying...

Note 8. Concerning Christian funerals

- (1) How fragile, brief and miserable temporal life is
- (2) What the potent cause of death is
- (3) How we have been redeemed from sin and death
- (4) How Christ was buried and raised
- (5) Judgment Day
- (6) That Christians by their godly hymns differentiate
- (7) Those who accompany the funeral should commend every tribulation to our God and Lord

§ 24 – In order that the Word of God may dwell richly in a congregation it is necessary... that the congregation establish an Evangelical Lutheran School.

Note 1. It is the duty of Christian congregations to establish schools

Note 2. The office of Christian school teacher, insofar as he deals with the Word of God, is a church ministry too.

Note 3. School teachers are subject to the supervision of the pastoral ministry

§ 25 – In order that the Word of God may richly and rightly dwell in a congregation it is finally necessary that the congregation shall tolerate no divisions by conventicles...

Note. Augustana XIV

C.

Part Three – Concerning the Exercise of a Congregation's Duty to Care for Purity of Doctrine and Life and in Both Relations to Discipline Its Members

§ 26 – All members of the congregation shall strive to grow and become enriched in all doctrine and knowledge

Note. Luther comments on judging doctrine – the sheep should judge whether it is Christ's Word that is taught

§ 27 – A Congregation shall establish the office of such elders or overseers as do not labor in the Word and doctrine

Note. Testimonies of Lutheran fathers

§ 28 – The Congregation shall see to it that only [doctrinally] pure books, approved by

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the orthodox church, are introduced and tolerated in church and school

Note 1. Regarding hymnals and the hymns offered in them

Note 2. To judge what the confessional ceremonies are that must be retained

§ 29 – The congregation shall receive into membership only those that are:

- (1) Baptized
- (2) As adults confess the faith
- (3) Lead a Christian life

Note. Compare this with Luther's witness in paragraph 12

§ 30 – The congregation shall in public assembly, according to God's Word, in Christian order, and with the employment of witnesses, examine those members who are reported as disobedient to God's Word in doctrine or life

Note 1. Extent to which the congregation is to be concerned about Christian discipline

Note 2. Concerning those who are to be excommunicated,

Who is subject to church discipline? Dannhauer:

- (1) He who is called brother
 - (2) Who is of a rational and sound mind
 - (3) Who is a member of the visible church
 - (4) Who is still alive
 - (5) Who is an impenitent sinner
- (this enumeration repeats in the explanation)

Note 3. Excommunication should be declared by the minister of the Word, but only after a preceding, fruitless, brotherly rebuke following the procedure outlined in Matt. 18:15-18.

Note 4. There are cases in which degrees of admonition can not be observed.

Note 5. Regarding the publication of the excommunication and its consequences

Note 6. Regarding the reinstatement of penitent excommunicated persons

Note 7. An important rule for judging and accusation submitted to the congregation

Note 8. A church member who has sinned publicly should not be

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excommunicated in case he repents.

Note 9. Those who themselves sever their relations with an orthodox congregation on account of sin or error should indeed not be excommunicated

§ 31 – Congregations shall not be so presumptuous as arbitrarily to depose their pastors and others who administer an ecclesiastical office. But...

Note 1. Congregations may not arbitrarily depose their pastors from office.

Note 2. It is contrary to God's Word for a congregation in advance to contract with a person who is called, that he may administer his office only for one or more years and that he then may be discharged.

Note 3. Congregations may not endeavor at once to remove their pastor because of mere imperfections in doctrine and life, but they should admonish him in a humble and friendly way.

Note 4. Concerning legitimate reasons to depose a minister from his office

Note 5. Concerning the right procedure in deposing a minister

Note 6. Unless a congregation has several ministers itself, it must call in several additional faithful ministers of the church for the procedure of removal.

Note 7. Finally it might be added that while incipient inefficiency in administering the office does not justify the removal of a minister from his office, it nevertheless entitles the congregation to relieve him of it.

§ 32 – Lastly, the congregation shall also see to it that neither the congregation nor individual church members enter into any church union with unbelievers or heterodox communions and so become guilty of religious unionism in matters of faith and church.

Note. Here should be added common worship with the heterodox, etc.

D.

Part Four – Concerning the Exercise of the Duty of a Congregation to Care for Its Members Also in Earthly Needs

§ 33 – In the first place, the congregation should do everything in its power to see to it that its pastor has food, clothing, and a home for himself and his family.

Note. A collected anthology of testimonies

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§ 34 – The congregation shall also provide food, clothing, habitation, and all other necessities for the poor, widows, orphans, aged, and invalids...

Note 1. Compare the testimonies of Luther

Note 2. A testimony from earlier times against joining secret societies

§ 35 – A congregation shall see to it that its members in their sickness are not without the necessary help

Note 1. The duty of nursing the sick

§ 36 – A congregation shall see to it that every member, even the poorest, be given a decent, honorable, and Christian burial.

E.

Part Five – Concerning the Exercise of the Duty of a Congregation to See to It that It Does All Things Decently and in Order

§ 37 – The pastor shall have and preserve in his custody two books –
1) the record of souls 2) the church record

§ 38 – All writings and documents which concern the congregation... should be preserved by the secretary of the church

§ 39 – The orderly administration of the money affairs of the congregation, the collecting and paying of salaries and the like

§ 40 – Almoners for the adequate care of the poor

Note: Luther on the common treasury

§ 41 – A congregation, according to its ability, shall seek to acquire property serving its congregational needs

Note 1. Luther on the congregational facilities

Note 2. Luther on churches used for divine worship

§ 42 – A congregation shall procure everything necessary for holding divine services

§ 43 – The accurate determination and careful observation of the time for congregational meetings

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§ 44 – In the congregational meetings nothing of importance shall be voted on unless previously discussed, clarified, and thoroughly considered

§ 45 – A majority vote decides all things not decided by God’s Word

Note: Adiaphora - the Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration X

§ 46 – The chairman shall see to it that only one man speaks at a time

§ 47 – Rules for election by oral vote

§ 48 – All summons to a congregational meeting shall be in writing

§ 49 – Written job descriptions for congregational officers

Note: The Wittenberg theological faculty on reluctance to accept congregational offices & Luther on the same

§ 50 – The contents of the constitution of the congregation

Note: Luther’s letter to Nicolaus Hausmann, Pastor of Dessau

§ 51 – The obligation of every Christian to contribute his proportionate share

Note: Luther on the tithe in Genesis.

F.

Part Six – Concerning the Exercise of a Congregation’s Duty Diligently to Seek the Unity of the Spirit, in the Bond of Love and Peace, Also with the Orthodox Church Outside Itself

§ 52 – The congregation shall diligently pray together for all the saints.

§ 53 – Unity to be sought with those of same official confessions.

Note: Preface to the Book of Concord

Frederick Balduin on schism among those who otherwise agree in articles of faith

§ 54 – Every congregation should agree with neighboring sister congregations on their mutual local boundaries.

Note 1. Wittenberg faculty on parochial territories

- remain distinct by divine right
- definition of a Lutheran diocese

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- Pastors prohibited from crossing diocesan lines

Note 2. Those who belong to another congregation are not to be received
- heterodox congregations are exceptions

§ 55 – Letter of transfer necessary between orthodox congregations.

§ 56 – A congregation shall not receive those excommunicated by orthodox congregations.

Note: Ludwig Hartmann on excommunication

§ 57 – A congregation shall receive those unjustly banished or excommunicated.

Note: Wittenberg faculty on receiving those from heterodox congregations

§ 58 – Whenever a congregation wishes to call a minister of another parish

Note 1. May a Pastor transfer from one congregation to another?

Note 2. Concerning the calling congregation – the decision does not belong to the minister's own judgment.

§ 59 – In difficult cases a congregation should seek the counsel of one or more sister congregations.

Note. Especially in cases of Church discipline
Luther on doctrinal controversies

§ 60 – A congregation shall regard the need of its sister churches as its own.

Note. Alms sent to congregations in need
- Benevolence towards fellow believers a sign of doctrinal unity

§ 61 – Whenever possible, a congregation should be willing to let its pastor serve as an affiliate or daughter church a neighboring congregation.

G.

Part Seven – Concerning the Exercise of a Congregation's Duty to Do Its Share That the Church in General May be Established and Promoted

§ 62 – A congregation shall see to it that gifted boys and young men are dedicated to the service of the church.

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Note 1. Luther's preface to the Small Catechism, and his preface to *Booklet on Christian Housekeeping*.

Note 2. Regarding the support of poor pupils and students – Luther

Note 3. It is also necessary to establish and support the necessary colleges.

§ 63 – A congregation should see to it that the bread of life will be broken to such fellow believers as are in spiritual need of it – the sending of orthodox Pastors and teachers.

Note. The zeal of Jerusalem to strengthen those at Antioch – John Canut Lenaeus

§ 64 – A congregation should be zealous to spread the written Word of God.

Note. Quenstedt on the service of the church

§ 65 – A congregation should do its share that the Gospel may be brought to those sitting in darkness and the shadow of death.

Note. Seckendorf and Dannhauer on the duty of the congregation
Dannhauer on the fourfold dove call:

1. Example
2. Written Word
3. Witnessing
4. Prayer

§ 66 - A congregation should be ready to unite with other Evangelical Lutheran churches in the land if it has opportunity to do so and the union serves and promotes the glory of God and the spread of His Kingdom.

Note 1. All congregations and pastors as such have equal authority

Note 2. The beneficial effects of the coherence of congregations and pastors is attested to in our Confessions.

Note 3. Bishops do not rank above other ministers of the Word by divine right, nevertheless it is salutary and in many respects even necessary that among the ministers of the church some should be placed over others.

Rev. Mark P. Braden - Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church, Detroit, Michigan
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