

# Make Known God's Manifold Wisdom!



*“His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus, our Lord.”  
(Ephesians 3:10-11)*

## Essay 3 – The Holy Spirit, The Enabler of Our Outreach Message

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The world around us lies in deep spiritual darkness, the darkness of ignorance, sin and death. We also used to be part of that. So we know the deepest problem of all mankind from the inside, so to say. We all were lost and damned sinners before our Holy Creator, deserving nothing but eternal separation from Him in the fiery flames of hell. But our God revealed His unsearchable glory and grace to all of us in the person of His Son Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. Through His perfect life and innocent sufferings and death on the cross God justified us, declared us not guilty before Him, forgiving us all of our sins. He brought all mankind back to Himself, the way it was supposed to be from the beginning. That is our comfort, that is our salvation, that is our only but absolutely sure way to heaven. We build our hopes and all of our life on that. *“The blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.”* (1 Jn 1:7)

The message of our justification in Christ was treated in the previous essay. But now we have some practical questions. What are the vessels into which God poured this precious Gospel message? How do we appropriate this salvation, won for us by Jesus on the cross? How did it happen that we possess this treasure now? How can we pass it on to so many hopeless and dying people around us? What or who is the power behind the Gospel? We feel ourselves so weak and helpless to accomplish this huge and seemingly impossible task of bringing the forgiveness of Christ to the dying world! It is impossible to discuss the answers to so many important questions in the frame of this essay in detail, so this work, dear brothers, is just a brief presentation. I just want to share some of my thoughts on this subject with you. We all want to mutually encourage and edify each other in this difficult but blessed work of preaching the Gospel that our Savior has entrusted to us.

### I. Original Sin

In order to find proper answers we need to recall first: who did Christ die for? Was it for people who loved God? Was it for people who deserved it? No way! *“You see, at just the right time, when we*

*were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”*(Ro 5:6-8) What was our real spiritual state after the Fall? Adam and Eve lost the blessed image of God in which they had been created, and all their children, including us, were born without it. The Old Testament testifies about that: *“The LORD saw how great man’s wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time.”*(Ge 6:5) *“The LORD looks down from heaven on the sons of men to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God. All have turned aside, they have together become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one.”*(Ps 14:2-3) The New Testament echoes the same sad truth: *“As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath.”* (Eph 2:1-3)

So Christ died for sinners - for us, who by nature were without the image of God, ungodly, undeserving, ungrateful, spiritually dead, enemies of God, who didn’t want to have anything in common with the Lord, His Word, His holy will for us, His mercy, His salvation, His Son. If it had depended on us and our abilities and our own response, the justification of Christ would have brought us no good at all. We would have thrown it all away. By nature we don’t want it. We loathe and despise it. We don’t understand and appropriate it, because we’re dead, you see. We’re talking here about what we call original sin. *“The sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God’s law, nor can it do so.”*(Ro 8:7) *“The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.”* (1 Co 2:14).

The Reformers also described this horrible state of fallen and spiritually dead men very well in the Book of Concord: *“As little as a corpse can quicken itself to bodily, earthly life, so little can man who through sin is spiritually dead raise himself to spiritual life, as it is written, ‘When we were dead through our trespasses, he made us alive together with Christ.’ ‘Therefore we are not of ourselves ’sufficient to claim anything as coming from us; our sufficiency is from God’”* (2 Cor. 3:5). (The Formula of Concord: 1, II, 3)

## **II. Concerning Some Heresies About Original Sin**

Here’s where the opponents of the biblical doctrine of original sin make their tragic mistake. Most of the visible Christian churches in their teaching don’t recognize the seriousness and deadliness of original sin. They don’t believe what the Bible says about it and think of it as some kind of tough disease which didn’t deprive us totally and completely of our spiritual strengths and abilities before God. People go to opposite sides concerning this teaching but they end up on the same side of synergistic barricade, so to say. Catholics and Orthodox, on one hand, believe that God deals with the problem of original sin in our Baptism and takes it away from us as a coat off our shoulders, so after we’ve been baptized we can and must cooperate with God in the matter of our justification. They believe so strongly in the natural abilities of men that they make our efforts of sanctification almost equal in value to the redemptive work of Christ our Savior. Thus our salvation becomes an uncertain life-long process at the end of which we still can’t be sure of eternal life in heaven, completely won for us by Jesus Christ on Calvary, and our conscience still damns us before the holy God. What a horrible mixture of justification and sanctification, what a horrible “different gospel, which is really no gospel at all” (Gal. 1:6,7), robbing us of all comfort and peace with the Lord!

On the other hand, so-called Protestant churches believe in power of the unregenerate human will to accept and believe God’s Good News of our salvation in Christ. They make a monument out of their

“ability” to believe, shifting the accents and getting it all wrong. “Decision theology” is the clearest example of that. What did they achieve in their erroneous thinking about original sin? It’s even sad to think about it. They turned the objective liturgical worship of God, based on His Word and Sacraments, into mere theatrical gatherings which they simply use as a conversion tool, appealing to human reasoning, emotions and will. They flood the Internet with all kind of virtual churches and forums, where they try to present their most sophisticated arguments and proofs in order to lead people to Christianity. They point to their deep mystical personal experience to bring the Gospel truth to unbelievers. And if one observes this virtual process long enough, one will see that all this avails nothing, and everything remains the same with unbelievers for the truth of God’s Word about the natural state of fallen man remains the same too. And what is worse, Protestants themselves are robbed of the sweet assurance of their forgiveness and eternal life in heaven in the same way as their “opponents” on the Catholic-Orthodox side, for mixing the Law and the Gospel creates only condemning Law again. They all deny the seriousness of original sin and its eternal consequences; they try to soften it. The end is predictable: where the Law is not harsh, there the Gospel is not sweet.

### **III. God the Holy Spirit is the One Who Makes Us Able**

So, the conclusion is this: it is not in our human power or ability either to appropriate God’s gracious justification in Christ by faith or to convey it to other people around us. It is simply impossible with us. But nothing is impossible with God! He is the spiritual Life and Power behind our own faith in Christ and our efforts to testify to His Gospel truth. God the Holy Spirit in His undeserving grace awakens our dead hearts, He gives us new spiritual birth, He creates and sustains in us this “hand of faith” that receives all the blessings of Christ’s vicarious atonement. *“I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.”* (Jn 3:5-6) *“You know that when you were pagans, somehow or other you were influenced and led astray to mute idols. Therefore I tell you that no one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, ‘Jesus be cursed’ and no one can say, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ except by the Holy Spirit.”*(1 Co 12:2-3) *“But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.”* (Eph 2:4-9) The Christian Church has been declaring for centuries this gracious act of our Lord in its ecumenical Creeds: *“And (we believe) in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son: who together with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified.”* (The Three Universal or Ecumenical Creeds: II, 1). The sainted Dr. Martin Luther has perfectly expressed this truth in his theological masterpiece known to us as “The Small Catechism”: *“I believe that by my own reason or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him. But the Holy Spirit has called me through the Gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, and sanctified and preserved me in true faith...”*(The Small Catechism: II, 6)

And so we can see that all the work of our salvation completely belongs to Triune God: the Father, Who in love sent His only begotten Son into this world to save condemned sinners; the Son Jesus Christ, Who became Man to live and fulfill God’s holy will for all mankind in our place, to suffer pains of hell, to die and pay the penalty for our sins before the Father; and the Holy Spirit, Who creates and sustains spiritual life in us through faith in the Son. Nothing is from us, everything is from Him. To Him be all the glory!

### **IV. Concerning the Heresy of the Enthusiasts**

With this in mind we can proceed to the details of how exactly God the Holy Ghost does His gracious work of faith in Christ in us. And here we'll have to deal with the ancient heresy of the enthusiasts, a heresy that claims that God deals with people directly, beside or without the objective means that He has instituted for this purpose. This heresy is very powerful, it began with our first parents in the Garden of Eden, when Satan tempted them to reject the objective command of God and trust their "spiritual" reasoning, and it will live among sinful people until the end of this world, I guess. The sinful mind or sinful heart will always want to play with God according to its own rules, foolishly trying to make God deal with a person the way this person wants it, and not the way God wants it. Dear brothers, when enthusiasts try to pray to God: "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven," they don't know what they're praying for. Their words contradict their beliefs. They are actually praying that God would overthrow their view on His means of grace. They invite Him to work in them according to His ways and not the ways they want.

Especially popular in modern Christianity is the opinion that the Christian is led by the Spirit everyday in this way, that God tells him what to do and how to do it in his heart. New mystics claim that the Spirit will not let them be mistaken and thus the Bible is not of much help for them anymore. They trust their subjective feelings more than the objective Word. Once a person told me that he started living with a woman outside of marriage because, as he put it, "the Lord told him in his heart that it was no sin because they loved each other." I still wonder what kind of "lord" he was talking about. The Apostle John tells us: "*Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world*" (1 Jn 4:1) How else can we test the spirits in absolute spiritual darkness if not by God's Word, which is "*a lamp to my feet and a light for my path.*"? (Ps 119:105) Without the Bible we'll become easy prey for all kinds of evil spirits and "lords".

Enthusiasts try to support their view of God's direct "miraculous" intervention into person's heart, arguing that those, who think otherwise, limit the Lord of heaven and earth in His divine attributes, especially His omnipotence. Well, I'm not going to argue against God's omnipotence, for I know that "*our God is in heaven; he does whatever pleases him.*" (Ps 115:3) He could have worked faith in my heart directly, without any means. He could have made me a believer in my sleep. But I'm not going to point out to my gracious and merciful Creator, Redeemer and Life-giver how He should do that, either. I need to listen to Him in His holy Word to learn the ways He chose to impart His forgiveness in Christ to me and to work the receiving hand of faith in me in His unspeakable love. And He tells me that.

It takes humility and trust before God on our part to accept and use His objective means of grace – the Gospel in Word and Sacraments. It takes respect for His words and not ours. Enthusiasts need just that. The statement of Dr. Luther in our Confessions about them remains true to this day: "*In these matters, which concern the external, spoken Word, we must hold firmly to the conviction that God gives no one his Spirit or grace except through or with the external Word which comes before. Thus we shall be protected from the enthusiasts — that is, from the spiritualists who boast that they possess the Spirit without and before the Word and who therefore judge, interpret, and twist the Scriptures or spoken Word according to their pleasure...All this is the old devil and the old serpent who made enthusiasts of Adam and Eve. He led them from the external Word of God to spiritualizing and to their own imaginations, and he did this through other external words. Even so, the enthusiasts of our day condemn the external Word, yet they do not remain silent but fill the world with their chattering and scribbling, as if the Spirit could not come through the Scriptures or the spoken word of the apostles but must come through their own writings and words. Why do they not stop preaching and writing until the Spirit himself comes to the people without and before their writings since they boast that the Spirit came upon them without the testimony of the Scriptures?...In short, enthusiasm clings to Adam and his descendants from the beginning to the end of the world. It is a poison implanted and inoculated in man by the old dragon, and it is the source, strength, and power of all heresy, including that of the papacy and Mohammedanism. Accordingly, we should and must constantly maintain that God will not deal with us except through his*

*external Word and sacrament. Whatever is attributed to the Spirit apart from such Word and sacrament is of the devil.”* (The Smalcald Articles: 3, VIII, 3, 5-6, 9-10)

## **V. God’s Means Of Grace – the Gospel In Word And Sacraments**

The means that God the Holy Spirit uses to give us ability to believe His forgiveness and convey it to others is His precious Gospel – the sweet news about His Son Jesus Christ, Who was crucified and died for our sins. About this very Gospel St. Paul testifies: *“I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: “The righteous will live by faith.””* (Ro 1:16-17) And also he writes to Christians in Ephesus: *“And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession—to the praise of his glory.”*(Eph 1:13-14) Through the Gospel God reveals to us His grace in the crucified and risen Christ Jesus, makes us spiritually alive, enlightens us and brings us to eternal life and blessed immortality with Him, as it is written: *“This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.”* (2 Ti 1:9-10) Look at the words of Dr. Luther from this angle when you read in “The Small Catechism”: *“But the Holy Spirit has called me through the Gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, and sanctified and preserved me in true faith.”*(The Small Catechism: II, 6)

We shouldn’t forget about the preaching of God’s holy Law, to be sure. Preaching of the Law plays a very important part in preparing unrepentant and spiritually dead hearts to hear the Gospel message. We must preach the Law in all its severity and sternness to crush the proud and wicked thoughts of sinful self-righteous minds so that the seed of the Gospel might be planted in them. *“Through the law we become conscious of sin.”* (Ro 3:20) *“Is not my word like fire, declares the LORD, and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?”* (Jer 23:29) So we must properly distinguish between these two main teachings of the Lord, Law and Gospel, teach and apply them both correctly, as is fitting for *“a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.”* (2 Ti 2:15-16) But in all of this we need to remember that the Law is still the servant of the Gospel of Christ, and after harsh preaching of the Law we must proclaim Lord Jesus crucified for our sins – Good News in all its sweetness. For only through the Gospel God the Holy Spirit makes us truly able.

So let’s return to the Gospel. The message of the Good News of Jesus Christ our Savior is never without its specific forms for us. Where do we find it as the servants of God the Holy Spirit in this blessed work to reach all the people with the news of their full and absolute forgiveness for the sake of atoning sacrifice of our Savior? What vessels of the Gospel should we use so the Lord would make us and everybody able to have it and believe it? He tells us that the Gospel is contained in His Word, Holy Scriptures, the Bible, the inspired writings of His prophets and Apostles, which we should proclaim and diligently study and teach. We have the command of Christ: *“Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.”* (Mk 16:15-16) St. Paul explains: *“Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.”* (Ro 10:17) Our Savior says: *“You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me.”*(Jn 5:39) St. John writes: *“But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.”*(Jn 20:31)

And not only that, but in order to reach out to each and every one of us on a very personal and intimate level, our merciful Savior has joined His powerful word of the Gospel with water, bread and

wine, thus instituting His Sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion. In the Sacraments God comes to us, brings us the forgiveness of all our sins, creates and sustains our faith in Jesus, uniting us with our Savior and with the benefits of His life, death and resurrection. The water of our baptism joined with the Word washes us clean of our guilt and makes us the children of God. *“Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.”*(Ac 2:38-39) In a mysterious way Jesus gives us His true Body and Blood along with the bread and wine of the Holy Supper and makes us partakers of heavenly blessings. *““Take and eat; this is my body...Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.”* (Mt 26:26-28) Through these means God comes to us, through them He also comes to all the other people. Through the Sacraments He gives us Christ. He makes us truly able, and He wants us to administer His means of grace to give life, strength and faith to the dying world around us. *“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”* (Mt 28:18-20)

The Lutheran Church has always recognized these precious instruments of God’s Gospel. So we confess on the basis of the Bible in the Book of Concord: *“To obtain such faith (in our justification only by merits of Christ) God instituted the office of the ministry, that is, provided the Gospel and the sacraments. Through these, as through means, he gives the Holy Spirit, who works faith, when and where he pleases, in those who hear the Gospel. And the Gospel teaches that we have a gracious God, not by our own merits but by the merit of Christ, when we believe this.”* (The Augsburg Confession: 2, V, 1-3)

## **VI. God’s Church Is the Work of the Holy Spirit**

But let us leave the sad topic of devilish doctrines and proceed to the blessings of God in Christ which He distributes through His means of grace. As the Holy Spirit makes us able to believe and as we continue to administer His Gospel, He creates believers around the Word and Sacraments, and all together by His power and grace we are gathered into one communion of saints, His body, His Bride, His Temple, His Holy Christian Church. *“Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.”*(Eph 2:19-22) From ancient times Christians confessed this in the Creeds, correctly putting faith in God’s Church right after faith in the life-giving Spirit, for building the true Church is His work and not ours. *“I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Christian church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins...”*(The Three Universal or Ecumenical Creeds: I, 1) And, of course, who could teach this clearer than Dr. Luther? *“...just as (the Holy Spirit) calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth and preserves it in union with Jesus Christ in the one true faith. In this Christian church he daily and abundantly forgives all my sins, and the sins of all believers.”* (The Small Catechism: II, 6)

And the means of grace, the tools of the Spirit, serve as the “marks” of the Church. By them we recognize the presence and manifestation of God’s children born again by the Word and Sacraments. This is what truly unites us and makes us one in fellowship. As our Confessions put it: *“It is also taught among us that one holy Christian church will be and remain forever. This is the assembly of all believers among whom the Gospel is preached in its purity and the holy sacraments are administered according to the Gospel. For it is sufficient for the true unity of the Christian church that the Gospel be preached in conformity with a pure understanding of it and that the sacraments be administered in accordance with the divine Word.”* (The Augsburg Confession: 2, VII, 1-2)

The Spirit preserves the Church through us, unworthy but blessed public ministers, when we continue to administer the forgiveness of sins won by Christ in the vessels of His means of grace. He makes us able. *“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) But we do it by His means, by His power, being called by His grace. *“It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.”* (Eph 4:11-13) Therefore, public ministers of the Word can draw immeasurable comfort from their divine call when they carry the cross of hardships and tribulations in their life of service to God. They themselves are weak, but they know the One Who gives them much needed gifts and strength to perform the duties of their call. *“But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.”* (2 Co 4:7)

## **VII. False Teachings and Visible Churches**

And here we have to deal with another problem, instigated by the devil. He simply cannot bear the glorious building of the Kingdom of God by His Spirit through His ministers. He is *“a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.”* (1 Pet. 5:8) Satan tries his best to destroy our faith in Christ and so to remove us from His Church. Satan uses his most effective tool by far – false teachings which the Bible compares with spiritual yeast and cancer. False teachings are so contagious and attractive for our sinful nature, and we must be constantly on guard against them. Our Savior sees that and issues sobering warnings to us in His Word to separate ourselves from visible church bodies that mix the truth of His Gospel with satanic lies. *“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.”* (Ro 16:17) He wants us to do that so that we don’t fall away from His invisible Body-Church. He wants us to have true fellowship based on the truth of His Word with the visible churches that remain true to Him. He, our High Priest, prayed to His Heavenly Father on the night He was betrayed for His Apostles and for Christians who would believe their inspired words: *“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.”* (Jn 17:20-21) And that is a true fellowship: our fellowship with Him and through Him with each other, fellowship, which is through the Gospel message, by the message, based on the truth of this message in love. *“Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit— just as you were called to one hope when you were called— one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.”*(Eph 4:3-6)

Unfortunately, the devil seems to be successful in his ungodly campaign all around the world. In our wicked age people clamor about the importance of Christian love, but almost nobody seems to care even a little tiny bit about Christian truth. Any public statement about even the possibility of the existence of absolute objective and divine truth is met with sarcastic laughter and enmity. Everything is relative. Your truth is what you think or prefer, and everyone has his own truth. All-compromising tolerance is in fashion today. Churches sacrifice the truth of God’s Word for the sake of abstract “love” which is not love at all. Huge denominations unite in fellowship despite the differences in their teachings. “Love unites us all,” they claim, without really understanding what true love from God is. They talk and write a lot about sanctification, but they forget what Jesus said in His prayer: *“Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth.”* (Jn 17:7) The most painful fact for me is that this devil’s lie has found itself some warm place in the majority of Lutheran churches, churches that have their roots in the Reformation, the movement which was God’s act in history to get the Church back to His truth, to His Gospel.

## **VIII. The Comfort and Power of God’s Promises**

All this could fill us with sadness, but we have comfort from the One, Who truly makes us able! He is the One, Who said: *“Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.”* (Mt 24:35) We can rely on the Scriptures more than on anything else. He is the One Who proclaimed through His prophet Isaiah: *“As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.”* (Is 55:10-11) So we preach His Word and the Spirit produces the good fruit of faith in people’s hearts. He is the One Who promised us: *“I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”* (Mt 16:18-19) And we use these keys from the Lord when we announce the forgiveness of sins for the sake of the cross of Christ to the people who receive it in Spirit-given faith and when we deny forgiveness to those who oppose the Spirit by rejecting Good News of their salvation. We use these keys when we baptize people in the Name of the Triune God and distribute Jesus’ Body and Blood in Holy Supper.

And our Lord showed the truth and power of His promises in history which is His Story. He showed it in the first centuries of New Testament Church, defending her through such Church Fathers as Athanasius and Augustine. He showed it in Reformation times, letting the light of His Word to shine anew through Dr. Martin Luther and his work. He showed it 15 years ago when His faithful gathered together to form CELC. He shows it today among us, members of Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Conference, by bringing us here for fellowship in truth and in love. We may not be many in the world of today, but we have His blessing, His promise to be with us, His power to make us able to keep our faith in Christ, to remain true to His Word, and to share His Gospel with lost and dying people everywhere, for *“God our Savior wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.”* (1 Ti 2:3-4)

These are really difficult times in which we live. The spiritual darkness is growing thicker and thicker. Wickedness is rapidly increasing. The love of many is growing cold, and many are falling away from faith. *“When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?”* (Lk 18:8) The sad question of Christ rings in our ears when we observe how mad people can be in their rebellion against their Creator and Savior. We may begin to wonder if we will ever succeed in preaching God’s grace to this generation. But we have Lord Jesus with us, we have His Spirit with us! He is *“the same yesterday and today and forever.”* (Heb. 13:8) *“In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God’s will. And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?”* (Ro 8:26-28, 31-32)

So dear brothers in Christ Jesus, first we need to strengthen and encourage each other with His word. *“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.”* (Col 3:16) *“Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”* (Heb 10:25) Then we must continue to preach the light of the Gospel in the darkness of this dying world, speaking the truth in love: *“Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction. For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your*

*ministry.*”(2 Ti 4:2-5) And we can continue doing that until the Day when the Lord Jesus comes back to earth for His Bride, to take us to be with Him forever in the heavenly mansions prepared by Him in love for us, because we’re assured by Jesus through His Apostle: “*Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.*” (1 Co 15:58) And why is that so? Because His Spirit makes us truly able! Amen.