January 2019

Shall We Organize?, n.d.

O.P. Kretzmann

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholar.valpo.edu/kretzmann_collection

Part of the Christianity Commons

Recommended Citation

https://scholar.valpo.edu/kretzmann_collection/91

This Collection Record is brought to you for free and open access by the University Archives & Special Collections at ValpoScholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in O.P. Kretzmann Collection by an authorized administrator of ValpoScholar. For more information, please contact a ValpoScholar staff member at scholar@valpo.edu.
SHALL WE ORGANIZE?

O.P. Kietzmann

It is an axiom in Church history that the voice of the Church of tomorrow is determined by the whispers of its members today. The quiet conversations of the Augustinian monk in the corners of the monastery and the halls of the university preceded the trumpet call to purity of doctrine and life in the 16th Century. In our own Synod every great movement forward has followed months and years of private discussion in parsonages, at conferences and in informal meetings. Usually these subterranean rumblings have been productive of good results; when they have been harmful it has been due to the fact that they were not drawn into the pitiless glare of print and subjected to the test of action at the right time. The fact that it was not necessary to state them publicly often made them subjective and emotional rather than objective and logical. If it is true that the whispers of the Church are important, it is also true that they must at some time be formulated lest they become a possible foundation for factions and a serious obstacle in the progress of the Kingdom.

At the present moment everyone who follows the destinies of our Synod with a careful eye will agree that no problem is more pressing than the matter of organization within the confines of the Church. For the past twenty-five years we have been organizing steadily and enthusiastically both within the boundaries of our individual parishes and beyond them. We have city-wide organizations, state-wide organizations and national organizations. We have them for men, women, young people and here and there for children. We have them for missionary efforts, Sunday school efficiency, radio preaching, and so on. By and large, their introduction and growth
may be traced to two factors:

1. The almost universal but specifically American tendency to organize.

2. The obvious need for some definite way of accomplishing the purposes for which the organization was called into existence.

With the growth and development of these organizations, all of them more or less separate and distinct from the only divinely imposed organization for the administration of the means of grace, the problem of their value to the Church has come upon us like the proverbial thief in the night. Unfortunately, it will not leave us in the same way; and since it becomes increasingly clearer that the whole complexion of our Synodical organization and our Church life in general during the coming decades will be materially affected by our present attitude, the writer believes that a statement of a few factors which ought to be considered will be timely.

At the very outset it must be said that the organizations which we have at present are only incidentally involved in any consideration of the problem. With a few exceptions they have been called into being for definite/laudible purposes or to meet special needs. In most cases they have done their work faithfully and well. But the Church historian must be interested in permanent values, and no organization in our Synod has existed long enough to demonstrate its right to continue indefinitely. The reason for this lies in the fact that entirely aside from their worthy purposes and honorable accomplishments their existence demands a certain view of
Church polity and a philosophy of Church life which goes far deeper than the surface question: "Shall organization X or Y be permitted to exist?"

Any consideration of the problem must then be dictated primarily by the long view. The question is not only "Is it good now?" but rather, "Will it be good several decades from now?" "Or, will it lead the Church into a blind alley, so that in 1975 it finds itself with obsolete methods on its hands and a consequent loss of power which will handicap its work for many long years?" This consideration is all the more important since it is clear from the history of the Church that it is much easier to introduce a certain tendency than to get rid of it. Habits of thought and action grow just as insidiously in a corporate body as they do in a human organism, and what appears to us to be a good way of doing things may prove a terrific handicap to the Church of our children.

Now there are definite signs on the horizon of history that the age of pathetic faith in organization is passing. We no longer believe that a committee can solve all our problems. The vast fraternal orders in our country show definite signs of losing their hold; in fact, some of their literature sounds a frantic note. With the opening of the fourth decade of the twentieth century we are entering an age in which there will be a new appreciation of the value of the individual and a new sense of the fact that the final solution of many problems, both social and ecclesiastic, lies in the careful training of the individual and his personal responsibility over against his immediate environment. The hue and cry against the system of mass education in our American colleges and universities
is most significant. The younger generation is refusing to be regimented and classified as cogs in a series of great machines. We are becoming weary of being organized.

The Church, specifically the individual congregation, is the only organization on the face of the earth which can escape this general indictment. This is due to the fact that it alone can maintain a balance between the rights and privileges of the individual and the need for co-operative action for the advancement of the Kingdom. By divine command it emphasizes on the one hand the individual soul and its needs. The Gospel is a gospel for the individual and not for the social organism. On the other hand, it points out also the need for co-operation and unity in the accomplishment of the missionary task of the Church. It holds in its hands a divine message for the individual and for the group of which he is a part. As a consequence it maintains a balance which is divinely ordained and vitally necessary for its success. The appalling breakdown of modern Protestantism is due in large part to the fact that the Gospel for the individual has been forgotten. For the social gospel the individual is important only as a member of his group.

Since no other organization, even within the Church, is called to administer the means of grace it follows that no organization within the Church can emphasize the individual and his needs properly. If it does not tend toward bureaucracy, it does tend toward placing the destinies of the organization in the hands of a few men whose power is derived solely from the willingness of the others to submerge their individuality and not from any divinely imposed plan for the advancement of the Kingdom. This is dangerous for the men who
lead, since they are prone to forget the source of their power; and it is dangerous for those who remain in the ranks, since it robs them of individual initiative and allows them to sink into an inertia and a false sense of accomplishment. We are beginning to see that.

Our organizational life and work is seldom spontaneous. Every pastor laments the high-pressure methods necessary to keep them moving. If we evaluate the tendency of the times correctly our children will see this even more clearly. The natural result will be that organizations within the Church, especially those that go beyond the boundaries of the individual parish, will again disappear, and we shall save ourselves a great deal of worry and heartache if we recognize that fact clearly and do not press them on the Church of the next generation. To sum up: organizations within the Church are transient phenomena designed by a philosophy which is now passing out of our thinking and which is forgetful of the divine rights of the individual believer. Even today they carry within themselves dangers which are of their very essence. These can no longer be ignored.

That is the problem. If the Whispers of the Church mean anything, the problem will not take care of itself. Its solution will depend upon a clear apprehension of the following factors:

1. A grateful and objective acknowledgment of the splendid services rendered by some organizations in a period of the history of the Church when the Christianity of the individual threatened to become entirely passive.

2. A clear and consistent recognition of the fact that the Christian congregation is the only unit around which the soul-winning work of the Church can be built up permanently.
3. A thorough appreciation especially among the younger clergy and laity of the fact that the success of the Church of the future will never be determined by the temporary and artificial enthusiasms of organizations, but only by the slow and patient training of the individual member of the congregation, to a full realization of his duties and responsibilities. We need more stewards and fewer presidents and secretaries.

4. The willingness of the leaders of our present organizations to relinquish positions of power and trust if the welfare of the Kingdom demands it.

5. A sharp distinction must be made between man-power and money-power. The former must come first; the latter will be an inevitable result. Until now we have often reversed the order.

It is to be hoped that future issues of the North American Lutheran will present further and more thorough discussions of the problem. Its practical importance for our future work cannot be over-estimated. So long as the Church is divided on the most practical method of grasping its God-given opportunities, the work of the Kingdom cannot prosper. The whispers of the Church of today determine the voice of the Church of tomorrow. We have drifted - now we must row.