

Come, Holy Spirit, God and Lord: Preserve Our Unity of Faith

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Introduction

If this were a business training session, or a professional conference of some kind, I'm not sure I'd like to be the seventh presenter near the end of the schedule. To look at the other six topics is to see that the Holy Spirit is receiving our full attention during this entire conference. But that is good, and if what I present has been included in the other papers, so much the better. This is one subject that can not get enough attention in our world. As Paul told Timothy: "Beyond all question, the mystery of godliness is great: He appeared in a body, was vindicated by the Spirit, was seen by angels, was preached among the nations, was believed on in the world, was taken up in glory" (1 Ti 3:16). Note that Jesus Christ is the focus of these words, the author and finisher of our salvation, but see also the prominent role that the Holy Spirit plays in Paul's teaching to Timothy. My prayer as I present this paper to you as brothers is that you view me as Paul wanted to be seen when he said, "So then, men ought to regard us as servants of Christ, and as those entrusted with the secret things of God" (1 Co 4:1). In this paper we want to stress that it is only by the Holy Spirit that we are united in faith, and it is only by the Holy Spirit that we are preserved in that unity.

I. Only by the Spirit Are We United in Faith.

Our minds can only dream of the unity that existed when God rested on the seventh day. Perfect unity between Creator and created was coupled with perfect unity between husband and wife. How tragically that unity was shattered between holy God and his disobedient creation when our first parents fell into sin! And how quickly other evidences of fractured unity reared their ugly heads. How long was it before "the Lord looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor." How could such a difference arise so quickly? The boys had the same parents as teachers and role models. In his grace God even reached out to Cain and said, "If you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it." Cain didn't listen, and murder followed in short order.

That lesson is repeated more often than we might wish on the pages of Holy Scripture. For instance, how could both Judas and Peter sit at the feet of the Master for over three years, and still miss so much? With Judas it was greed, a blinding desire for the material things in life which left him in despair, willfully choosing eternal separation from God in hell. With Peter it was pride and self-confidence. All by himself he would stand tall for Jesus, and even die rather than deny. Yet, you know what happened. Not once, but three times he denied and even added other sins to that denial. Yet, when the Lord turned and looked at him, he wept bitterly but did not despair. Why? God's Word told us only minutes ago: "Beyond all question, the mystery of godliness is great." The record shows that Judas received even more warnings than Peter during the Lord's earthly ministry, and yet he refused the blood which would be shed in only a matter of hours for him and for all people of all times. The only conclusion we can reach on the basis of Scripture is that if we are saved it is wholly, solely and completely the work of God's gracious working by the Holy Spirit through the gospel. On the other hand, if we are condemned, it is only because of the self-imposed blindness of rejection and unbelief.

Later in life Peter would say this: "In his great mercy he [God] has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade—kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time" (1 Pe 1:3b-5). The first thing that comes to mind for us as children of God when we hear about a "new birth" is Holy Baptism. By this gift of God many of us were first made members of God's eternal family. Listen as Paul echoes this same truth: "But when the kindness and love of God our Savior

appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life” (Tit 3:4-7).

But back to Peter’s words for a minute. What do these words mean: “you, who through faith are shielded by God’s power”? It is important to see that God’s Word never confuses “grace” and “omnipotence.” Faith is created, sustained and strengthened by grace alone. Only grace, not omnipotence or any other kind of irresistible power or force, reaches into the heart and soul and works spiritual blessings. The only tool which grace employs is the Word and sacraments as its means.

Omnipotence, on the other hand, operates in a different realm. It does not operate in or on our faith as if it were some kind of irresistible power. No, God’s omnipotence works above, over and around us, and its force is felt, not by us, but upon our enemies: the devil, the world and our sinful flesh. Paul tells us: “No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it” (1 Co 10:13). In every spiritual danger and trouble faith turns to God by grace and trusts his promise to use his power to shield us and provide a way of escape for us. We need to learn from Daniel in the lions’ den and the three men in the fiery furnace. Remember also Luther’s words from the Sixth Petition: “We pray in this petition that God would guard and keep us, so that the devil, the world and our flesh may not deceive us or lead us into false belief, despair and other great and shameful sins; and though we are tempted by them, we pray that we may overcome and win the victory.” That we should be united in this faith as brothers is a miracle of God’s grace, and one more evidence of his power to ward off the constant attacks of the three enemies who hound us relentlessly.

Another evidence that it is only by the Spirit that we are united in faith comes from Paul’s letter to the Thessalonian congregation: “And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe” (1 Th 2:13). What does this mean? Those of us who first learned God’s Word using the King James translation remember that last part of the above passage this way: “ye received it, not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which effectually worketh also in you who believe.” Paul cited examples of the Word’s effectiveness in the Thessalonian believers earlier in the letter. Here are some of them: “We continually remember before our God and Father your works produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Th 1:3). And again: “Our gospel came to you not simply in words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction” (1 Th 1:5). And again: “You welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit” (1 Th 1:6b). And finally: “[Y]our faith in God has become known everywhere. Therefore we do not need to say anything about it, for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us. They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the true and living God, and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath” (1 Th 1:8b-10). Here I should insert Article I of the proposed confession, *The Eternal Word: A Lutheran Confession for the Twenty-first Century*. It was drafted on the basis of essays presented at the 1993 convention of the CELC and presented for adoption at this conference. It is our clear conviction that only the Holy Spirit can unite us in faith, and that his eternal Word is the only source of such unity.

Now consider the companion passage from St. Paul’s second letter to the same congregation: “But we ought always to thank God for you, brothers loved by the Lord, because from the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth. He called you to this through our gospel, that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter” (2 Th 2:13-15). Notice how both start. “We ought always to thank God.” Paul begins so many of his sentences with these words that we almost take them for

granted and jump over them. They are not idle words, but rather they are Paul's heartfelt expression of thanksgiving to God the Holy Spirit for the unity of faith which God alone can give. Notice also how completely he gives God the credit for faith and unity of faith. He says: "from the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit." What an awesome mystery confronts us each time we as believers ponder the truth that our God chose us from before the foundation of the world. How else can we possibly begin to give thanks without also taking notice when Paul encourages us to "stand firm and hold to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by mouth or by letter."

No discussion of our unity of faith would be complete without also reflecting on these words of Jesus, spoken to his heavenly Father in prayer: "I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world. They were yours; you gave them to me, and they have obeyed your word" (Jn 17:6). Then he said, in preparation for his great sacrifice, "I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name—the name you gave me—so that they may be one as we are one" (Jn 17:11). And finally, as he looked forward down through the centuries, he added these words to those of us assembled here in Winter Haven, Florida, this day: "My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one, as we are one" (Jn 17:20-22). So much more could be said about the glorious truth that it is only by the Holy Spirit's gracious power that we are united in the faith, but it is time to move on to the equally glorious fact that it is only by the Spirit's working that we are preserved in this most holy faith.

II. Only by the Spirit Are We Preserved in Unity of Faith.

Our Lord was not alone in praying for unity in his Church. So also did Paul and Peter on many occasions. It hardly needs repeating that each time we pray the Lord's Prayer we join the throng that seeks to hallow God's name, have his kingdom come to us and others, and his gracious good will be done in all that we think, say and do. That those are the first three petitions did not happen by mere chance or accident. Unless God's Word is taught and practiced in all its truth and purity, there can be no unity in Christ's Church. Nor can his kingdom come, unless "our heavenly Father gives us his Holy Spirit, so that by his grace we believe his holy Word, and lead a godly life now on earth and forever in heaven" (The Second Petition, "How does God's kingdom come?" Luther's Small Catechism). The third petition underscores the same truth as follows: "God's will is done when he strengthens and keeps us firm in his Word and in the faith as long as we live."

First of all let me take you to a place in Scripture which starts with the Word as the foundation and from there proceeds to a prayer that God would not only give but preserve unity of faith among believers. "For everything that that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope. May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God" (Ro 15:4-7). The formula is really very simple. (1) Start with the premise that everything in God's Word was written to teach us. (2) Ask God to give a spirit of unity so that we may with one mouth and mind glorify him as we follow Christ Jesus. (3) Accept one another, always remembering how Jesus accepted each of us as lost and condemned creatures, patiently leading and teaching us everything we know about the one true God. (4) The goal is always and only to bring praise to God.

Jesus also gives us a simple formula for preserving our God-given unity as believers. He said: "I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing" (Jn 15:5). Unfortunately, when unity in the Church is threatened, the formula of Paul and Jesus is sometimes replaced by human devices. Unity in the

Church can not be maintained by agreeing to disagree. Nor can it be maintained by electing the "right" slate of candidates, who then will be able to restore unity by the power of persuasion or position. Preserving the unity of faith is the work of the Spirit through the Word, and not the result of human maneuvering and machination. St. Paul might want to add these words to this point: "We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ" (2 Co 10:5). And to do that it is also necessary to heed the following: "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: who . . . did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing. . . ." (Php 2:5,6a). Only when and where the Spirit gives unity of heart and mouth can that unity be preserved and strengthened.

Paul underscores this truth in another context as well: "When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might rest not on man's wisdom, but on God's power" (1 Co 2:1-5). Corinth was as much a septic tank as are many of the large cities in America today. Not only that, the infant believers in that congregation were still very weak, still prone to personality attachment, still lax in discipline, still "sleeping" when it came to something as important as the Lord's Supper. No wonder Paul trembled! But he did not resort to "eloquence or superior wisdom," both of which he possessed in rich measure from our God who gives all talents and abilities to His people. No, Paul preached "Christ and him crucified," and his message and his preaching were "a demonstration of the Spirit's power." What a testimony! What a lesson for us to ponder and emulate!

Christ's Church faces threats to unity of faith in every generation. Satan can't stand to let the gospel march to victory without doing everything in his power to obstruct God's glorious plan. These threats take on many forms as we will see by reviewing a number of them from the pages of Scripture. These examples can be most instructive for us on our particular watch in history to insure that under God's grace we preserve the gift of unity with which he has blessed us.

Sometimes unity is threatened by something as simple as an innocent lack of understanding, and that might even include something very basic to our faith and doctrine. For example: "Meanwhile a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and he spoke with great fervor, and taught about Jesus accurately, though he knew only the baptism of John" (Ac 18:24,25). What high grades Apollos receives under inspiration of the Holy Spirit. He was learned and spoke with great fervor as he taught about Jesus accurately. There was only one problem. Somehow during his training the subject of baptism either had not come up, or else it had not been taught thoroughly. The only baptism he knew of was that of John the Baptist, which Paul later described as follows: "John's baptism was a baptism of repentance" (Ac 19:4a). So what was to be done to correct the misunderstanding, or perhaps better, the lack of understanding on the part of Apollos? "When Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately" (Ac 18:26). What a beautiful solution. In the privacy of the home of believers the matter was resolved, I am sure, with thankfulness on the part of Apollos. Would that all differences, difficulties and threats to unity could be resolved with such ease!

Sometimes it takes a larger group to clarify an issue. "Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, 'The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses'" (Ac 15:5). How was this matter handled? "Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question" (Ac 15:2b). What transpired? "After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: 'Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He

made no distinction between them and us, for he purified their hearts by faith. . . . No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are” (Ac 15:6-9,11). Then it was James who spoke up: “Brothers, listen to me. Simon has described to us how God at first showed his concern by taking from the Gentiles a people for himself” (Ac 15:13,14). He then verified this by quoting from Amos 9:11,12. And, finally, we are told: “Then the apostles and elders, with the whole church, decided to choose some of their own men and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They chose Judas (called Barsabbas) and Silas, two men who were leaders among the brothers. With them they sent the following letter . . .” (Ac 15:22,23a). That letter is also included in the sacred record (Ac 15:23-29).

A number of lessons are worth noting in this exchange. First of all, the issue was confronted and not swept under the carpet. Secondly, they chose leaders who were capable, gifted men who were filled with the Spirit, to lead the delegation. Thirdly, they discussed the issue openly, looking to those with the most experience and knowledge to lead that discussion. Fourthly, they formulated a response and supported it with Scripture. And finally, they not only sent a delegation back to Antioch but also put that response in writing so that all might gain the benefit of it. What a wonderful procedure they followed in order to preserve the unity of faith!

Unfortunately, not every threat to unity has the same outcome as the two noted above. The Scriptures provide abundant instruction as well for those threats which confront the church and do not reach harmonious resolution. For example, God’s Word tells us: “Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God: whoever continues in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take him into your house or welcome him. Anyone who welcomes him shares in his wicked work” (2 Jn 9-11). All three of John’s epistles are filled with instruction on preserving the unity of faith on the basis of Biblical truth. Paul adds this perspective: “The coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with the work of Satan displayed in all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders, and in every sort of evil that deceives those who are perishing. They perish because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. For this reason God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie and so that all will be condemned who have not believed the truth but have delighted in wickedness” (2 Th 2:9-12). And to Timothy Paul said this: “The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons. Such teachings come through hypocritical liars, whose consciences have been seared as with a hot iron” (1 Ti 4:1,2). Any number of similar warnings could be added to this list of threats to the unity of the church, but these three will serve to alert us to the forces of evil that are at work seeking to destroy the unity of faith as Satan’s agents in every age of the Church’s history. The words: “God sends them a powerful delusion,” and “all will be condemned who do not believe the truth,” are chilling to ponder, and yet our God has warned us that these things will happen.

So what are we to do when such things rear their ugly heads during our watch in the Lord’s Church? From one imprisoned for his unswerving loyalty to Christ and God’s Word we hear this: “As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (Eph 4:1-3). Elsewhere Paul added: “And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should. Be wise in the way that you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone” (Col 4:3-6). And Peter, who was slow to learn this truth, also adds: “But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior may be ashamed of their slander” (1 Pe 3:15,16). And, finally, our God also says this: “Brothers, if someone is caught

in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ" (Gal 6:1,2).

Against that backdrop, what are we to do when we come face to face with those who persist in undermining the authority of Scripture and stray away from the clear teachings of God's holy Word? Our God does not fail us. His directive is clear: "I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them. For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people" (Ro 16:17,18). In another context Paul paraphrases Isaiah 52:11 when he says to the Corinthians: "Therefore come out from them and be separate," says the Lord. 'Touch no unclean thing and I will receive you. I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters,' says the Lord Almighty. Since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God" (2 Co 6:17-7:1). There have always been those who argue that these verses only applied to the situations which prevailed in Paul's day at the churches in Rome and Corinth. But the Word speaks clearly and presents a general, timeless and universal principle, one which is to guide Christ's Church until his return in glory. We are always to be on guard against any and all who persist in disturbing the church's unity by causing divisions and putting obstacles in our way that are contrary to the teaching we have learned. If we were to see this happening, and in spite of it continue to practice fellowship with those who persist in these activities, our own actions would be a cause of division and offense. Worse than that, to ignore this principle, or to refuse to apply it, jeopardizes our own fellowship with God. The Holy Spirit gave us our unity of faith and uses this principle to preserve our unity of faith!

Concluding Thoughts

I had just completed the third year of the WELS eight year worker training program for the public ministry when in 1961 the WELS in convention severed fellowship with the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. That in turn led to the dissolution of the old Synodical Conference, which for years upon years had been the Spirit's tool to promote and preserve unity of faith. My mentors back then already spoke often and enthusiastically about the need for a new Synodical Conference which would do the same for those still in fellowship with us, and growing numbers of national churches around the world who were maturing under the Spirit's guidance and gift. Eventually, this conference, the Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Conference, was God's answer to that desire to promote, strengthen and preserve our God-given unity.

Reflect with me one final moment on how this conference would have looked in 1961. There may have been a number of Apaches there. Possibly some Zambians might have made the trip, but no one from Malawi, because we did not enter that field until 1963. There may have been Japanese representatives. There would have been representatives from Germany. The appeal from Nigeria had not as yet arrived, nor had the plea from Cameroon. Hong Kong didn't make contact for another year, and Mexico asked for help a year after that. We were not yet in Puerto Rico, and Colombia started twelve years after that. Taiwan and Indonesia would soon follow, as would Brazil. And most recently, look at Russia, Bulgaria, Albania, Dominican Republic, Cuba, Thailand and India. While not all these churches are represented here as of yet (and I ask our ELS brothers to fill in their fields as well; also we take note of the formation of the LBK in 1974), might we not pray for the day when this conference will have representation, not only from those here named, but also from many others as well? I pray that the Holy Spirit who has united us in faith will continue to preserve us in that special gift of his grace, so that together we might share his saving Word with countless others, until that glorious moment when we will all be privileged to join the throng around God's throne "from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb" (Rev 7:9b). Together then we will sing eternally: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!" (Rev 7:10). Then will also be heard this echo: "Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever, Amen!" (Rev 7:12).

