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*Unity of Spirit—Bond of Peace*

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Essay #1—

**The Invisible and The Visible Church**

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**Justification is the Chief Doctrine of the Christian Faith**

In this essay, we will deal with the Bible's teaching on the visible and the invisible church. Before we begin this study, however, it is important that we relate this teaching to the central teaching of the Bible, *justification by grace through faith in Jesus Christ*. It is because of God's justification of the world that there is a church, and it is vital to maintain this chief doctrine of the Bible if the church is to be preserved.

The teaching of justification by grace through faith in Jesus Christ is the chief teaching of the Bible. It was the central teaching of the Old Testament. Some have said that the Old Testament is law and the New Testament is gospel. If that were true, people of the Old Testament would have been saved by works, and people of the New Testament would not have known they needed to be saved. Rather, both testaments contain both law and gospel. In both testaments, the central teaching is that God saves sinners by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. From the first gospel promise (Genesis 3:15) onward, people of the Old Testament were directed to the Savior who was coming. Peter declared that all the prophets directed people to salvation in the coming Messiah (Acts 10:43).

Christ, crucified for our sins and risen from the dead, was the central theme of the Old Testament and is the central theme of the New Testament. Paul stated that he never shirked from declaring all that God's Word taught (Acts 20:27). Yet, he also declared that Christ crucified was the hub around which all of his teaching revolved (1 Corinthians 2:2). So close a relationship exists between this central teaching of Scripture and all other teachings of Scripture, that when you tamper with Scripture, you tamper with Christ. To lose the biblical teaching on justification is to lose the Christian faith (Galatians 5:4).

Luther declared in the Smalcald Articles:

Here is the first and chief article:

That Jesus Christ, our God and Lord, "was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification" (Rom. 4[:25]); and he alone is "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1[:29]); and "the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Isa. 53[:6]); furthermore, "All have sinned," and

“they are now justified without merit by his grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus . . . by his blood” (Rom. 3[:23–25]). Now because this must be believed and may not be obtained or grasped otherwise with any work, law, or merit, it is clear and certain that this faith alone justifies us, as St. Paul says in Romans 3[:28, 26]: “For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law”; and also, “that God alone is righteous and justifies the one who has faith in Jesus.” Nothing in this article can be conceded or given up, even if heaven and earth or whatever is transitory passed away. As St. Peter says in Acts 4[:12]: “There is no other name . . . given among mortals by which we must be saved.” “And by his bruises we are healed” (Isa. 53[:5]). On this article stands all that we teach and practice against the pope, the devil, and the world. Therefore we must be quite certain and have no doubt about it. Otherwise everything is lost, and the pope and the devil and whatever opposes us will gain victory and be proved right (Smalcald Articles, Part II, Article I:1-5).

The Formula of Concord reiterated this truth when it said:

This article on justification by faith (as the Apology says) is the “most important of all Christian teachings,” “without which no poor conscience can have lasting comfort or recognize properly the riches of Christ’s grace.” As Dr. Luther wrote, “If this one teaching stands in its purity, then Christendom will also remain pure and good, undivided and unseparated; . . . but where it does not remain pure, it is impossible to ward off any error or sectarian spirit.” Regarding this article of faith Paul specifically says, “a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough” [1 Cor. 5:6; Gal. 5:9]. For this reason, he so earnestly and zealously advocates use of these *particulae exclusivae* [exclusive clauses] in this article (that is, expressions such as “apart from the law,” “apart from works,” “on the basis of grace” [Rom. 3:12, 27–28, 24; 4:6, 16; 11:6; Gal. 2:15-16; 3:11; Eph. 2:8-9], which exclude human works), so that he may demonstrate how highly necessary it is that in this article, alongside the pure teaching, one separate, exclude, and reject the antithesis, that is, all contrary teachings (Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article III:6-8).

Having reflected on this central teaching of the Bible, we may now turn to the result of this teaching, that God has gathered together, through the gospel and sacraments, an assembly of believers in Christ.

### **The Church is the Assembly of Believers in Christ**

We use the word church in a variety of ways. We speak of the building in which we conduct worship services as a church. We may speak of “St. Paul’s Lutheran Church” as the local church to which we belong. We may speak of the denomination or synod to which we belong as church. When Scripture speaks about the church (Greek: *ekklesia*), it refers to the assembly of believers brought together by the Holy Spirit through the means of grace (Acts 20:28; 1 Corinthians 1:2; Acts 2:41). The church is also called “the body of Christ” (Ephesians 1:22-23), “the family of God” (1 Peter 4:17), “the family of believers” (Galatians 6:10), “members of God’s household . . . a holy temple in the Lord” (Ephesians 2:19-21).

In his explanation of the Third Article of the Apostles' Creed in the Large Catechism, Luther gave this definition of the church:

But some among our people, who understand neither Latin nor German, have rendered it "communion of saints," although no German would talk that way or understand it. To speak proper German we ought to say "a community of saints," that is, a community that is composed only of saints, or, still more clearly, "a holy community." . . . This is the meaning and substance of this phrase: I believe that there is on earth a holy little flock and community of pure saints under one head, Christ. It is called together by the Holy Spirit in one faith, mind, and understanding (Large Catechism, Third Article: 49-51).

### **The Church is Found Where the Means of Grace are Administered**

The church (the assembly of believers in Christ) is found wherever the gospel is proclaimed and the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper are administered. The prophet Isaiah wrote, "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" (Isaiah 55:10-11). When it rains, the water causes the planted seeds to grow into plants. The plants produce more seed to plant as well as food to feed the farmer and others. So also the gospel will carry out God's purpose. God is always at work in and through his gospel, so that it is "the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes" (Romans 1:16).

The church will be found wherever the gospel is proclaimed and the sacraments are administered. On Pentecost, Peter baptized 3000 people. Luke wrote, "Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day" (Acts 2:41). We also read of the early church, "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread [a reference to the Lord's Supper] and to prayer" (Acts 2:42). Baptism and the Lord's Supper were instrumental in the gathering and strengthening of the church.

### **What is the Church Like?**

*The church is invisible.* Faith is a matter of the heart. Only God can look into a person's heart to see if he believes. As Solomon declared, "You alone know the hearts of all men" (1 Kings 8:39). We must accept what people profess concerning their faith, as they must accept what we profess. Jesus said, "The kingdom of God does not come visibly, nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is within you" (Luke 17:20-21). The people of Jesus' day expected the Messiah to come and establish an earthly kingdom which would cast off the hated Roman rule. Jesus pointed out that God's kingdom, his rule in the hearts of believers, is an internal matter. It is something which only God can see. As Paul stated, "The Lord knows those who are his" (2 Timothy 2:19). Since the church is invisible, we confess, "I believe in the holy Christian church" (Apostles' Creed).

The Roman Catholic Church teaches that “the church” is the visible body ruled by the pope. Thus, they assert “the church” is an outward, visible body. We, however, on the basis of Scripture, confess, “I believe in the holy Christian church.” We know “the church” by faith, not by sight. Only the Lord knows those who are his (2 Timothy 2:19). In response to Rome’s error, Luther stated: “We do not concede to them that they are the church, and frankly they are not the church. . . . God be praised, a seven-year-old child knows what the church is: holy believers and “the little sheep who hear the voice of their shepherd” (Smalcald Articles, Part III: Article XII:1,2).

*The church is one.* There is only one church of Christ. There is not a Lutheran branch and a Methodist branch. There is only one body of believers in Christ. Jesus said, “There shall be one flock and one shepherd” (John 10:16). To stress the unity of Christ’s church, Paul stresses the word “one” seven times in Ephesians 4:3-6. Paul also declared, “You are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28).

There are many different denominations in the world today. There is only one “holy Christian church,” however. In this world, denominations serve a useful purpose. We cannot look into the hearts of people to see if they are believers. We must deal with people on the basis of their professions of faith. A church body’s confessions will tell us what their members believe. If a church body’s confessions do not agree with Scripture, we know that error exists in that denomination. If the gospel is still present in that church body’s confessions, there will be Christians in that church. Yet, we cannot join with a church body which teaches error. This is not a loving witness to the people who are in error. Joining a church body that teaches error could also cause people to stumble in their faith or lose it. Error is never helpful to faith. It is always harmful to faith. We don’t want to expose our faith to error lest we succumb to it.

Thus, we do not join with Roman Catholics, Methodists, Presbyterians, or other church bodies which teach or tolerate error. Yet, we know that there are Christians in those church bodies where the gospel is still present. All who believe in Christ are one with us in Christ’s one invisible church. However, since we cannot look into people’s hearts to see if they believe, we will not be in the same denomination with these people on earth, though we may be members together with them in the invisible church.

*The church is holy.* We confess, “I believe in the *holy* Christian church.” The church is not holy because of the good things we do for God. Rather, the church is holy because believers are clothed in the righteousness of Christ (Galatians 3:27). Through Baptism, God has made his church holy, giving to believers the holy, sinless life of Christ and the benefits of his suffering and death (Ephesians 5:25-27). The holiness of the church is not an inherent holiness, one which comes from within. It is an imputed holiness, one which comes to us from outside of ourselves. It comes through faith in Christ. Yes, God’s people do serve him with holy works (1 Peter 2:5, Romans 12:1,2). Believers’ works are holy only because they are viewed through the perfect life of Christ. Members of the church can be called saints (Ephesians 1:1) because they are counted holy for the sake of Jesus.

*The church is universal (catholic).* The word “catholic” with a small “c” means “universal.” Since Rome calls itself the Roman *Catholic* Church, we always have to explain the proper

meaning of the word “catholic.” The church embraces people from all over the world. No one is excluded because of race, ethnic origin, gender, or social standing. The gospel reaches out to all people, bringing people from all over the world, from different social standings, from different genders, to faith. Peter had to learn that God wanted the Gentiles (non-Jews) to hear the gospel. When the Lord led him to the house of Cornelius, Peter declared, “All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name” (Acts 10:43). Jesus prayed, “I pray also for those who will believe in me through their [the apostles’] message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you” (John 17:20,21).

*The church is imperishable.* The devil seeks to destroy Christ’s church. He rages against it and attacks it in every way he can. Yet, we need not fear. Jesus gives us his assurance that the devil will never succeed. Christ will protect and preserve his church through all ages. He said, “The gates of Hades will not overcome it” (Matthew 16:18). The entire book of Revelation is a carrying out of this theme. The seven different visions Christ granted John in Revelation all have the same theme: Christ will preserve his church. As Jesus said, “My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand” (John 10:27,28). What a comfort these words are. They lead us to say with Luther:

Though devils all the world should fill,  
All eager to devour us,  
We tremble not, we fear no ill;  
They shall not overpower us.  
This world’s prince may still  
Scowl fierce as he will,  
He can harm us none.  
He’s judged; the deed is done!  
One little word can fell him (CW 200:3).

*Christ’s church is the only saving church.* There is only one way to heaven, and that is through faith in Jesus Christ. Jesus declared, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). Only those who believe in Christ belong to the holy Christian church. Only those who believe in Jesus will enter heaven. Thus, Christ’s church is the only saving church. We cannot identify any visible church or denomination as the only saving church. Wherever the gospel is proclaimed, believers will be present. Those who enter heaven do so, not because they belong to any particular church body or denomination. Rather, heaven is a gift of God to those who, through faith, are members of his church.

The Roman Catholic Church has asserted that it is the only saving church. In 1302 Pope Boniface VIII declared, “We are obliged by the faith to believe and hold—and we do firmly believe and sincerely confess—that there is one Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church and that outside this Church there is neither salvation nor remission of sins” (Bettenson, *Documents of the Christian Church*, p. 159). This declaration was made by Boniface in the context of a power struggle with Philip IV (the Fair) of France. Philip had levied a tax on the clergy in France to help him pay for his conflict with Edward I of England. The French clergy appealed to Boniface,

who asserted that Philip had no authority to tax them. Boniface claimed authority over temporal kingdoms as well as over the church.

This exclusive view held sway in Rome until it was reinterpreted in the twentieth century. Father Leonard Feeny, S.J. (died 1978), insisted on a literal interpretation of the principle of exclusivity enunciated by Boniface VIII. Father Feeny's interpretation ran counter to the spirit of ecumenism rising in Rome. The Holy Office (now the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith) sent the so-called "Boston Letter" to Cardinal Richard Cushing of the archdiocese of Boston in 1949. In that letter they stated:

It is not always required that a person be incorporated in reality as a member of the Church, but it is required that the person belong to it at least in desire and longing. It is not always necessary that this desire be explicit. . . . God also accepts an implicit desire, so called because it is contained in the good disposition of soul by which a person wants his or her will to be conformed to God's will (McBrien, *Catholicism*, p. 815).

This view was reaffirmed by Vatican II's (1962–1965) "Dogmatic Constitution on the Church." There, Rome, under the leadership of Popes John XXIII and Paul VI, reasserted her view that she is the only true and saving church. Rome said:

It teaches that the Church, now sojourning on earth as an exile, is necessary for salvation. . . . Whosoever, therefore, knowing that the Catholic Church was made necessary by God through Jesus Christ, would refuse to enter her or to remain in her, could not be saved ("Dogmatic Constitution on the Church," in Abbot, *Documents of Vatican II*, pp. 32-33).

Yet, Rome also asserted:

Those also can attain to everlasting salvation who through no fault of their own do not know the gospel of Christ or his Church, yet sincerely seek God and, moved by grace, strive by deeds to do His Will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience (*Ibid.*, p. 35. For a similar statement, see also the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, p. 224, n. 847).

McBrien sums up the change in Rome's view as follows:

The understanding of the necessity of Catholicism differs from the common pre-Vatican II understanding of the Catholic Church as the "one, true Church of Christ." The deeper theological reasons for the shift in understanding are the renewed appreciation of the universal availability of grace and revelation, and the recognition that the Church (i.e., the whole Body of Christ) is composed of many churches, some of which are not in communion with the Bishop of Rome. The Catholic Church, however, retains a certain normative status in relation to other churches (McBrien, *Catholicism*, p. 736).

Some in Rome believe that there is still one true religion but that insofar as other “religions” embody authentic values and even saving grace, they do so as “anonymously Christian” communities. Rome’s view, then, has gone from *exclusivism* (where they hold they are the only saving church) to *pluralism* (where they are willing to accept a variety of beliefs as having some validity).

### **Though Invisible, the Church is not Unnoticeable**

The church is invisible. Only God can look into a person’s heart to see if that person has faith in Christ. Yet, though the church is invisible, we can find where it is present. The means by which the presence of the church is identified are the means by which God produces the church. These means are the gospel and the sacraments. Where the gospel is proclaimed, where the sacraments are administered, there we are assured we will find believers. The gospel has the power to change hearts (Romans 1:16). Where it is proclaimed, there we are assured God is at work bringing people to faith (Isaiah 55:10-11). We, then, call the means of grace *the marks of the church*, because they indicate to us where the church is to be found.

Further, where you find believers, you will find fruits of their faith. You will find people holding to Christ and his Word in faith. Jesus said, “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples” (John 8:31). You will find people confessing their faith in Christ. This is a natural fruit of the Christian’s faith. As the apostles said, “We cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:20). Where the church is present, we will find people holding to Christ in faith and confessing their faith in him.

We call a visible gathering of people around the gospel “the visible church” because of the believers in their midst. This is not a church apart from the invisible church. Those believers in a visible gathering are members of the invisible church. That visible gathering of people around the gospel is called “church” for the sake of the believers in their midst. Yet, we are also aware of the fact that there are hypocrites in visible gatherings of people around the gospel. Jesus told the parable of the weeds among the wheat (Matthew 13:24-30,36-43) to illustrate that unbelievers will be present in visible gatherings of people around the gospel. They will pretend to be Christians, but they mask their unbelieving hearts by a pretense of Christian faith. That is why the Christian life cannot be an infallible mark for identifying the presence of the church, for the Christian life can be imitated. Ananias and Sapphira tried to imitate the Christian life. However, they were hypocrites whom the Lord exposed in the early church (Acts 5:1-11).

Hypocrites will be present in the visible church. Yet, they are not part of the invisible church. Since they have no faith, they do not belong to Christ’s church, even if they are associated with a group of believers who gather around the gospel.

Concerning these matters our Confessions state:

However, the church is not only an association of external ties and rites like other civic organizations, but it is principally an association of faith and the Holy Spirit in the hearts of persons. It nevertheless has its external marks so that it can be recognized, namely, the pure teaching of the gospel and the administration of the

sacraments in harmony with the gospel of Christ (Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article VII/VIII:5).

Although hypocrites and wicked people are indeed associated with this true church according to the external rites, nevertheless when the church is defined, it must be defined as that which is the living body of Christ and as that which is the church in fact as well as in name (Apology, Article VII/VIII:12).

Nor indeed are we dreaming about some platonic republic, as some have slanderously alleged. Instead, we teach that this church truly exists, consisting of true believing and righteous people scattered through the entire world. And we add its marks: the pure teaching of the gospel and the sacraments (Apology, Article VII/VIII:20).

Therefore in accordance with the Scriptures we maintain that the church is, properly speaking, the assembly of saints who truly believe the gospel of Christ and have the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, we admit that in this life many hypocrites and wicked people, who are mixed in with these, participate in the outward signs. They are members of the church according to their participation in the outward signs and even hold office in the church. Nor does this detract from the efficacy of the sacraments when they are distributed by the unworthy, because they represent the person of Christ on account of the call of the church and do not represent their own persons, as Christ himself testifies [Luke 10:16], “Whoever listens to you listens to me” (Apology, VII/VIII:28).

### **The Outward Form of a Christian Assembly May Vary, but Wherever the Marks of the Church are Present, the Church is Present**

The Lord wants Christians to gather together around the means of grace. The writer to the Hebrews wrote, “And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing” (Hebrews 10:24,25). We gather together around the means of grace to spur one another on toward love and good works. Christians benefit from their association with other Christians. When you start a charcoal fire in a grill, you don’t separate the pieces of charcoal from each other. Rather, you pile them together. In that way, the heat from one will set fire to another. So also, Christians encourage each other with the gospel in the Word and in the sacraments.

The forms in which believers gather together around the Word and sacraments will vary. The primary form in which the church gathers is the local congregation. The local congregation carries out the most comprehensive program of work. Here the Word of God is proclaimed and taught regularly in church services, Bible classes, and programs of Christian education. Believers gather together for worship and mutual encouragement. The sacraments are regularly administered. The sick and shut-ins are visited. People reach out to bring others the gospel of Christ.

Our Lord did not, however, command any particular form in which the church was to gather. He left that up to his people to decide in Christian freedom. He simply gave the church the

commission to proclaim the gospel and to administer the sacraments. How, or in what form, they did this, he left up to the church's discretion. Thus we find, in the early church, Christians gathering together with other Christians from other areas to carry out Christ's commission. The believers in Jerusalem and Antioch had close contact with each other. The church at Jerusalem sent Barnabas to Antioch. Barnabas brought Paul from Tarsus (Acts 11:19-26). The church at Antioch then sent Paul and Barnabas out on Paul's first missionary journey (Acts 13:2,3). The council at Jerusalem involved people from the church at Antioch as well as people from the church in Jerusalem (Acts 15). The churches in Galatia, Macedonia, and Achaia joined in a collection to help the poor in Jerusalem (1 Corinthians 16:1-4).

These early gatherings of Christians from different areas, who united to carry out Christ's commission, were forerunners of our modern-day synods. A synod is an assembly of Christians, from different congregations, from various areas, who unite to carry out the work Christ gave to his church. Since the marks of the church (the gospel in the Word and in the sacraments) are present, a synod is also church. A synod will pool the resources of the collective membership in the interest of carrying out Christ's commission. A synod will engage in activities such as beginning home and foreign missions. What a small group of people may not be able to do on their own, a larger group of people will be able to do. Training future pastors and teachers is also the work of a synod. If each congregation trained its own church workers, they would find that the quality of training would suffer. Thus, believers pool their resources to fund worker-training schools where they can give future workers the best training they can possibly give them.

Other forms in which the church may gather are area Lutheran high school associations, an association to run a Lutheran college, institutional ministries, Bible camps, groups which provide radio or TV services, the old Synodical Conference (1871–1967), and the Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Conference (founded in 1993). All are believers gathered around the gospel. Where the marks of the church are present, the church is present.

There are some who have maintained that the only visible form of the church which God instituted is the local congregation. They say that any other assembly or association of Christians, such as a synod, is merely a human arrangement. Some in the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod and the Lutheran Churches of the Reformation have taught this error. It is an error, because any group of believers gathered together around the means of grace is church.

### **God Builds and Nurtures the Church through the Means of Grace**

Christ has given his church the commission, “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” (Matthew 28:19,20). Christ, as the head of the church, sends out believers to bring to the world the good news about Jesus. It is through the proclamation of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments that Christ builds and preserves his church. Wherever the gospel is proclaimed, there God is at work reaching people to bring them to faith in Christ (Isaiah 55:10,11).

God builds his church through the means of grace. There is always a temptation to achieve large growth in the numerical membership of the church through a “quick fix.” Certainly we can make use of different methods of presenting the gospel. We also will not want to place obstacles in the

way of bringing the gospel to people. Yet, we must be careful that we do not rely on something other than the means of grace to build and nurture the church. It is in this connection that we want to look at the Church Growth Movement. Church Growth, as a movement, involves more than evangelism. It covers such areas as church planting, church diagnosis, assimilation, nurture, spiritual gifts, and small group diagnosis.

The father of the Church Growth Movement is Donald McGavran, a Disciples of Christ missionary for the United Christian Missionary Society in India. He died in 1990 at the age of 92. McGavran had noticed that a few congregations in central India were growing at a rapid rate while others were growing slowly or not at all. He wanted to know why this was happening. His answers led him to found the Church Growth Movement. In 1961, McGavran resigned from the United Christian Missionary Society. He founded the institute for Church Growth at Northwest Christian University in Eugene, Oregon. In 1965, he moved the Institute to Pasadena, California, at the invitation of Fuller Theological Seminary. There McGavran became the dean of a separate graduate school, Fuller Theological Seminary School of World Missions.

The first six faculty members at this school have contributed to the body of Church Growth material. Arthur Glasser served under the China Inland Mission. Edward Orr was an evangelist from England. Alan Tippet was an Australian, who had 20 years of missionary experience in the Fiji Islands. Charles Kraft had years of mission experience in Nigeria. Ralph Winter was a missionary to Guatemala. C. Peter Wagner was a missionary to Bolivia.

In 1972, the Church Growth Movement underwent a major change in emphasis. Up until that time, the focus was mainly on world missions. Church Growth leaders, such as C. Peter Wagner, began asking the question whether the same principles of Church Growth which seemed to work on foreign fields would also work in North America. McGavran and Wagner held a seminar, teaching the principles of Church Growth to 25 pastors and lay people at the Lake Avenue Congregational Church in Pasadena, California. The seminar met with such enthusiastic response that the Church Growth Movement switched its major emphasis from foreign fields to domestic fields.

Today the leading Church Growth figures are C. Peter Wagner, Win Arn (evangelism leader for the Evangelical Covenant Church; founder of the Institute for American Church Growth), Carl George (head of the Charles E. Fuller Institute of Evangelism and Church Growth), Waldo Werning (a LCMS man known for his work in the area of stewardship but also the author of a book on Church Growth), and Lyle Schaller (a writer, parish planner, church consultant, and resource leader for Church Growth workshops).

There are some things in the Church Growth writings of McGavran which may be useful. He has a great deal of experience from which he can offer practical suggestions to deal with mission problems in an effective way. We would not say it is wrong to employ strategies to reach people with the gospel. The apostle Paul employed a strategy in his missionary journeys. He preached the gospel first in the synagogues. If they rejected his message, he then went to the Gentiles. He went to where the people were. He didn't just go into a town, find a space for a church, hang out a sign which said "You all are welcome," and then sit down and wait for the people to come. As

we share the gospel, it is appropriate that we devise strategies by which we can best reach people with the gospel.

Yet, the Church Growth movement has the spirit of Reformed theology. Thus, there are a number of theological weaknesses of which we need to be aware (See Valleskey, “The Church Growth Movement,” pp. 102-110).

1. Doctrinal pluralism. While the Church Growth writers will hold a certain number of doctrines to be fundamental (there can be no salvation without them), they are willing to compromise on those doctrines which they do not deem to be fundamental. They will agree to disagree in those areas.
2. They do not give the means of grace their proper due. They do not connect the Holy Spirit’s work with the means of grace. Baptism is looked on as an act of obedience and the Lord’s Supper is viewed as a memorial meal.
3. Decision theology. The Arminian emphasis on free will is evident. Only in Lutheran Church Growth material will you find this emphasis absent. The goal of Church Growth is to persuade people to accept Jesus. They emphasize the powers of persuasion, not the power of the gospel.
4. Church Growth has a faulty understanding of sin and grace, law and gospel. The Church Growth Movement stresses the *felt needs* approach to evangelism. According to this approach, you look for needs the church can fill for people, such as loneliness, grief, alienation, poverty. You then fill the need in order to generate a positive response to the gospel. When this approach is used, sin is minimized. The real law, which exposes the depths of human depravity, is ignored. The grace of God is obscured when the unconditional gospel is presented as conditioned on human response. The real gospel, which proclaims the good news of free and full salvation in Christ, is obscured or lost.

In conclusion, when reading Church Growth literature, one must carefully sift the wheat from the chaff. Sociological research and principles do not build the church. Only the Holy Spirit, through the means of grace, builds the church. We need to test methods on the basis of Scripture, not on the basis of visible results.

### **What Constitutes an *Orthodox* Church?**

An *orthodox* church is a “right-teaching” church. What determines if a church is a “right-teaching” church? Scripture indicates there are three standards. The church must teach all of God’s Word, no more, no less. It must administer the sacraments in accordance with Scripture. It must practice doctrinal discipline, so that its practice agrees with its profession of faith. A *heterodox* or wrong-teaching church is one which adds to God’s Word or takes away from God’s Word. It does not administer the sacraments as Christ instituted them. It does not discipline those who teach false doctrine, thus creating a difference between its profession of faith and its practice.

In the first place, the church must teach all of God's Word, no more, no less. Jesus said, "Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, . . . teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19,20). He condemned the teachers of the law for adding to Scripture by placing their own interpretations of the law on the same plane as God's law (Matthew 15:9). The book of Revelation closes with this warning: "I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds anything to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book. And if anyone takes words away from this book of prophecy, God will take away from him his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book" (Revelation 22:18,19).

When church bodies add their own laws or doctrines to what God has said in the Bible, they identify themselves as false-teaching churches. When they indicate they don't think all doctrines of Scripture are important, that some can be dispensed with, and that we can agree to disagree on some teachings of Scripture, they identify themselves as false-teaching churches. It is the Bible alone that can establish a doctrine. Those church bodies which teach contrary to Scripture are false-teaching church bodies.

Secondly, an orthodox church body will administer the sacraments as Christ instituted them. When church bodies turn Baptism and the Lord's Supper into sacrificial acts which we must perform simply because God said so, they indicate they are false-teaching churches. When church bodies deny the real presence of Christ's body and blood in the Lord's Supper, or administer the Lord's Supper in a way not in accordance with Christ's institution, they identify themselves as false-teaching churches.

Finally, when a church body does not discipline those who teach false doctrine, they identify themselves as false-teaching churches. Jesus warned against false prophets (Matthew 7:15). Paul left Timothy in Ephesus so he could "command certain men not to teach false doctrines any longer" (1 Timothy 1:3). He told the Christians in Rome not to join in expressing their faith with those who created divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine they learned (Romans 16:17). Paul frequently warned against false teachers (2 Corinthians 11:13; Titus 1:10,11; 2 Corinthians 11:3). The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America permits people in their midst to deny the physical resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. If a church, in a published confession, states it believes in Christ's resurrection, but permits people in their midst to deny Christ's resurrection, it identifies itself as a false-teaching church.

How do we find a "right-teaching" church? We look at the church's published confessions. It is not enough to say, "The Bible is my confession." The question is, "What do you say the Bible says?" Churches must state what they say the Bible says, so we can compare what they say to what the Bible actually says. If a church's confession does not agree with Scripture, then it is a false-teaching church.

We adhere to the Lutheran Confessions as published in the Book of Concord of 1580. The three confessions which are common to all who call themselves Christians are the Apostles', Nicene, and Athanasian Creeds. The six distinctly Lutheran Confessions are: Luther's Small Catechism (1529); Luther's Large Catechism (1529); the Augsburg Confession (the unaltered Confession of 1530; Philip Melancthon, a co-worker of Luther's, made some changes in this confession to

make it possible for the Reformed to accept it. We reject those changes.); the Apology (defense) of the Augsburg Confession (1531); the Smalcald Articles (1537) (with Melancthon's treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Papacy); and the Formula of Concord (1577). These are the Confessions to which we subscribe. In addition, from time to time, we have added other doctrinal statements to state our position on matters not treated specifically by the Lutheran Confessions, such as inspiration, abortion, and the roles of men and women.

False-teaching churches teach contrary to God's Word, add to God's Word, or take away from God's Word. They do not administer the sacraments in accord with Christ's institution. They live or teach contrary to God's Word, or they permit false teachers to promote error in their midst. A right-teaching church teaches all of the Word of God, no more, no less. It administers the sacraments as Christ instituted them. It practices doctrinal discipline so that its practice agrees with its profession.

### **Are there Christians in False-Teaching Churches?**

Wherever the gospel is proclaimed, there we will find believers (Isaiah 55:10,11). Thus, we will find believers also in false-teaching churches. As long as the church accepts the triune God as the only true God, as long as they proclaim Jesus Christ as the Son of God and the Son of Man, as long as they teach that Jesus died to pay for our sins and rose again from the dead, there will be believers in that church. God will be at work bringing people to faith through that gospel.

There will be believers in that church, not because of the error of that church, but in spite of it. Error is never helpful to faith. It is always harmful to faith. Error undermines faith. Every error will ultimately have a detrimental effect on the central doctrine of the Christian faith, that we are saved by grace alone through faith in Jesus Christ. When people deny the inerrancy of Scripture, they ultimately will undermine what Scripture teaches about Jesus Christ, who is the center of Scripture.

Thus, we will not join a church which teaches or tolerates error in its midst. We do not join it as a testimony against their error. We do not join it lest we cause people to stumble in their faith, giving the impression that their error is not objectionable. We do not join it lest we expose ourselves to error which could destroy our faith. People have often accused us of saying that we are the only ones who are going to heaven. We do not teach this. We believe that all who believe in Jesus Christ as their Savior from sin will go to heaven. Yet, in obedience to our Savior and in love for the souls of those threatened by error, we do not join churches which teach or tolerate error.

### **Conclusion**

As we gather together to celebrate this seventh triennial convention of the CELC, we thank God for his many blessings upon us. We thank God as individuals that "the Holy Spirit has called me by the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith." We further thank God that "in the same way he calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith" (*Luther's Catechism*, p. 5). We jointly thank God for salvation through faith in Christ, for the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and for the active and passive obedience of Christ by which he won our salvation.

We thank him for the means of grace through which he builds and preserves his church. We thank him for giving to us and preserving for us the true teaching of His Word. That we possess this today is not a matter of our doing, but is purely a gift of God's grace.

As we face the future, we are small in number, frail because of our own weaknesses, hated by the world, harried by the devil, and often immobilized by our own fears. Still, we are encouraged to go forward by the words of Jesus: "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

Armed with the promises of Christ, we join the hymn writer and confess:

The Church's one foundation Is Jesus Christ, her Lord;  
She is his new creation By water and the Word.  
From heav'n he came and sought her To be his holy bride;  
With his own blood he bought her, And for her life he died.

Elect from ev'ry nation, Yet one o'er all the earth;  
Her charter of salvation: One Lord, one faith, one birth.  
One holy name she blesses, Partakes one holy food,  
And to one hope she presses, With ev'ry grace endued.

The Church shall never perish. Her dear Lord to defend,  
To guide, sustain and cherish, Is with her to the end.  
Though there be those that hate her And strive to see her fail,  
Against both foe and traitor She ever shall prevail.

Though with a scornful wonder The world sees her oppressed,  
By schisms rent asunder, By heresies distressed,  
Yet saints their watch are keeping; Their cry goes up, "How long?"  
And soon the night of weeping Shall be the morn of song.

Mid toil and tribulation And tumult of her war  
She waits the consummation Of peace forevermore  
Till with the vision glorious Her longing eyes are blest  
And the great Church victorious Shall be the Church at rest. (CW 538)

*Sola Gloria Dei!*

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## Discussion Questions

1. What dangers do we face if we do not focus all of our doctrinal teaching on Christ?
2. What confidence do we have when we proclaim the gospel of Christ crucified and risen from the dead? Relate incidents from your own lives and ministries where you have seen the evidence of God's promise (Isaiah 55:10, 11) fulfilled.
3. People often say of churches in our fellowship, "You people think you are the only ones going to heaven." Could we ever give that impression? How would you respond to this charge?
4. God builds the church through the means of grace. We use different strategies to bring the gospel to others. What works in one area may not work in another. Share the strategies that you use in your area of ministry to bring the gospel to others.
5. Discuss the importance of exercising doctrinal discipline in a church.
6. What temptations may we face when we consider the small number of people in our church bodies? What are the antidotes for these temptations?
7. What are the blessings we possess from being churches that hold to the Lutheran Confessions?

**Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Conference  
Seventh Triennial Convention  
June 4-6, 2011—New Ulm, Minnesota USA**

*Unity of Spirit—Bond of Peace*

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Essay #2—

**The Mission of the Church**

**Davison Mutentami  
Zambia**

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Before we get into the business of the mission of the church, it is important to know what the church is. The Lutheran Confessions with the help of Scripture define the church in the proper sense as “the assembly of saints who truly believe the Gospel of Christ and who have the Holy Spirit” (Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article VII/VIII:28). Edward W. A. Koehler in his book *A Summary of Christian Doctrine* says: “All those whom the Holy Spirit through the Gospel has ‘called out of darkness into His marvelous light,’ constitute that ‘chosen generation, royal priesthood, holy nation, people for God’s own possession’ (1 Peter 2:9), which is called the Church” (Koehler, *Summary*, p. 236).

This one church is headed by Christ: “Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Saviour” (Ephesians 5:23). Luther also writes in his Large Catechism: “I believe that there is on earth a little holy flock or community of pure saints under one head, Christ. It is called together by the Holy Spirit in one faith, mind, and understanding. It possesses a variety of gifts, yet is united in love without sect or schism” (Large Catechism, Third Article: 51). However, not all is holy in the visible church of professing believers. A visible gathering may contain unbelievers who only pretend to be believers. Jesus pointed this out in Matthew 13:47-50, where he says: “Once again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was let down into the lake and caught all kinds of fish. When it was full, the fishermen pulled it up on the shore. Then they sat down and collected the good fish in baskets, but threw the bad away. This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous and throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” This means there are hypocrites in the church (actually “churches”) on earth. These hypocrites and wicked people are members of the church according to the outward associations of the church’s marks, that is, Word, confession, and sacraments.

Therefore the invisible church is the total number of those who have true biblical faith in their hearts, that is, in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. The visible church is the total number of those who profess the Christian faith. The invisible church is hidden within the visible church, known only to God.

**Christ has given the mission to this church.**

We have looked at what the church is; now we want to look at the responsibility Christ has given to his church. We call this responsibility, “the mission of the church.” Christ revealed the

church's mission in the four Gospels of the New Testament; these are Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. I will survey this mission by following the order as outlined in the Bible. The first mission, actually known as the Great Commission, is found in Matthew 28:18-20, Jesus said: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising 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."

Jesus opens the mission by assuring his disciples, who had gathered on the mountain in Galilee, that he is the leader of the church, the one who was given "all authority in heaven and on earth." He said these words after he rose from the dead and was about to go to his Father. These were important words of instruction from Jesus to his disciples. On the basis of that authority, Jesus told his disciples to make more disciples as they preached, baptised, and taught. The disciples were under the authority of Jesus in their mission of making disciples. The authority of Jesus comes from his divine throne in heaven where he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty (*Luther's Catechism*, p. 170). With this same authority, Jesus still commands us to tell others the good news and make them disciples for the kingdom.

Jesus has total power and control over the world; he rules "far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come" (Ephesians 1:21). When Jesus said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me," he was developing confidence and trust in his disciples. He was telling them that they were not alone; they had a strong leader behind them, the head of the Great Commission. This is the same assurance that Jesus is giving to his church today. We should make disciples without fear or favour because we have a divine leader who has all authority on earth.

In Matthew 28:19, Jesus said, "Therefore go." Now the word "go" is a participle (*poreuthentes*), literally, "having gone." This means Jesus is telling them that unless they go to people, what he commands them will not happen. The mission Jesus gave to his disciples was to "make disciples of all nations." A disciple is a learner and a follower of Jesus Christ, a believer. In this commission, Jesus commanded his disciples to go to all unbelievers who do not yet know Christ as Saviour and teach them about this Saviour. This is the same mission that Jesus Christ has given to our church today. He is saying "Go!" We have to go out to all unbelievers throughout the world and make disciples. We are Christ's messengers. There will not be Christians if we do not go out to preach and teach people about the Saviour.

Jesus Christ has commissioned the church to make disciples. This activity of making disciples is qualified by the two words: "baptising and teaching"; therefore, the commission of Jesus Christ will include Baptism and teaching. The Bible clearly teaches that through Baptism, God washes away sin: "Peter replied, 'Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins'" (Acts 2:38). In the book of Titus 3:5, the Bible says: "He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit." Baptism is called a "washing of rebirth." This is how the Holy Spirit converts people from spiritual death to spiritual life. Through Baptism, the gospel marked by a visible sign (water), the Holy Spirit makes disciples.

When unbelievers are turned into believers by the power of the Holy Spirit, the commission is not yet complete. Jesus added, “Teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.” This means that after the Holy Spirit converts people through Baptism, the church takes up another responsibility—that is teaching believers to obey everything he (Jesus) has commanded them. “To obey” is to hold firmly to, to guard, and to do what one is told. For example, if someone gives you a precious gift, he will advise you to take care of that gift. He will instruct you to guard it jealously and to hold firmly to the gift which is already in your hands. This will often involve effort on your part.

Since the mission of the church is to make disciples throughout the world, baptising them and teaching them to obey everything Christ has commanded, the church has to continue nurturing the flock which has already been baptised and are followers of Christ. It is the duty of the church to continue teaching people to hold on firmly to everything they have learned. This must have an impact on their lives. It is thus the mission of the church to preserve and encourage the flock of believers to live safely according to the commands of the Good Shepherd. When Jesus says, “teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you,” he is talking about the life of a person after they become a believer. It is our mission to help people grow in faith as disciples and to be preserved in faith through the Holy Spirit. As a light sends forth rays from the moment it begins to burn until it is extinguished, so also the sanctification of life begins the very moment faith is kindled in the heart, and it continues as long as the light of faith burns.

It is therefore also the mission of the church to help members’ light of faith in holy living to continue shining. Once the light shines, the moral attitude of man is radically changed; morally he becomes a new creature: “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!” (2 Corinthians 5:17). This inward change and renewal is the essence of sanctification. The church can accomplish this by using the means of grace. The gospel as manifested in the Word of God and the sacraments are used because the Holy Spirit creates faith through them. The Word of God which the church teaches keeps believers in faith; it helps believers guard everything they have been commanded to obey: “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 Thessalonians 2:13). Romans 1:16 says; “I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.”

In order for the church to continue fulfilling God’s command, “teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you,” it should encourage all believers to study God’s Word. John 5:39 says: “You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me.” It is the mission of the church to educate believers through Bible study because it is only the gospel which God uses to preserve faith. Therefore, “we must learn and ponder His Word, and keep it in our hearts. . . . Neglecting to use the Word of God means spiritual starvation, spiritual suicide” (Koehler, *Summary*, p. 177). If we study the Word, the light of faith will continue to burn because the Word of God will supply the oil for the lamp.

In the Great Commission “go and make disciples,” Jesus knew that he had put the precious gospel in jars of clay. This is why he promised to keep them company. The disciples were not

very strong in their faith. Some doubted: Matthew 28:17b, “but some doubted.” Knowing the situation, Jesus planted confidence within the disciples; he told them: “I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:20b). As we go out to make disciples, we should remember that this making of disciples is solely dependent on the power of the Word, the operation of the Spirit, and the authority of Jesus Christ. We should therefore carry out our mission confidently without fear because Jesus is with us to the very end of our mission.

### **The mission of the church is to preach the gospel.**

We looked at the mission of the church in the light of the gospel commission of Matthew 28:18-20. We concentrated on the task of making disciples and teaching them to obey everything Jesus commanded us. We will continue by looking at the book of Mark 16:15-16: “He said to them, Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptised will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.” The book of Mark reinforces the mission of the church by repeating the command: “Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation.” The disciples were to proclaim the gospel, to tell it in a form of urging the people to see the importance of the gospel. The preaching of the gospel has even more to it: Mark 16:16 says, “Whoever believes and is baptised will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.” This means that as the church goes preaching, there will be people who will reject God’s Word, and there will be some who will believe. This is just like the parable of the sower in the book of Matthew 13:3-9:

Then he told them many things in parables, saying: “A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. He who has ears, let him hear.”

From this parable, we see that there are some seeds which bear fruit and some which do not bear fruit. In the same way, when the church preaches the gospel, those who reject it will be condemned, while those who accept it will be saved (Mark 16:16).

According to the commission in Mark, we see that **the power of the church’s mission is the gospel**. This is because Christ has given to his church the Word of God: “For I gave them the words you gave me and they accepted them. . . . I have given them your word.” (John 17:8,14). By the Word people are to be brought to faith and sanctified. This is why the apostle Peter speaks of the “ministry of the word” in Acts 6:4.

Therefore, as the church carries out its mission “to preach the gospel,” it has no right to exercise secular power. “Jesus said, ‘My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place’” (John 18:36). Nor may the church employ the power of the state to compel people to accept the teachings of the gospel and to enforce Christian living (2 Corinthians 10:4: “The weapons we fight with are

not the weapons of the world”), or to imprison and burn heretics. The police of the state are neither an integral part of, nor an appendage to, the spiritual power of the church.

This is contrary to the claim of the Church of Rome that the pope has both the sword of temporal power and the sword of the Spirit. We hold that the state has the power of the sword, and the church has the power of the Word. “Not by force and fines, but by teaching and persuasion the Church wins men for Christ and induces them to live under Him in His kingdom” (Koehler, *Summary*, pp. 256, 257; See Augsburg Confession, Article XXVIII). As the power of the church is exercised through the Word of God, it is definitely limited by this same Word. It reaches as far as the Word of God reaches, and not any further. According to Matthew 28:20 the church is to teach men to observe all Christ has commanded. Whatever the Bible teaches, commands, and promises, the church must teach, command, and promise. Beyond this the church has no power and authority. It is our divine right to preach the gospel not taking up the sword (Augsburg Confession, Article XXVIII:18,21). Our mission is to preach the good news to all people.

### **The mission of the church is to preach repentance and forgiveness.**

The Gospel of Luke tells us another aspect of the Lord’s commission to his church. Jesus appeared before his disciples after he rose from the dead. He appeared to give live evidence that he had indeed conquered death. He also wanted to encourage the disciples to carry with them this truth and present it to all the people. The truth he wanted them to carry was this: “The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high” (Luke 24:46-49). This is the message the prophets foretold and Christ fulfilled.

Jesus wants the church to take this same message to all people. First, the church should preach about the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and then preach about repentance and forgiveness of sins: “And repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations” (Luke 24:47). The chief truth of the gospel is that for Christ’s sake God has forgiven all sins to all men. This is the truth which we should preach to the world. We need to assure the penitent of a complete forgiveness of sins, yet at the same time withhold this assurance of forgiveness to anyone who remains impenitent: “If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven” (John 20:23).

The church has been given authority to proclaim to all people the blessed fact that God has reconciled the world to himself and the people’s sins have been forgiven. Paul states this truth clearly when he says: “God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God” (2 Corinthians 5:19-20). It is the mission of the church and actually the purpose of the office of the ministry to make known to the world the forgiveness of sins procured by Christ. Whenever and wherever we go, we must use the inviting message, “Be reconciled to God.” It is our duty as a church to warn everyone who does not repent and believe in Jesus Christ. We are to tell them that they will die in their sins if they do not repent: “I

told you that you would die in your sins; if you do not believe that I am the one I claim to be, you will indeed die in your sins” (John 8:24).

The church is to perform its mission by preaching and teaching the gospel, by administering the sacraments, by remitting and retaining sins.

Our teachers hold that according to the Gospel the power of keys or the power of bishops is a power or command of God to preach the Gospel, to remit and retain sins, and to administer the sacraments. For Christ sent out the apostles with this command. “As the Father has sent me, even so I send you. Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained” [John 20:21-23]. . . . This power is exercised only by teaching or preaching the Gospel and by administering the sacraments either to many or to individuals, depending on one’s calling. For it is not bodily things that are thus given, but rather such eternal things as eternal righteousness, the Holy Spirit, and eternal life. These things cannot come about except through the ministry of Word and sacraments, for Paul says, “The gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith,” [Romans 1:16] and Ps. 119:50 states, “Thy word gives me life” (Augsburg Confession, Article XXVIII:5-9).

This is the work of the church, to administer the means of grace, and this will always involve transmitting these promised blessings to man. It is impossible to preach the gospel without the forgiveness of sins, and to administer the sacraments without offering the remission of sins.

This is the mission of the church: “The power and right of the ministry of the Word (*Predigtamt*) is to preach the gospel, administer the sacraments, forgive or retain sins, and practice discipline” (Hoenecke, *Dogmatics*, p. 207). This is what we call the power of the keys.

### **The mission of the church is to use the office of the keys.**

This is spiritual power because it imparts spiritual blessings, forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. It uses spiritual means, the gospel of the Word of God. This power was given by Christ to his church on earth. When Jesus addressed his disciples in Caesarea Philippi, he told them: “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” (Matthew 16:19). Jesus has given the power to bind and loose sins to the church; therefore, the church forgives sins by the authority of Christ. In order to do this the church uses a twofold power of the keys: The loosing and binding keys:

For although there is one ministry of the Word by which sins are loosed and bound, as also in a general consideration there is one key that is effective for opening and closing the kingdom of heaven, nevertheless, because of the diversity of objects, means, and effects, one key is called the loosing key, by which penitent people are absolved of their sins and heaven is opened to them, and the other is called the binding key, by which the sins of the impenitent are retained and heaven is closed to them. (John Gerhard, quoted in Hoenecke, *Dogmatics*, p. 208).

When we use the loosing or releasing key, we are declaring someone to be free from the guilt and punishment of sin. This is not a power beside and above the ordinary preaching of the gospel. Absolution is merely a specialised form of gospel preaching. "The power of the keys administers and offers the Gospel through absolution, which is the true voice of the Gospel" (Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article XII:39). The meaning here is not that sins are first forgiven by God in heaven when the absolution is spoken, for Luther says: "The sins are already forgiven, before we confess them" (Koehler, *Summary*, p. 258). There is no soul in the entire world which God has not already absolved from all its sins because of the reconciliation through Christ (2 Corinthians 5:19: "God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them").

Absolution merely applies the message of grace and forgiveness to the individual in a more formal and direct way. This is what Christ says in John 20:23: "If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven." These Bible passages are empowering the church. Jesus Christ is giving the church authority to remit sins. When the church forgives sins, it does so in the name of God, but it is not the church that does the actual forgiving; only God does that: "Who can forgive sins but God alone?" (Mark 2:7). The church acts like a spokesperson. The church merely transmits to the individual the forgiveness of God; the function of the church in this matter is purely instrumental (Koehler, *Summary*, pp. 258-259).

The *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics* (pp. 209,210) puts it this way:

Absolution is no mere announcement. It is done not in a declarative manner (*declarative*), but effectively (*effective*). It really looses. . . . "The ministers of the church have the power to remit sins in such a way that they not only remit sins  $\square\sigma\tau\omicron\rho\iota\kappa\ \square\zeta$ , in a manner that declares and announces, but also effectively, and nevertheless  $\square\rho\gamma\alpha\nu\iota\kappa\ \square\zeta$ ," i.e., "instrumentally."

The church is an instrument of God. As we go out to preach the gospel of forgiveness to all people, we should know that we are carrying out God's responsibility. There are many people out there who need God's forgiveness, even though they may not realize it. So let us go out and use the power of the keys, the power to forgive sins given us by Christ in order to help lead them to repentance and the assurance of their salvation.

We have looked at the loosing key, i.e. the right to forgive sins. Now we will look at the use of the binding key. The power to retain sins is what we call the binding key. Christ himself commissioned the church to do this in John 20:23: "If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven," as well as in Matthew 18:18: "I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."

To retain sins, therefore, simply means to declare a certain fact, which fact would obtain even though the declaration were not made, namely, that the impenitent cannot and shall not have the forgiveness as long as he does not repent. And lest such a person think he could still have forgiveness despite his impenitence, the

Church has authority and power to make such declaration formally and officially.  
(Koehler, *Summary*, p. 260)

Our work as a church is to use the authority given us by God. We preach the message of repentance and forgiveness to people and the people must accept this message in faith. Romans 1:17 says: “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.’” Such forgiveness can be apprehended in no other way than by faith, “for we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law” (Romans 3:28). But the impenitent person, lacking this faith, makes the grace and promise of God, as far as it concerns him, ineffectual: “For we also have had the gospel preached to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because those who heard did not combine it with faith” (Hebrews 4:2). He thus excludes himself from the general amnesty proclaimed by God (Koehler, *Summary*, p. 260).

Much as we preach the gospel, we should know that some will reject it. This is where the church comes in with the binding key authorised by God to instill discipline.

### **The church must use right judgment in its mission.**

The church may not use the power of the binding key indiscriminately or arbitrarily, but must strictly follow the instructions of Christ, to forgive sins to those who repent and not forgive those who do not repent. The church carries with its message the forgiveness which is readily available to all people, but it can only be granted to those who repent. When we go out into the world to make disciples, we should make sure that the component of repentance or sorrow over sin is displayed because it is necessary. We have one good example in the person of David that shows us that sins should be remitted to those who repent, but retained to those who do not repent: “Then David said to Nathan, ‘I have sinned against the LORD.’ Nathan replied, ‘The LORD has taken away your sin. You are not going to die’” (2 Samuel 12:13). As a church we have the authority to deal with sinners. This authority is given to us by Christ himself; therefore, any action we take as we deal with sinners is valid in heaven. Christ says, “I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven” (Matthew 18:18). But we should be extra careful as we take on this responsibility of using the binding and loosing key. This is because we may err in our judgment by forgiving sins to an impenitent and retaining sins to a penitent sinner.

If it happens that the church errs in its judgment, i.e. it forgives sins to an impenitent and retains sins to a penitent sinner, such action is not valid. The penitent sinner will still receive the forgiveness in spite of what the church has said. The impenitent sinner will also not receive the forgiveness even though the church has forgiven him.

### **The mission of the church is to carry out church discipline.**

In the mission of the church we are advised to guard against the public teaching of false doctrine. The Bible says: “Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves” (Matthew 7:15). What we need to know is that we are not alone in the field of making disciples; we will come across different teachings. It is our duty as a church to test these teachings so that we can protect the believers from attack by false teachers.

The apostle John warns 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 John 4:1). We have this problem in Africa where we as Lutherans are accused of not having the Holy Spirit because we do not perform miracles, we do not speak in tongues, and we do not have the healing power.

The church should also guard against any persistent ungodly living among its members. It is the duty of the church to restore every erring brother. It is also our responsibility to rebuke any church member who strays. This duty is found in the office of the keys according to the book of Matthew in chapter 18:15-17 which guides us in this matter. It tells us that if a brother sins publicly, we should help him by showing him his sin. This is an ongoing plan until the person is won back to the sheep-pen. If he refuses to repent, it must result in discipline. All members of the body of Christ should be concerned about the spiritual well-being of each other; we must be each other’s keeper.

However, all disciplinary actions should be done out of love. Paul says: “Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently” (Galatians 6:1). The church will exercise the right to excommunicate someone who does not repent. This is done to admonish (out of love) those who have fallen so that they can amend their lives. However, the truly Christian excommunication excludes those who are manifest and impenitent sinners from the sacrament and other fellowship of the church until they mend their ways and avoid sin (Smalcald Articles, Part III, Article IX, p. 314).

The church must carry out disciplinary matters in an orderly way as prescribed in the Scriptures. The Scriptures have laid down steps of church discipline which must be followed. The church has to take time and observe confidentiality when dealing with disciplinary issues. The book of Matthew in chapter 18:15 tells us that we should talk to any brother/sister who falls into sin. This should be done in a private, humble, and loving manner. Persistent impenitence of the person is the reason the church excommunicates. The other reason for excommunication is not to destroy someone but to save him/her: “Hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord” (1 Corinthians 5:5).

The moment a sinner realizes the danger that lies ahead, and repents, the church welcomes him/her into the communion of saints. This is Christian love at its best: “The punishment inflicted on him by the majority is sufficient for him. Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him.” (2 Corinthians 2:6-8). This is how the gospel is preached and enacted in different areas of the mission of the church. All this we do to direct people to Christ for their salvation.

### **The mission of the church is to use the means of grace.**

In order to better understand the mission of the church, we also need to bring in another very important tool, “the means of grace.”

The mission of the church is to use the means of grace, because this is God’s “delivery system” for his plan of salvation. We call the means of grace the delivery system, and they rightly occupy

a key place in the Lutheran church. As Lutherans, with the Bible we confess the means of grace to be “the way by which the Holy Spirit of God both offers and confers to the individual all the blessings procured by Christ through his life and death. Through the means of grace, God the Holy Spirit conveys to people the gift of forgiveness of sins won by Christ and works faith in the heart to accept this forgiveness. The means of grace are the link between Christ’s cross and a person’s heart” (Valleskey, *We Believe*, p. 94).

What are the means of grace? In his book, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine*, Edward W. A. Koehler defines the means of grace as “the Gospel and the Sacraments” (p. 189). But strictly speaking, we only have only one means of grace, i.e. the gospel. The sacraments become the means of grace because of the gospel which is connected with them. The apostle Paul tells us in the book of Romans 1:16, “I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.” The gospel (the glad tidings of God’s grace in Christ) is the means of grace because the Holy Spirit works saving faith in and through the gospel. The apostle Paul tells us: “Our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction” (1 Thessalonians 1:5).

Furthermore, our focus on the gospel does not mean that we cannot use the law in our mission of the church. We obey the law when we follow Christ’s command to preach and teach the gospel to people. The gospel is also applied to people in the form of absolution after we call upon people to repent: “If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they not forgiven” (John 20:23). It is part of the church’s mission, wherever we are sent to preach repentance and forgiveness, that the law comes in. When we make disciples and ask them to obey what Jesus commanded us, we use both the law and the gospel:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising 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. (Matthew 28:18-20)

Therefore it is our mission to use the means of grace by preaching both the law and the gospel. When Jesus commissioned his disciples, he commanded them to “preach the gospel.” If people refuse to accept the good news of the forgiveness of sins through Jesus Christ, we must tell them that they are then under God’s judgment. In the Great Commission Jesus simply said his pastors should proclaim both the law and the gospel. So even today, it is our mission to preach and teach both law and gospel to all people. The law will convict sinners of their sinfulness, while the gospel promises and delivers forgiveness to the penitent. As we preach the law and the gospel, we should understand that they have something in common. In a wider sense the law and the gospel denote the entire revelation of God. In the narrower sense the law refers to God’s commands and the gospel is the glad tidings of God’s grace in Christ. Both the law and the gospel are the Word of God; they both pertain to all people; and both should be taught side by side in the church. But care should be observed as we apply the law and the gospel when carrying out the mission of the church because they serve different purposes (Koehler, *Summary*, p. 194).

When directing people to follow Jesus we apply the law. This is because in the law God tells us what we must do or may not do. One example is in the book of Matthew 22:37, where we are told: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” This Jesus has told us we should do. Again in Exodus 20:3 the Bible tells us what we should not do; it says: “You shall have no other gods before me.” Therefore as we preach the good news to people, it is also our mission to share God’s law with them so that they know what should be done and not done to please God. The law is like a highway code which teaches all road users everything they need in order for them to use the road properly.

Jesus in his commission said, “Repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations” (Luke 24:47). In his commission Jesus wants us to use the law to convict people of their sinfulness: “Through the law we become conscious of sin” (Romans 3:20). In our mission we use the law to warn people because the law reveals the wrath of God against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men. The law works fear of punishment, sorrow and regret, despair and hatred of God in the heart of man: “The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness” (Romans 1:18). Once the law demands perfection from a sinner, he becomes desperate, just like someone drowning looks for a rescue team.

This is the stage at which we come in with the gospel to introduce the love of God and what God has done for that desperate person: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). The gospel comes in with promises of grace and forgiveness: “I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes. . . . 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’” (Romans 1:16-17). The gospel comes to comfort those who are depressed because of their sins. It builds hope and confidence in the heart of the penitent sinner. It works faith and trust in God. It moves a believer to love God and his neighbor: “Whoever loves God must also love his brother” (1 John 4:21).

From this we can see that in our mission as a church we must use both law and gospel. We can do this before and after conversion. We should use the law before conversion to show a person his sin and need for a Savior; after conversion we use the law with respect to Christian living. The regenerate person needs the law as a curb, as a mirror, and as a guide. This is what we call the threefold purpose of the law (*Luther’s Catechism*, pp. 49-51).

- A. The purpose of the law as a **curb** is to help preserve order in the world by keeping the wicked actions of all people within bounds: “My flesh trembles in fear of you; I stand in awe of your laws” (Psalm 119:120). “For although they are indeed reborn, and have been renewed in the spirit of their mind, such regeneration and renewal is incomplete in this world. In fact, it has only begun, and in the spirit of their mind the believers are in a constant war against their flesh (that is, their corrupt nature and kind), which clings to them until death. . . . It is necessary for the law of God constantly to light their way lest in their merely human devotion they undertake self-decreed and self-chosen acts of serving God. This is further necessary lest the Old Adam go his own self-willed way. He must be coerced against his own will not only by the admonitions and threats of the law, but also

by its punishments and plagues, to follow the Spirit and surrender himself a captive” (Formula of Concord, Epitome, Article VI:4).

- B. God’s law as **mirror** shows all people their sins and their need of a Saviour: “Indeed I would not have known what sin was except through the law” (Romans 7:7).
- C. God’s law as a **guide** tells Christians, surrounded by a sinful world, the way of life that is pleasing to God. As a guide, the law shows Christians in which works they should exercise their faith. The gospel conveys the power of the Holy Spirit which makes them able and willing to follow this guide and do these good works: “According to their inmost self they do what is pleasing to God not by coercion of the law but willingly and spontaneously from the heart by the renewal of the Holy Spirit” (Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article VI:23). This is the mission of the church.

### **The mission of the church is to administer the sacraments.**

A sacrament is sacred act, ordained by God, wherein he, by certain external means connected with his word of the gospel, offers, conveys, and seals unto men the grace which Christ merited (Koehler, *Summary*, p. 198). In other words, a sacrament should have physical elements used in conjunction with the Word of God. By means of its gospel foundation, a sacrament strengthens a person’s faith by assuring them of the grace of God and the forgiveness of sins. The validity of the sacrament is solely dependent on the Word of God. Therefore we must take the words of institution in that sense and the meaning in which Christ used them. It is true that the sacraments get their strength from the gospel. That is why we confess in Luther’s Small Catechism: “It is certainly not the water that does such things, but God’s Word which is in and with the water. . . . It is certainly not the eating and drinking that does such things, but the words ‘Given’ and ‘poured out for you for the forgiveness of sins’” (*Luther’s Catechism*, pp. 9,14). As we do mission work, we should help people to understand this.

Administration of the sacraments is one of the missions of the church. This duty is found in the Great Commission of Matthew 28:18-20 where Jesus commanded us to baptise people. Jesus also commanded us to administer the Lord’s Supper in the Gospels. He said: “Do this in remembrance of me.” Jesus commanded us to administer these sacraments because there are benefits in them. In the Lord’s Supper we receive the blessings of the forgiveness of sins, new life in Christ, and eternal salvation. In Baptism all who believe receive the blessings of the forgiveness of sins, deliverance from death and the devil, and eternal salvation. As Jesus promised, “Whoever believes and is baptised will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned” (Mark 16:16). These blessings are available to all, but they need to be received by faith: “For we also have had the gospel preached to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because those who heard did not combine it with faith” (Hebrews 4:2). Performing these sacraments should not be a mere outward act; nor does their efficacy depend on the faith of the administrator:

Although the Christian church, properly speaking, is nothing else than the assembly of all believers and saints, yet because in this life many false Christians, hypocrites, and even open sinners remain among the godly, the sacraments are efficacious even if the priests

who administer them are wicked men, for as Christ himself indicated, “The Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat” (Matthew 23:2).

Our churches condemn the Donatists and others like them who have denied that the ministry of evil men may be used in the church and who have thought the ministry of evil men to be unprofitable and without effect (Augsburg Confession, Article VIII:1,3).

The Lutheran church believes and confesses that there are only two sacraments that should be administered according to God’s Word; these are Baptism and Lord’s Supper. We teach that there are two sacraments because a sacrament is a sacred act that unites visible elements with the promise of the forgiveness of sins according to Christ’s command. We are different from other denominations which have more than two sacraments. For example, the Catholics recognize more than two; they have the sacraments of Confirmation, Penance, Holy Orders, Matrimony, and Extreme Unction in addition to Baptism and Lord’s Supper. The first five do not qualify to be sacraments because they do not have the essential features of a sacrament.

To begin with, it is the mission of the church to administer the Sacrament of Baptism as commanded by Christ Jesus in the Great Commission: “baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19). All those churches which have done away with Baptism or have distorted its biblical meaning nullify the command of Jesus and they violate the basic institution of the Christian church.

The Lutheran church believes that Baptism should be administered by the application of water; this can be done either by immersion, pouring, or sprinkling. The mode of application is an adiaphoron:

Just by allowing the water to be poured over you, you do not receive Baptism in such a manner that it does you any good. But it becomes beneficial to you if you accept it as God’s command and ordinance, so that, baptized in the name of God, you may receive in the water the promised salvation. This the hand cannot do, nor the body, but the heart must believe it. . . . The body has water poured over it, though it cannot receive anything but the water, and meanwhile the Word is spoken so that the soul may grasp it. . . . This act or observance consists in being dipped into the water, . . . which is simply the slaying of the old Adam and the resurrection of the new man, both of which actions must continue in us our whole life long. . . . Even if we were immersed in water a hundred times, it would nevertheless be only one Baptism (Large Catechism, Baptism: 36, 45, 65, 78).

Some churches teach that unless a person is completely immersed in water, he is not baptised. Yet they have little to say about the spiritual benefit of Baptism and the significance of such immersion. They make much of the outward form and mode of Baptism. It is our mission to make sure that all are baptised: adults, youth, or infants. We should first instruct the adults and then baptise them; but with children, we baptise and then instruct them. In Matthew 28:19-20, we are told to make disciples of all nations for Christ. This is to be done by baptising and teaching

them. We make little children disciples of Christ through Baptism, and thereafter teach them to obey all that Christ has commanded. This should be done with the consent of their parents.<sup>1</sup>

Despite all this, our mission is to preach the gospel and administer the Sacrament of Baptism even to infants because the Bible makes it clear that little children belong to all nations, and the kingdom of God: “Let the little children come to me, . . . for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.” (Luke 18:16). “Our churches teach that Baptism is necessary for salvation, that the grace of God is offered through Baptism, and that children should be baptized, for being offered to God through Baptism they are received into his grace. Our churches condemn the Anabaptists, who reject the Baptism of children and declare that children are saved without Baptism” (Augsburg Confession, Article IX:1-3).

The Lord’s Supper is the second of the two sacraments which the church should faithfully administer. The Lord’s Supper is a divine and permanent institution which has to be practiced by the church until the end of time. According to the words instituting this sacrament, we recognize the bread and wine as visible elements, and the body and blood of Jesus as the heavenly elements. We confess with Luther in his Small Catechism where he says, “It is the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ under the bread and wine, instituted by Christ for us Christians to eat and to drink” (*Luther’s Catechism*, p. 13).

As we carry out our mission of preaching the gospel through the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, we should be mindful of the divergent doctrines which are taught by other churches. The Catholics teach *transubstantiation*. This means when Jesus said, “Do this in remembrance of me,” he gave his disciples power to change the bread and wine into his body and blood. Catholics teach that even today when an ordained priest consecrates the bread and wine, they are changed (transubstantiated) into the body and blood of Jesus. They continue by affirming that once the bread and wine are consecrated and changed into the body and blood of Jesus, the bread and wine are no longer present.

Our Lutheran Confessions refute that:

“As for transubstantiation, we have no regard for the subtle sophistry of those who teach that the bread and wine surrender or lose their natural substance and retain only the appearance and shape of bread without any longer being real bread, for that bread is and remains there agrees better with the Scriptures, as St. Paul himself states, “The bread which we break” (1 Cor. 10:16), and again, “Let a man so eat of the bread” (1 Cor. 11:28) (Smalcald Articles, Part III, Article VI:5).

However, we read in 1 Corinthians 11:26-28: “For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes. Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup.”

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<sup>1</sup> NB. In some parts of the world, Africa in particular, we have a challenge in baptising infants. Many people in Africa believe that a child has to reach a certain age in order to be accepted as a human being. This makes it difficult for the church to baptise little babies. This gives some advantage to other churches like the Anabaptists who deny infant Baptism.

Even if the eating and drinking takes place after the consecration, the communicants still eat bread and drink wine because the above text says so. Therefore the bread and wine must still be present.

The Reformed church teaches *representation*. This teaching claims that the bread and wine *represent*, or signify, the true body and blood of Jesus, which is located in heaven. They teach that when partaking of the Sacrament the natural bread and wine are present, but the body and blood of Jesus are absent from the consecrated bread and wine. They assert that it is impossible for the body of Christ which is in heaven to be present everywhere on earth in the Sacrament. This raises the chief question:

In the Holy Communion are the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ truly and essentially present if they are distributed with the bread and wine and if they are received orally by all those who use the sacrament, be they worthy or unworthy, godly or godless, believers or unbelievers, the believers for life and salvation, the unbelievers for judgment? The Sacramentarians say No; we say Yes (Formula of Concord, Epitome, Article VII:2).

According to their reason, they interpret the words of institution figuratively. However we cannot take the words “This is my body” to be figurative. “This” refers to nothing else than the bread which Christ gave to his disciples (Hoenecke, *Dogmatics*, pp. 116-118). The word “is” cannot be taken in a figurative sense to mean “represent” or “signify”; “is” should be “is” (Hoenecke, *Dogmatics*, pp. 106-115).

The Lutheran church furthermore does not agree with the teaching of *consubstantiation*. This teaching claims that the bread and body form one substance, or that the body is present like the bread in a natural manner. Nor do we (Lutherans) teach *impanation*, which means that the body of Christ is locally enclosed in the bread. When we use the words “in, with, and under the bread,” we are not explaining the sacramental union because it cannot be explained, but we are rejecting the papist transubstantiation” (Koehler, *Summary*, p. 220).

The Lutheran church, on the basis of Scripture, teaches the “real presence” of Christ’s body and blood, which is received together with the bread and wine in the Lord’s Supper. The bread and wine are received in a natural way. In, with, and under the bread and wine, we receive the true body and blood of Christ in a supernatural way (in a way that we cannot understand because it is a miracle of God).

There are other faulty concepts regarding the means of grace, which are taught by certain churches such as the Catholics. The Catholics claim that the means of grace do help the individual who is responsible for working out his salvation. They (Catholics) say that the Holy Spirit assists a person by the infusion of God’s enabling grace through the sacraments. That grace, in turn, helps the person work towards furthering his justification.

In contrast, Lutherans believe what the Scriptures teach about justification. For example, in 1863 the American president, Abraham Lincoln, declared all slaves to be free. By this declaration, freedom from slavery was an accomplished fact. No one had to pay for it, or earn it. Of course,

the slave himself did not use this freedom until he heard about it and accepted it as his own. On the basis of the death and resurrection of Christ, God declared the whole world to be justified: “He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification” (Romans 4:25). By this act of God, all people were judged to be free from sin, and righteous before him: “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21). This act of God’s grace is made known in the gospel, and this freedom from the slavery and consequences of sin becomes a person’s own when the person believes: “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’” (Romans 1:17).

Another faulty concept concerning the means of grace is brought in by charismatic theology, which speaks about the operation of the Holy Spirit without the means of grace. We do not believe that. The Lutheran Confessions strongly insist that “we must condemn with all seriousness and zeal, and in no wise tolerate in the church of God, the enthusiasts who imagine that without means, without the hearing of the divine Word and without the use of the holy sacraments, God draws man to himself, illuminates, justifies, and saves him” (Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article II:80).

Luther writes in his treatise “Against the Heavenly Prophets”:

When God sends forth his holy gospel he deals with us in a twofold manner, first outwardly, then inwardly. Outwardly he deals with us through the oral word of the gospel and through material signs, that is, baptism and the sacrament of the altar. Inwardly he deals with us through the Holy Spirit, faith, and other gifts. But whatever their measure or order the outward factors should and must precede. The inward experience follows and is effected by the outward. God has determined to give the inward to no one except through the outward (*Luther’s Works*, Vol. 40, p. 146).

Certain branches of the Reformed theology turn the two around. They start with the inward and finish with the outward. Synergism is yet another faulty concept concerning the means of grace. This concept is commonly taught by Arminianism. Arminians claim that a man should cooperate with God to become a Christian. But the confessions reject this:

[We condemn . . . ] The teaching of the synergists, who maintain that in spiritual things man is not wholly dead toward that which is good, but only grievously wounded and half-dead. . . . After the Holy Spirit . . . has called us . . . , then the free will by its own natural powers can meet God and . . . help and cooperate and prepare itself for the grace of God, . . . and by its own powers cooperate with the Holy Spirit in the continuation and preservation of this work within us. (Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article II:77)

In our mission of the church, through the distribution of the means of grace, it is important to understand the claims and implications of such religious material on the public market. Some of these materials include false teachings which can destroy people’s lives. We have the means of

grace (gospel) as a wonderful tool and a great treasure for the church. God has placed into our hands the means of grace to use as we carry out the mission of the church. The means of grace (gospel in Word and sacrament) will help us call people to eternal salvation:

God provides for the public proclamation of his divine, eternal law and the wonderful counsel concerning our redemption, namely, the holy and only saving Gospel. . . . Thereby he gathers an eternal church for himself out of the human race and works in the hearts of men true repentance and knowledge of their sins and true faith in the Son of God, Jesus Christ. And it is God's will to call men to eternal salvation, to draw them to himself, convert them, beget them anew, and sanctify them through this means and in no other way—namely, through his holy Word . . . and the sacraments (when they are used according to his Word). . . . All who would be saved must hear this preaching, for the preaching and the hearing of God's Word are the Holy Spirit's instrument in, with, and through which he wills to act efficaciously, to convert men to God, and to work in them both to will and to achieve. (Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article II:50,52)

### **Charity work demonstrates our faith in the gospel.**

In Mark 16:18, the Bible has assigned the church an extra responsibility in its mission. This passage says: "They will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well." Jesus is here encouraging the church to lead a sanctified life of service to the needy as part of her mission of preaching the gospel. This means that believers are to bring forth such good works as fruits of their repentance. "Produce fruit in keeping with repentance" (Matthew 3:8). This should be done out of love and of course not in the desire to earn salvation.

As he demonstrated in his own ministry on earth, the Lord Jesus encourages the church to help the needy in society. This is what we call charity work, or humanitarian aid. Jesus thus asks us to use both hands when preaching the gospel. One hand has the spiritual food, while the other has physical food. We can see both hands in the commission of Mark 16:15-18: "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. . . . They will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well."

Jesus will assess our life of sanctification on judgment day: "Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, . . . take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you. . . . For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, . . . I needed clothes and you clothed me.'" (Matthew 25:34-36). Jesus used both hands when he preached and taught people on earth. He fed and healed thousands (Matthew 15:29-38). The book of James also encourages humanitarian work: "Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to him, 'Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,' but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it?" (James 2:15-16).

Any kind deed done to help a person in his or her time of need is very important and can become a point of contact that the Christian uses to help touch a deeper need. Jesus used healing as a point of contact for the gospel. In Matthew 9:27-31, we read:

As Jesus went on from there, two blind men followed him, calling out, "Have mercy on us, Son of David!" When he had gone indoors, the blind men came to

him, and he asked them, “Do you believe that I am able to do this?” “Yes, Lord,” they replied. Then he touched their eyes and said, “According to your faith will it be done to you”; and their sight was restored. . . . They went out and spread the news about him all over that region.

The church and all individual Christians should plan to meet the obvious needs of people with the intention of using that point of contact to bring the means of grace to people. Our mission fields need to have food aid and medical aid. This can help people all over the world hit by disasters like earthquakes, floods, droughts, volcanoes, hurricanes, poverty, and disease. All these are points of contact for sharing the gospel.

Charity work can be done on an individual level, a congregational level, synod level, and an international level: “For Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem” (Romans 15:26). Humanitarian aid is a tool for evangelism. But this has to be done with care. Let me give you some examples from Africa (Zambia in particular): We have a board known as the Charities Board. Under this board we have a department called Health and Development. This department deals with the sinking of boreholes, caring for the sick, and adult literacy. We use these points of contact to share the gospel. When people come to draw water from a borehole, we take advantage of this opportunity to share the gospel with them. Home-based care givers also use that opportunity to spread the gospel. They do this during their time of visiting the sick. We do the same with literacy programs. This is not something new in the church. The Lord Jesus used such points of contact during his ministry here on earth.

However we have to be very careful so that we do not lose track of how to use the means of grace. The danger is that some false evangelists twist the gospel in their attempt to motivate their audience. They blind people by promising them money, power, and pleasure. They blind people from the saving light of Christ’s gospel. This is what we call the “social gospel.” Paul wrote about “men of corrupt mind, who have been robbed of the truth and who think that godliness is a means to financial gain” (1 Timothy 6:5).

This social gospel has invaded the world. Many people are taking advantage of widespread poverty levels, disease, unemployment, and divorce in certain countries. These social ills have created a fertile ground for the social gospel. Preachers come in great numbers to preach about prosperity, deliverance, and marriage reunions. This has affected our churches such that we have lost a lot of members. This has led to the misunderstanding of the true gospel. People are now looking for an immediate worldly salvation: “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” (2 Timothy 4:3).

As Lutherans we should preach the gospel and use charity work to demonstrate our faith. Let humanitarian aid be the sign of our appreciation for what Christ did for us. It must be done as a response to the saving acts of God; it should not be treated as a means to salvation, but as a fruit of faith: “So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God” (1 Corinthians 10:31). We should do charity work because of our love for God: “We love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19).

## The ministry

In the commissioning of his church, Christ established the office of the preaching ministry. He wanted his church to faithfully preach the gospel and administer the sacraments. The Augsburg Confession defines the ministry of the church as this: “In order that we may obtain this faith, the ministry of teaching the Gospel and administering the sacraments was instituted” (Augsburg Confession, Article V:1). We see that the most important work of the church is to preach and teach the Word and to administer the sacraments. The Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod in its doctrinal statement entitled, “Theses on the Church and Ministry” says: “Christ instituted one office in His Church, ‘the ministry of the Gospel’” (*Doctrinal Statements of the WELS*, p. 48).

1 Peter 2:9: “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.” From this we see that every Christian is a priest of God. This means that every believer should tell others about the Saviour. According to 1 Peter 2:9, there are four titles given to believers. Believers are: “a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, and a people belonging to God.” This means that the church is a special group of people dedicated to God. These titles should move every Christian to share with others. God is the one in charge of this group; he gives birth to this group, and he is in control of this priesthood of believers. The word “people” has in it the idea of being a family. The word “chosen” reminds us of the formation of this particular family as God’s initiating activity. Therefore all believers in Jesus Christ are God’s chosen people, chosen “according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit” (1 Peter 1:2). The church is a holy nation: this means we are set apart for a purpose. God has set us apart to lead a brand-new life of dedicated and consecrated service.

The church is a people belonging to God. As a church, we were bought at a price in order to belong to God: “You were bought at a price” (1 Corinthians 6:20). This price is the blood of Jesus which was pure and without defect: “You were redeemed . . . with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect” (1 Peter 1:19). Jesus made us who we are today—the holy people of God. Because of all that Jesus did, we do not have to be uncertain regarding our purpose as a church. The purpose of the church is to declare the praises of him who called us out of darkness into his wonderful light. This is what God is looking for in his church: “the people I formed for myself that they may proclaim my praise” (Isaiah 43:21). The Greek word “*euangello*” is an action word which has an idea of publishing, announcing, making known abroad, or proclaiming. This divinely-chosen group (the church) has to convey the message which it knows, the “mystery of God in Christ,” to outsiders. This is the mission of the church. The church should be dynamic not static. It is the responsibility of the church to tell the world about all the wonders of God which are his saving acts.

All believers have the responsibility to tell others about the good news of Jesus Christ. Members of the church are ordained for this task through Baptism. A church father of the fourth century, Jerome, said: “Baptism is the ordination of the laity” (Valleskey, *We Believe*, p. 149). Luther also maintained that passages like 1 Peter 2:9, “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light,” mean that all Christians have the responsibility of preaching the gospel to others—of telling people about the grace of God in Christ. Luther goes

on to say: “No one can deny that every Christian possesses the word of God and is taught and anointed by God to be priest. . . . But if it is true that they have God’s word and are anointed by him, then it is their duty to confess, to teach, and to spread [his word]” (*Luther’s Works*, Vol. 29, p. 309).

We have much evidence from the Scriptures, the church fathers, and the Lutheran Confessions that the mission of the church to preach the gospel is a responsibility of all believers. John Schaller, former president of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary wrote in his article about the origin and development of the New Testament ministry:

Our studies, which have adhered strictly to what is set forth in the Holy Scriptures, incontrovertibly show that the ministry, that is, the commission to preach the gospel, is given to every Christian; that at conversion not only the ability but also the impetus for this preaching is implanted in him; and that the gospel by its very nature as a *message* presupposes this preaching activity and at the same time by the effect it has guarantees it will occur. (Schaller, “The Origin,” p. 38).

The mission of the church is to spread the gospel as a group like the shepherds in Luke 2 did. Individuals can also tell others what they know about the gospel. A good example is the woman at Jacob’s well who told the people about Jesus: “Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did” (John 4:29). The church can benefit through individual ministries. This is where individual Christians serve as priests in their personal private lives. Whatever rights and duties Christians perform in their capacity as individual members of Christ’s royal priesthood, they act as private persons and not as public officials of the church. This is because Christians are to be the salt of the world. They can thus use their lips to talk about Christ: “But they went out and spread the news about him all over that region” (Matthew 9:31). Christians can talk about Jesus in various places like social gatherings, funerals, hospitals, and when visiting in their neighbourhoods. Christians use the gospel by “teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness” (2 Timothy 3:16).

### **The office of the public ministry**

The office of the public ministry is where pastors and others act on the basis of a call they have received from their fellow Christians. A public minister acts under God, in the name of the congregation which called him. The Scriptures put it very clearly in 1 Corinthians 14:40 that everything should be done in an orderly way; it is therefore correct that certain functions of the ministry should be done by public ministers. Certain functions cannot be done by everybody at the same time without disorder and confusion. One example is the public preaching of the gospel in the worship service; another is administering the sacraments when the congregation is gathered together.

There are several functions of the ministry which require trained public ministers. This is why Jesus instituted the public ministry of the gospel. The public ministry not only deals with the public preaching of the gospel; it also administers the sacraments and carries out church discipline, including the excommunication of impenitent sinners from the congregation. This is so because no individual Christian can claim these responsibilities for himself or herself simply

because he or she is a member of the royal priesthood. In matters to do with the above functions, the entire congregation should act and act through its called minister.

Luther explains the ministry this way:

You should put the Christian into two places. First, if he is in a place where there are no Christians he needs no other call than to be a Christian, called and anointed by God from within. Here it is his duty to preach and to teach the gospel to erring heathen or non-Christians, because of the duty of brotherly love, even though no man calls him to do so. . . . Second, if he is at a place where there are Christians who have the same power and right as he, he should not draw attention to himself. Instead, he should let himself be called and chosen to preach and to teach in the place of and by the command of others (*Luther's Works*, Vol. 39, p. 310).

Our Lutheran Confessions say: "Nobody should preach publicly in the church or administer the sacraments unless he is regularly called" (Augsburg Confession, Article XIV). Most people are familiar with the pastoral office as the only form of public ministry, yet there are other forms of the public ministry; for example, in the Scriptures we read that there were apostles, prophets, elders/overseers, deacons, evangelists, and teachers. In the public ministry the church should have different public ministers to take on various tasks. This helps meet every need, situation, and circumstance. We need to know that the office of the public ministry is not man-made. It is a divine institution. God himself instituted the public ministry. The Scripture gives us evidence of this set up in Ephesians 4:11-12: "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."

Because of this divine institution of the public ministry, "wherever the church exists, the right to administer the Gospel also exists. Wherefore it is necessary for the church to retain the right of calling, electing, and ordaining ministers" (Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope, 67). Since the mission of the church requires the public ministry, it is important that the church organizes all local congregations to call public ministers. Once these ministers are put in place, they strengthen the mission of the church. This is because the office of the public ministry administers the means of grace through which forgiveness and salvation are offered and conveyed to people. After the administration of the church is set up, the mission of the church becomes a running wheel. It moves into the entire world to preach the gospel.

The work of the public ministry is to nurture the flock. Christ has given spiritual leaders to his church to equip the saints so that they can serve the Lord, "to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up" (Ephesians 4:12). It is the mission of the church to take care of the already existing flock, protect them from false teaching, guard, and guide the flock:

Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the

truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard! (Acts 20:28-31).

The apostle Peter also speaks to the elders of the church in his letter, 1 Peter 5:1-4:

To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder, a witness of Christ's sufferings. . . . Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers . . . ; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.

The mission of the church goes beyond nurturing the existing flock. It includes the building up of both internal and external flocks. This means the office of the public ministry helps the church organise outreach programs. After managing its internal affairs, the church has to reach out to the unchurched. This is what we call "evangelism." We have to centre our evangelism programs on the means of grace. In so doing, we will give the Holy Spirit an opportunity to carry out his work of calling and gathering people, enlightening, and sanctifying them for holy lives and works of service.

The church should practice democracy in its distribution of the means of grace. This can be done through the use of the varied gifts that Christ has given to his church. We should joyfully serve the Lord according to our abilities and strive to be productive members of Christ's body the church:

Therefore, I urge you brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will. . . . We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully (Romans 12:1,2,6-8).

This is the mission of the church in full strength: "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19). "Whoever believes and is baptised will be saved" (Mark 16:16). "If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven" (John 20:23). May the Lord of the church enable us through his Holy Spirit to carry out this mission faithfully to the glory of God—wherever in the world we may happen to serve him!

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Scripture quotations from New International Version (NIV).

## Discussion Questions

1. In your culture, is the social gospel a significant threat? If so, tell how.
2. How do you balance the desire to make the world a better place versus the priority of preaching of the gospel?
3. To what extent is sharing the gospel to be done by the called clergy and to what extent by the lay people?
4. How do we encourage the laity to use their gifts in service of the mission of the church?
5. What if your church does not have enough pastors—how can the mission of the church be carried out?
6. What false teachings concerning the sacraments are present in your country?
7. What charitable works does your church engage in to the glory of God?
8. Has any aspect of the “mission of the church” been omitted from or neglected in this essay? If so, please point this out.

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*Unity of Spirit—Bond of Peace*

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Essay #3—

**Governance of the Church:  
Ways the Visible Church has been and is Governed  
Or: *Who's the Boss Around Here?***

**John F. Vogt  
Ukraine**

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We recognize Christ as the head of his Church, but he leaves the day-to-day governance of the visible church<sup>1</sup> in the hands of us humans—us sinful humans who get into power struggles and like to be in authority over others. National leaders know the temptation to lord it over their church, pastors over their congregation, lay leaders (congregational presidents and elders) over their pastor.

Questions we want to address in this essay are: What does the Bible say about the way the visible church is to be governed? How has the church been governed over the course of New Testament history? What forms of government are used in Lutheran churches today? Is there a correct way? Is there a best way? What are some practical issues related to governing the visible church?

**I. What does the Bible say about how the visible church is to be governed?**

The form of government in the Church is a monarchy. Christ “is Lord of lords and King of kings” (Revelation 17:14); Christ “is the head over every power and authority” (Colossians 2:10). Christ is the Church’s sole head and absolute ruler. And he “is the head of the body, the church” (Colossians 1:18). In spiritual matters, Christians are subject to no other authority than that of Christ. “You have only one Master and you are all brothers” (Matthew 23:8).

Christ rules his Church by his Word. “My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me” (John 10:27). “Everyone on the side of truth listens to me” (John 18:37). Christ’s Word is the sole authority in the Church, to which all clergy and laity must bow, from which nothing may be taken away, to which nothing may be added.<sup>2</sup> “No law of man and no vow can

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<sup>1</sup> This essay follows the older custom of capitalizing Church when referring to the Holy Christian Church, the invisible body of all believers in Jesus Christ. The essay does not primarily speak about the invisible Church, but rather about church with a small c, the visible gathering of Christians on earth on the basis of their unity in confession.

<sup>2</sup> Revelation 22:18-19; John 8:31.

nullify a commandment of God.”<sup>3</sup> “A custom introduced contrary to the commands of God is not to be approved.”<sup>4</sup>

Christ, the Church’s head, delegates leadership to men in his visible church. “Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you” (Hebrews 13:17). Through the Holy Spirit, Christ gives men responsibility for the spiritual well-being of his sheep. “Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers” (Acts 20:28).

You will search the Scriptures in vain for any command establishing a particular form of government for the New Testament church. Instead the church has been granted freedom in such matters. “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery” (Galatians 5:1). Christians are not to become entangled with or enslaved under man-made ordinances. Christ has set us free. This allows flexibility in order “to win as many as possible” (1 Corinthians 9:19).

## **II. How has the church been governed over the course of New Testament history?**

### ***A. During the time of the apostles***

The New Testament points to an active congregational involvement by all members. In his letter to the Romans, Paul lists by name 29 members who were working in the congregation in one capacity or another (Romans 16:1-15). In Corinth lay involvement was carried to the extreme, and Paul had to give instructions regarding propriety and order in the service. “God,” says Paul, “is not a God of disorder” (1 Corinthians 14:33). “Everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way” (1 Corinthians 14:40). The words translated as “disorder” and “orderly” come from the same Greek root, a word having the idea of arranging in an orderly fashion.<sup>5</sup> One form of this word, for example, was used of soldiers marching single file, one behind the other. Even in Corinth, however, Paul did not say: “Leave all preaching (i.e. prophesying) to the pastors” or “Let the leaders conduct the worship.”

Though congregations at the time of the apostles seem rather loosely structured, this does not mean that they were without order and organization. There were offices with specific responsibilities in carrying out the ministry of the Word of God. In addition, other forms of ministry were established to support the preaching of the Word. In Acts 6, men<sup>6</sup> were chosen to handle the food distribution so the apostles could give their attention to prayer and the preaching

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<sup>3</sup> Augsburg Confession, Article XXIII:8 (Latin), *The Book of Concord*, translated and edited by Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), p. 52.

<sup>4</sup> Augsburg Confession, Article XXII:9 (Latin), *The Book of Concord*, p. 50.

<sup>5</sup> From the verb *τάσσω*. Liddell-Scott: *an arranging*: I. in military sense: 1. *a drawing up, the order or disposition of an army*, 2. *battle array, order of battle*, 3. *a single rank or line of soldiers*, 4. *a body of soldiers, a squadron*, 5. *a post or place in the line of battle*. II. generally, *an arrangement, order, regularity*.

<sup>6</sup> They are not called deacons in Acts 6, although we customarily refer to them as deacons. This title appears in the epistles of Paul—1 Timothy 3:8-13, for example.

of the Word. 1 Timothy 5:17 tells us that some of the elders (πρεσβύτεροι) served in tasks other than preaching and teaching. We detect two levels of called workers: pastors and deacons.<sup>7</sup>

Paul and his representatives exerted bishop-like oversight of the young mission churches. As they returned from the first missionary journey, “Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church” (Acts 14:23). Paul tells Timothy: “Stay there in Ephesus so that you may command<sup>8</sup> certain men not to teach false doctrines any longer.” (1 Timothy 1:3). Timothy is to “command” those who teach God’s people. This is doctrinal discipline. Titus also seems to have exerted bishop-like authority. Paul tells him, “The reason I left you in Crete was that you might straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town, as I directed<sup>9</sup> you” (Titus 1:5).

### ***B. After the Apostolic Age***

A natural development, which came already in the first century, was the selecting of an over-shepherd or bishop by the churches in a region. This led soon after the Apostolic Age to a three-tier government: bishop—pastor—deacon. One quote from the letters of Ignatius (written about A.D. 110, within a decade of the apostle John’s death) is sufficient to show that already at his time the bishop ruled over presbyter, deacon, and congregation.

Let all follow the bishop as Jesus Christ did the Father. Apart from the bishop let no one perform any of the functions that pertain to the church. Let that Eucharist be held valid which is offered by the bishop or by one to whom the bishop has committed this charge. Wherever the bishop appears, there let the people be; as wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the catholic church. It is not lawful to baptize or hold a community meal without the consent of the bishop. On the other hand, whatever has his approval is pleasing to God.<sup>10</sup>

Such over-bishops developed into hierarchical positions<sup>11</sup> and eventually evolved into two powerful bishops claiming authority over the whole church. One of them, the bishop of Rome, claimed to be the direct successor of Peter and possessor of the keys to heaven (the means of grace). The idea grew that those in the public ministry received their authority not from God through God’s people (the church), but from God through the pope and bishops. Bishops assigned and transferred priests and nuns according to their own best judgment.

From the end of the Apostolic Age all the way up to the Reformation, episcopacy was practically the only church polity known in east or west. The laymen seem to have been given virtually no say about their church.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Swedish: *forsamlingsledare* = congregational leaders, and *forsamlingstjanare* = congregational helpers.

<sup>8</sup> Greek παραγγέλλω = give orders, command, instruct, direct. Consider how the word is used in Acts 16:18: “Finally Paul became so troubled that he turned around and said to the spirit, ‘In the name of Jesus Christ I command you to come out of her!’ At that moment the spirit left her.” Also Acts 16:23: “The jailer was commanded to guard them carefully.”

<sup>9</sup> Greek διατάσσω = order, direct, command. Consider Acts 18:2: “Claudius had ordered all the Jews to leave Rome,” and Acts 24:23: “He [governor Felix] ordered the centurion to keep Paul under guard.”

<sup>10</sup> Ignatius of Antioch, “To the Smyrnaeans,” in *The Past Speaks for Itself*, Vol. 1, edited by Theodore J. Hartwig (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1986), p. 346.

<sup>11</sup> Five at first: Alexandria, Antioch, Jerusalem, Constantinople, and Rome.

<sup>12</sup> The lay members having virtually no say is still the norm in Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches.

### ***C. Lutheran Reformation***

Luther and the Lutheran Confessions show that the forms of government in the church are a matter of freedom. There was even openness to the continuation of the office of bishop if bishops would exercise their ministry in service of the gospel.

Parish ministers and churches are bound to be obedient to the bishops according to the saying of Christ in Luke 10:16, “He who hears you hears me.” On the other hand, if they teach, introduce, or institute anything contrary to the Gospel, we have God’s command not to be obedient in such cases, for Christ says in Matthew 7:15: “Beware of false prophets.”<sup>13</sup>

The Apology to the Augsburg Confession gives the bishop “the authority to excommunicate those who are guilty of public offenses or to absolve them if they are converted and ask for absolution.”<sup>14</sup> The Augsburg Confession also grants bishops authority in adiaphora.

What are we to say, then, about Sunday and other similar church ordinances and ceremonies? To this our teachers reply that bishops or pastors may make regulations so that everything in the churches is done in good order.... It is proper for the Christian assembly to keep such ordinances for the sake of love and peace, to be obedient to the bishops and parish ministers in such matters....However, consciences should not be burdened by contending that such things are necessary for salvation or that it is a sin to omit them.<sup>15</sup>

Luther himself set up the office of superintendent with authority over the pastors in a region. He writes,

This pastor (*Pfarrherr*) shall be superintendent of all the other priests who have their parish or benefice in the region, whether they live in monasteries or foundations of nobles or of others. He shall make sure that in these parishes there is correct Christian teaching, that the Word of God and the holy gospel are truly and purely proclaimed, and that the holy sacraments according to the institution of Christ are provided to the blessing of the people....If one or more of the pastors or preachers is guilty of error in this or that respect, the superintendent shall call to himself those concerned and have them abstain from it, but also carefully instruct them wherein they are guilty and have erred either in commission or omission, either in doctrine or in life.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Augsburg Confession, Article XXVIII:22-23, *The Book of Concord*, p. 84. Melancthon was even ready to accept the leadership of the pope. When signing the Smalcald Articles, he added this note: “However, concerning the pope I hold that, if he would allow the Gospel, we, too, may concede to him that superiority over the bishops which he possesses by human right, making this concession for the sake of peace and general unity among the Christians who are now under him and who may be in the future” (Smalcald Articles, *The Book of Concord*, pp. 316, 317).

<sup>14</sup> Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article XXVIII:13, *The Book of Concord*, p. 283.

<sup>15</sup> Augsburg Confession, Article XXVIII:53-55, *The Book of Concord*, pp. 89,90.

<sup>16</sup> *Luther’s Works*, American Edition, Vol. 40 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1958), p. 313.

The Confessions don't say that bishops or superintendents have such authority by divine right. Rather a church agrees to give such supervisory roles and authority. Luther himself during his lifetime was looked upon with the highest respect and exerted considerable influence over the young church. On the other hand, he called upon the Lutheran princes—as the most influential laymen—to become active in the affairs of the church.

#### ***D. The Lutheran church after Luther***

With the Peace of Augsburg (1555)<sup>17</sup> came state churches which were ruled by the secular ruler and the ecclesiastical head. The Lutheran church in “Lutheran lands” continued the episcopal polity they inherited from the Roman Catholic Church. Bishops who came over from the Catholic Church did not give up their positions, but simply became Lutheran bishops. The superintendents who replaced the Catholic bishops carried out the duties of a bishop in many aspects.

An exception was found in places where the Lutheran church was not dominant and therefore did not become the state religion. In the Netherlands, congregations were organized apart from the secular authorities already in the 1560s and 1570s. These congregations governed themselves. This system of church government was brought to America by immigrants from the Netherlands in the 1600s. In America the congregational system became the norm because the congregations were far removed from the princes and bishops of Europe.<sup>18</sup> Later this “American system” was exported. The Evangelical Lutheran Free Church, a CELC member, separated from the state church in the mid-1800s, and under the influence of C.F.W. Walther and the Missouri Synod became “the first Lutheran church which practiced the congregational structure (*Gemeindeprinzip*) in Germany.”<sup>19</sup>

### **III. What forms of government are used in Lutheran churches today?**

As best I know, all the church bodies in the CELC have, in Christian freedom, chosen the “congregational” structure.<sup>20</sup> A typical constitution for a congregation in our circles includes statements such as:

The congregation, as represented by the voters' assembly, shall have the right of decision in all matters not otherwise decided by the Word of God.

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<sup>17</sup> The Peace of Augsburg did not grant freedom of religion. It allowed only two religions, Lutheran and Catholic, and stated that each ruler could determine which of those two his territory would be (*cuius regio, eius religio*).

<sup>18</sup> “The Church Order of Amsterdam (1592) was brought to America by immigrants from the Netherlands in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Jacob Fabricius (1680) then established the same order among the Swedish immigrants at the Delaware River (who came from a bishop church at home!). And Heinrich W. Muehlenberg spread the structure among the German speaking Lutheran congregations in the east (around 1750). This was the situation which Walther and his friends (Sihler, Crämer) found in Lutheran churches in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century” (Gottfried Herrmann in a short essay entitled “Congregational Structure of the ELFK”).

<sup>19</sup> Gottfried Herrmann, “Congregational Structure of the ELFK.”

<sup>20</sup> This writer has heard of one exception within our circles. One congregation has thought a bit “out of the box” and assigned most decisions to a Board of Directors or Governing Board. We cannot say this is wrong if this structure exists because the congregation has chosen to delegate decision-making authority to such a group.

The church council, any other elected committee or organization within the congregation, and any of its elected or appointed officers shall have no power or authority beyond that conferred upon them by the congregation.

This same basic structure is used also in our church bodies. The national assembly (convention, sobor, or whatever it is called), which is made up of the pastors and male representatives of the congregations, is the governing authority.

Leaders in the churches of the CELC are given various titles: president, bishop,<sup>21</sup> chairman of the church board, national leader, and probably others. Yet all our churches operate basically the same. The voting body of the church elects a man to serve as the church body's leader. According to the good order laid down in our constitutions, we voluntarily delegate clearly defined responsibilities and authority to that elected leader. We recognize that his election is a divine call to serve in this office and so he is placed there by the Holy Spirit. He deserves our respect and cooperation as a representative of God for our good. We also recognize, however, that he serves at the will of the Christians who have called him by election to that position. This understanding is shown by the fact that the church's leader is elected for a fixed term and is subject to periodic review by means of an election which decides whether to call him for another term or not.

Our churches are not purely congregational in structure, however. We have elements of a "presbyterian" model (i.e. leadership by elders). Congregations put a lot of faith and authority in their church councils. These "presbyters" make quite a few of the decisions. We also employ elements of the "episcopal" model (i.e. governance by bishops). Pastors are under the doctrinal supervision of district presidents, eparchy heads, circuit pastors, or whatever name we call them.

Some Lutheran churches outside our fellowship have gone down other paths. The larger national/state churches in Europe continue to have an episcopal system. Often this is supported through a belief in apostolic succession, the teaching that the keys have been handled down through ordination from one generation to the next in an unbroken string going back to Peter himself. A conservative group within the national church of Sweden, for example, has searched far and wide to find an apostolically ordained bishop to ordain its pastors since the Church of Sweden's archbishop won't.

Some in the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod have gone to the opposite extreme. They emphasize the God-ordained status of the local congregation and its pastor, in effect making each congregation and pastor independent of any higher ecclesiastical authority.<sup>22</sup> By contrast, we in the CELC recognize that a congregation delegates a certain amount of authority and responsibility to the larger (national) church and its leaders. Each congregation and each pastor

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<sup>21</sup> To illustrate how terms are used in different ways even in our circles, consider this: The ULC has one bishop, the elected leader of the church body; the WELS has 30 to 50 bishops depending on the year because the title *bishop* is used to refer to a pastor who oversees the work of a vicar/student pastor.

<sup>22</sup> This writer feels that some in the LCMS now emphasize their doctrine of the ministry in order to fight off women pastors. This has become necessary because the Scriptural basis (women not in authority over men) was given up long ago.

are bound to respect and obey such called/elected leaders in matters which have been delegated to them.

A related issue is the question of mission boards in parent churches and their authority over their daughter churches (missions). Once again Scripture gives no direct instructions, but we do see in the New Testament Paul's continuing oversight and authority in the congregations he founded. Just as children need a guiding hand as they are growing up, so we recognize that young mission churches need guidance. But, just as we are working for the day our children can stand on their own two feet in the adult world, so the goal for every mission program is the day when oversight and authority over a mission can cease and the daughter church becomes a sister church. There can be struggles between parents and their children. This happens especially in the teen years when children often demand rights and freedoms which they are not yet capable of handling. Unfortunately at times we find similar tensions between the parent church and its children.

#### **IV. Is there a correct way? Is there a best way?**

The outward organization in a congregation is something which grows automatically out of the preaching of the word and may be different at different times and in different localities. The gospel will create whatever offices become necessary."<sup>23</sup>

As this quote illustrates, Lutherans seem to be in agreement that it goes beyond Scripture to insist that one form of church government has divine approval as opposed to other forms.

So is there one correct way? The answer is: No, provided the chosen way serves the proclamation of the gospel, is orderly, and is agreed upon by the members of the visible church it is to govern.

#### ***Is there a best way?***

In preparing this paper I read an essay which advocated switching to an episcopal system.<sup>24</sup> The author, a LCMS pastor, cites four main reasons:

- 1) The Lutheran Confessions do not demand episcopal polity, but they do assume it. The confessions express their "deep desire to maintain the church polity and various ranks of the ecclesiastical hierarchy."<sup>25</sup>
- 2) The New Testament commands no particular form of church polity, but it does give legitimacy to the form that soon became the norm.
- 3) The Christian needs a place to learn obedience to a higher authority outside of himself, to knock down the self and conform the self to Christ.
- 4) More Christians accept episcopacy than any other form of church government. Therefore, it is a recognizably sacred arrangement to the world at large.

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<sup>23</sup> Paul Pieper, "The Relation of the Pastor and the Church Council to One Another," available in the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary online essay file ([www.wlsessays.net](http://www.wlsessays.net)), p. 5.

<sup>24</sup> John Rutowicz, "An Argument for Lutheran Episcopacy," in *Reformation Today*, available online at: <http://web.mac.com/hunnius/ELDoNA/Papers.html>.

<sup>25</sup> Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article XIV:1, *The Book of Concord*, p. 214.

While the above comments may offer some compelling arguments, I think most of us would say: “Yes, there is a best way. Our congregational system serves best.”

Yes, our congregational system makes it clear that the people have the authority in their congregation—and also the responsibility.

With us the laity is consigned to listening and doing nothing in the congregation, and the pastor wants to do everything alone. The result is that we often succumb under the work, and many things remain undone. This is to a large extent due to a wrong, monarchical, monopolistic view of the office, according to which the pastor concentrates all church offices, even the purely external ones, from preacher to janitor, in his own person.<sup>26</sup>

We might disagree a bit with this harsh assessment by Professor August Pieper, but there’s truth in what he says. Some pastors take too much extraneous work upon themselves, work which could be done just as well and perhaps better by a member of the congregation. A pastor who is a wise manager knows that the goal is not to do the work of 10 people, but to teach 10 people to do the work. If a visible church is going to survive and grow, all the members are needed, and each has something to contribute. Remember how Paul shows this in his illustration of the body in 1 Corinthians 12.

Yes, our congregational system of government serves best for a second good reason. It makes it clear to those called to the public ministry that they are servants of the people, not lords over them. Jesus says: “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:25-28).

That being said, we must also see the other side of the coin. Scripture says: “Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. . . . Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden” (Hebrews 13:17). Those called to leadership positions are God’s representatives, called by God through his church. The congregation is to respect the authority of the pastors and other leaders in Scriptural matters. It should also listen to their leadership in other matters where they are in the best position to know the wise course of action.

Paul is speaking to both leaders and the people they lead when he writes: “Now we ask you, brothers, to respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you” (1 Thessalonians 5:12). Notice: He says that those in positions of leadership earn respect by their hard work for the Lord and his people.

Is there a best way? Yes, I think we will agree that the congregational structure of authority is the best way when it is carried out in a spirit of mutual respect and humble service. It will be

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<sup>26</sup> August Pieper, “Are There Legal Regulations in the New Testament?” translated by Carl Lawrenz from the *Theologische Quartalschrift* (July 1916), available in the WLS online essay file, p. 10.

interesting in the discussion of this paper to see if cultural differences favor a different “best solution” in some of our member churches.

## **V. What are some of the practical issues related to governing the visible church?**

### *Who issues the call?*

The Lutheran Confessions state: “It is evident that the church retains the right of electing and ordaining ministers.”<sup>27</sup>

Today pastoral calls are extended in a number of different ways. WELS and ELS congregations call from a list provided by the synod or district president; names can be added, but only with the district president’s or synod president’s approval. In the Lutheran Confessional Church of Sweden (LBK), congregations call freely from the clergy roster. The Bulgarian Lutheran Church’s Spiritual Council assigns workers to their calls. In a similar way, the Synodical Council of the Ukrainian Lutheran Church (ULC) assigns St. Sophia’s graduates to their first call—upon request of the congregation.

The authority to call can be delegated as in some of the cases just mentioned. Keeping the authority to call with the people who are going to be served is good, however, for both the pastor and the people:

*For the pastor* it serves as a reminder of whom he is to serve—Christ first and the people Christ has entrusted to his care second. He is not the puppet of the bishop or national leader, but the servant of the congregation.

*For the congregation* it underlines the fact that the pastor is called by them, not imposed on them from above. With their call goes the promise that they will respect his leadership, cooperate with him, and help to make his ministry a joy and success.

### *How long does a call last?*

Scripture gives no instructions regarding the length of a person’s call, so we conclude that this too falls into the area of Christian freedom.

As best I can determine, there’s a consistent policy in CELC churches. Under ordinary circumstances we regard a pastoral call to be without a time limit. The worker should serve with the expectation that this will be his lifelong ministry. In American circles, while some pastors move frequently, others spend their entire ministry in one place. I followed a man who had been pastor in the congregation for 58 years. There are certain situations, however, where a call may be extended with a time limit. In my case, for example, both my call as friendly counselor to the LBK and my call as rector of St. Sophia Seminary were five-year calls.

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<sup>27</sup> Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope 72, *The Book of Concord*, p. 332.

A warning is in place here. A congregation must not terminate a call for anything other than a most serious reason. The called worker is God's called worker, given his call by God through the congregation. God has put him in his office. God will equip and work through him for the good of the church.

### ***Who decides how the money is spent?***

Mission boards at first and then national leaders frequently control the money in a mission church's early days. But the well-being of the church and its ultimate growth into a self-sufficient church require that the people in the pew see the financial support of their congregation as their responsibility. This calls for serious attention to teaching what the Bible says about stewardship. In addition, the pastor or missionary needs to involve the congregation in the budgeting process and in setting the congregation's work program. A budget with clear goals—one that the congregation has approved and to which it has committed itself—gives a tool to measure progress. Regular reports inform and encourage the members.

### ***Who is responsible for church discipline?***

Matthew 18:15-18 shows the God-pleasing way to handle cases of church discipline. It says that the responsibility for carrying out church discipline has been given *to the church*. Jesus does not say "tell it to the pastor" or "report it to the bishop." The members of the various church forms (local congregation, mission society, national church, CELC) are responsible to see that everything in their midst is done in harmony with God's Word. False teaching must be addressed and, God willing, be brought back into harmony with the Bible. Sinful actions must be confronted and, God willing, the sinner led to repentance.

The Scriptures don't give any detailed rules regarding church discipline. They do, however, give us one example of a successful case of church discipline. In 1 Corinthians 5, Paul says that the man who has taken his father's wife needs to be dealt with. Notice that Paul expects the congregation to act, but in an oversight role he says he has already drawn his conclusion about how the case should be handled. Apparently the man responded in a God-pleasing way to his excommunication because in 2 Corinthians 2, Paul can write: "You ought to forgive and comfort him...I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him" (2 Corinthians 2:7-8).

In situations where church discipline is called for, those responsible should take care to ensure that it is done

- objectively,
- according to Scripture,
- in Christian love,
- with the intent of reclaiming the sinner or errorist, and
- to preserve unity and the faithful proclamation of God's Word.

It seems also that an appeals process should be in place to give assurance that the church body has acted properly and people have been treated fairly. Such a process provides one more opportunity to call a guilty person to repentance and so regain him for the fellowship. And if the appeal panel ratifies the church's action in excommunicating or removing from fellowship, the united voice of the church is speaking even more clearly to the conscience of the guilty one.

### *How do we involve lay members in the congregation's ministry?*

Let me share one idea with you. Drastic cuts in the amount of support coming from American sponsors have caused the pastors in our ULC to become bi-vocational. This, of course, has reduced the amount of time and energy they can devote to their pastoral duties. In the hopes of keeping this from seriously harming the congregations, the Synodical Council inaugurated an ambitious curriculum of deacon education. The hope is to train a corps of well-qualified volunteers to assume tasks which the pastor no longer has time to do.

### **VI. Conclusion**

We are enjoying the blessings of oneness here in our CELC convention. We are enjoying the unity in doctrine and practice which unites us. We recognize, however, that there are differences in how we carry out our ministries because of the political, social, and cultural differences in the far-flung places we serve. Such differences do not destroy our unity. Christian freedom allows diversity. Our Savior desires the same unity and acceptance of diversity within our own church bodies and within the congregation each of us serves.

## Discussion Questions

1. Does your church govern itself in some way significantly different from the ways mentioned in this paper?
2. Are there things in your church or culture which would lead you to different conclusions than those drawn in this paper?
3. Regarding church discipline:
  - How are cases of church discipline handled in your church?
  - Is there a method to appeal an excommunication or removal from fellowship?
  - Is there any role for the CELC to play in mediating conflicts within member-churches?
4. Share some things your church has done to:
  - Teach stewardship.
  - Encourage your members in evangelism.
  - Involve your members in developing your church's work program.
  - Free pastors' time so they can concentrate on Word and sacraments.
5. List ways your church uses lay volunteers.
6. Agree or disagree: *We do harm to the respect people have for the public ministry when we say that the pastor and other called workers are "servants of the congregation."* Explain your answer.
7. Are there other issues related to church governance which you would like to discuss?

Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Conference  
Seventh Triennial Convention  
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*Unity of Spirit—Bond of Peace*

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Essay #4—

**Fellowship at Jesus' Feet:  
Challenges and Opportunities for Confessional Lutherans in  
the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

**Andreas Drechsler  
Germany**

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Greater scholars and pastors more experienced than I have written on the doctrine and practice of church fellowship from a confessional Lutheran perspective. I have learned from them. I have benefited from their insights and I am indebted to them.<sup>1</sup> But most of all I want to remain a student of the one who taught Mary and Martha the “one thing needful.” I invite you to join me to sit at Jesus’ feet to hear, learn, and reflect on the practical challenges and opportunities of a crucial biblical doctrine for us as confessional Lutherans as we confidently step forward into this 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Let us be assured that our risen Lord Jesus Christ, who holds the past, present, and future in his all powerful and loving hands, is with us. He has promised (Matthew 28:20): “Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” I would like us to start our study by prayerfully singing hymn #290 from *Christian Worship*:

One thing’s needful; Lord, this treasure  
Teach me highly to regard.  
All else, though it first give pleasure,  
Is a yoke that presses hard.  
Beneath it the heart is still fretting and striving,  
No true, lasting happiness ever deriving.  
This one thing is needful; all others are vain—  
I count all but loss that I Christ may obtain.

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<sup>1</sup> For a list of authors from whom I have benefited the most see the bibliography at the end.

How were Mary's thoughts devoted  
Her eternal joy to find  
as intent each word she noted,  
At her Savior's feet reclined.  
How kindled her heart, how devout was its feeling,  
While hearing the lessons that Christ was revealing;  
All earthly concerns she forgot for her Lord  
And found her contentment in hearing his Word.

Wisdom's highest, noblest treasure,  
Jesus, can be found in you.  
Let me find in you my pleasure;  
Make my will and actions true,  
Humility there and simplicity reigning,  
In paths of true wisdom my steps ever training.  
If I learn from Jesus this knowledge divine,  
The blessing of heavenly wisdom is mine.<sup>2</sup>

## 1. Introduction: Our Blessed Fellowship

So let us sit at Jesus' feet and start to discover *our blessed fellowship*. The doctrine of church fellowship has been the object of much in-depth study, strife, and emotional debate among confessional Lutherans during the last century. It was hardly an academic exercise in a theological ivory tower. Often it was directly connected to a specific and troublesome piece of church history. The dissolution of the Synodical Conference (1872–1967) in North America impacted confessional Lutheran churches all over the globe. It resulted in triangular relations, i.e. churches being in fellowship with both WELS and LCMS. It was followed by mergers (e.g. SELK in Germany, 1972), formations of new confessional church bodies (e.g. LBK in Scandinavia, 1974) as well as splits for confessional reasons (e.g. ELFK–Old Lutheran Church, 1984). The biblical doctrine of church fellowship has *shaped the landscape of Lutheranism* not only in Europe. It led to the formation of a new organization of confessional Lutherans in 1993—the Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Conference (CELC).

The study of the doctrine and practice of church fellowship has always been of very practical nature as it has a direct impact on the life of the church and its members. It is one of the key issues for confessional Lutherans in each generation. The future and well-being of confessional Lutheranism is directly connected to the question of how well we are equipped to teach and put into practice the biblical doctrine of church fellowship.

**Not a burden.** From a superficial point of view it could seem that this doctrine is more of a burden and obstacle for the mission of the church. Sometimes it may seem that our views on church fellowship stand in the way of what the term itself suggests, namely fellowship. How should we answer when we meet Christians from congregations not in our fellowship, and they

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. *Lutherisches Kirchengesangbuch*, #254. According to the German text, the hymn by Johann Heinrich Schröder has ten stanzas. For an English translation of the entire hymn cf. *Evangelical Lutheran Hymnary*, #182.

express the desire to work together with us as Christians: in prayer, worship, communion, and joint church work to advance the gospel?

It is the goal of this essay to study the biblical doctrine of church fellowship at Jesus' feet and to present its evangelical application in the light of the gospel, i.e. in light of justification of the sinner by grace alone through faith alone in Christ Jesus, our perfect Savior. During this study, we will discover *challenges and opportunities* that call for an ongoing study and discussion of biblical principles. It is our earnest prayer that this precious piece of doctrine may shine anew for us and those who join us and listen to Jesus. It is our hope that we will see again what a *blessing it is to have true unity*, to appreciate it and to join in from the bottom of our heart with what God inspired king David to write (Psalm 133:1): "How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity!"

The purpose of studying and practicing God's principles of church fellowship is to keep the gospel pure not only for ourselves but ultimately to share it with others. Purity of doctrine (i.e. orthodoxy) is not an end in itself. Surely we have enough reason to give God glory for our salvation by keeping his Word pure. Yet, God wants us to give glory to his name by sharing the good news with others (Matthew 5:16; 1 Peter 2:9) to win over people from darkness to light, from error to truth, and to strengthen God's people in the one true faith. That is why God wants us to protect others and ourselves from the danger of false doctrine. That is why our Savior encourages us to help and strengthen one another on our journey through this vale of tears in joyful anticipation of the glories of heaven.

The apostle Paul encourages us to equip 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. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming" (Ephesians 4:12-14).

**Truth and Love.** To accomplish this noble goal, two things are of equal importance as we study the doctrine of church fellowship: *love* which does not deny or withhold the saving truth of God's Word and *truth* which is confessed and lived out in love for those we want to reach with the gospel. In other words: it is our privilege as redeemed and beloved sons and daughters of our heavenly Father to live and share God's thoughts and plans for a dying world with our fellow believers and those we want to lead to Christ and his truth. Paul continues to admonish the church (Ephesians 4:15,16) to speak "the truth in love" so that we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of "him who is the Head, that is, Christ."

Church fellowship is *not a side issue* in the Scriptures. It runs through the Bible like a red thread from the first to the last page, Old and New Testament. Think of *Abraham*, who left his heathen home after being called by JHWH with the promise to become the father of a multitude of nations and a blessing to all families on the face of the earth through the one special future offspring whom God promised to come (Genesis 12:3). "I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."

Think of *Moses* and how God used this strong leader of Israel to instruct his chosen nation to be well equipped for the mission he had assigned to them. Think of how God always had in mind to protect his people from harmful influences through Canaanite religious practices (Leviticus 18:3,4): “You must not do as they do in Egypt, where you used to live, and you must not do as they do in the land of Canaan, where I am bringing you. Do not follow their practices. You must obey my laws and be careful to follow my decrees. I am the LORD your God.” The reason is clearly named in Leviticus 20:26: “You are to be holy to me because I, the LORD, am holy, and I have set you apart from the nations to be my own,” and also in Exodus 19:6: “You will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (cf. Leviticus 19:2; 20:26).

We see in the Old Testament *prophets* over and over again their zeal to protect the fellowship in their admonitions and calls to the people to repent (Isaiah 1:2ff; Jeremiah 2:13). Similarly we see in the *apostolic writings* of the New Testament how God’s spokesmen were sent to protect, foster, and keep the fellowship which always was in danger. Paul writes to the Christians in Corinth (1 Corinthians 1:10): “I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought.” He also wrestled with the spiritual dangers threatening to destroy the church in Galatia (Galatians 1:6): “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ.”

And is this not a danger *in our times* as well? We need the encouragement of the apostle Paul still today. Think of how often the apostles thanked and praised God for the existing bond uniting them with their fellow believers near and far (Philippians 1:3-6): “I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus” (cf. Romans 1:12; 1 John 1:3ff).

The practice of church fellowship is by no means a side issue but rather essential to the spiritual life and the fellowship of believers throughout the ages. Now what does this fellowship consist of? Where is it to be found? How is it put into practice according to the will of God and the well-being of precious souls redeemed by the atoning blood of Christ?

## **2. Invisible Fellowship Appreciated**

The theme for this conference “Unity of Spirit—Bond of Peace” gives us the proper focus to begin our discussion. It is God who has called us to life both physically and spiritually. In his letter to the Ephesians, the apostle Paul urges us to recognize and treasure the unity of the Spirit God has created (Ephesians 4:1-3): “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.”

**Unity of the Spirit.** God, the Holy Spirit, creates saving faith through the preaching of the gospel<sup>3</sup> where and when he wills to do so. Through the message of salvation in Christ he calls people out of the darkness of sin and death into the wonderful light of peace with God and life everlasting through the forgiveness of sins in Jesus (1 Peter 2:9-10). He unites all believers in an intimate bond with the Father, the Son, and with each other into one body, the body of Christ (Ephesians 1:22,23). He does so in spite of all barriers of culture, time, and geography as the apostle John tells us (1 John 1:3,4): “We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. We write this to make our joy complete.” The “communion of saints” or invisible church (*una sancta ecclesia*) is hidden from our sight because it extends over time and space and because we cannot see who has saving faith in Christ in his heart. However, we do not doubt the reality of the one, true, Christian church because we learn from the words of the prophet Isaiah that God’s Word does not return empty (Isaiah 55:10). God promises that “the gates of Hades will not overcome” his church (Matthew 16:18).

However, we need to distinguish the *spiritual fellowship* of all believers from our practice of church fellowship because we cannot make the spiritual fellowship of the invisible church visible. There can be both hypocrites within our own fellowship as well as true believers in churches who hold to false doctrine but still have the gospel. It can be a great comfort for us to know that God knows and protects those who belong to him. He does that in spite of the *pitiabile state of the visible church* in this world, which because of weakness, false doctrine, and sin is split up in countless numbers of congregations and groups of believers of all confessions, denominations, and synods. The apostle Paul writes (1 Corinthians 11:19): “No doubt there have to be differences<sup>4</sup> among you to show which of you have God’s approval.” But he reminds us for our comfort (2 Timothy 2:19): “Nevertheless, God’s solid foundation stands firm, sealed with this inscription: “The Lord knows those who are his.”

Because we cannot see into the human heart, we must *test the spirits* on the basis of Jesus’ words: “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 John 4:1). “They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us” (1 John 2:19). To be able to test the spirits we need to be well equipped with the Word to find out if something is in accordance with biblical doctrine or not. The apostle Paul reminds us: “For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light . . . and find out what pleases the Lord. Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them” (Ephesians 5:8-11).

**Unity—our goal.** Jesus asks the Father in his High Priestly Prayer for the *unity of all believers* “that they may be one as we are one” (John 17:11). We as confessional Lutherans do well not to

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<sup>3</sup> Augsburg Confession, Article V:1-3: “That we may obtain this faith, the Ministry of Teaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments was instituted. For through the Word and Sacraments, as through instruments, the Holy Ghost is given, who works faith, where and when it pleases God, in them that hear the Gospel, to wit, that God, not for our own merits, but for Christ’s sake, justifies those who believe that they are received into grace for Christ’s sake.” *Concordia Triglotta* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921), p. 45.

<sup>4</sup> Paul uses the term ἀφ᾽ ἑσῆς which can mean religious parties, divisions, factions as well as false teachings (cf. 2 Peter 2:1).

forget the true universality (ecumenicity) of the church, so that we are on our guard against unbiblical pluralism as well as a false elitism and a harmful separatist spirit. The church is one, and so we want to do everything to built and strengthen those who confess Christ and his Word in true fellowship based on the Word of God. The apostle John helps us bring this good ecumenical view back into our focus when he gives us a glimpse of church fellowship in perfection, i.e. in the church triumphant (Revelation 7:9): “After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb” (cf. Revelation 5:9; 11:9).

### 3. Where To Look for Fellowship

To our physical eyes, faith in Jesus is invisible. But the men and women, young and old, who carry this saving faith in their hearts are not. Earlier we said that God’s Word does not return empty. Through the prophet Isaiah God comforts his people (Isaiah 55:10-11): “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.”

Therefore our Lutheran Confessions rightly name the gospel in Word and sacrament as the *marks of the church*.<sup>5</sup> Where the gospel is being preached and the sacraments are rightly administered there the church is present. There believers will be present. Luther often used the expression “*Wo das Wort im Schwange geht*”<sup>6</sup> (where the Word is in use or at work). There we can assume that the Holy Spirit has been working. Martin Hoffmann put it this way:

The “*una sancta ecclesia*” itself is hidden from human eyes, because no one can look in anyone else’s heart to note his faith with certainty. This only God can do. But we may well know, where the church of Christ is to be found: where Word and sacrament are in use (lit. “*im Schwange gehen*”). Because the Word of God does not return empty, but accomplishes that for which God has sent it (Isaiah 55:10,11). Therefore, whenever people gather around the means of grace and confess Christ, there we can be certain, that the Holy Spirit has been and is at work having created faith. However, it cannot be said with certainty, that all who

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<sup>5</sup> Augsburg Confession, Article VII:1-4: “Also they teach that one holy Church is to continue forever. The Church is the congregation of saints, in which the Gospel is rightly taught and the Sacraments are rightly administered. And to the true unity of the Church it is enough to agree concerning the doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments. Nor is it necessary that human traditions, that is, rites or ceremonies, instituted by men, should be everywhere alike. As Paul says: One faith, one Baptism, one God and Father of all, etc. Eph. 4, 5. 6.” *Concordia Triglotta*, p. 47.

<sup>6</sup> For the expression “*Im Schwange gehen*” in Luther, cf. St. Louis Edition, Vol. 18, 1466 (57). C.F.W. Walther quotes this passage in his book on Church and Ministry, Thesis V: “*Nun fragst du, bei welchem Zeichen muss ich denn die Kirche erkennen? Es muss je etwa ein sichtbar Zeichen gegeben werden, dadurch wir zu Hauße versammelt werden, Gottes Wort zu hören. Antwort: Ja, es ist ein solch Zeichen vonnöthen, das haben wir auch; nämlich die Taufe, das Brod und allermeist das Evangelium. Diese drei sind der Christen Losung und Wahrzeichen. Wo du diese siehst im Schwange gehen, das ist, die Taufe, das Brod und das Evangelium, [es] sei gleich wo oder bei wem es wolle, zweifele nicht, es sei eine Kirche da.*”

are gathered are truly standing in the saving faith (cf. hypocrites, false believers). But we may well call those fellow believers, who confess the same faith as we.<sup>7</sup>

So how can individual believers be identified? How can we know where God the Holy Spirit has worked saving faith in a person's heart by the power of the gospel (Romans 1:16)? *By their fruit you will recognize them.* What Jesus tells his disciples as a warning against false teachers we can apply accordingly to the good fruits produced by believers (Matthew 7:16-18): "Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit." James wrote to admonish believers who knew their catechism well but were not living up to their doctrine. They were denying their creeds by their deeds. So James instructs them about "living faith" vs. "dead orthodoxy"—reminding us as well (James 2:17,18): "Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. . . . Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do." Faith in Christ is a living, active thing which can hardly remain hidden. Its presence will be noticed by the fruits of faith, i.e. by the confession of faith in word and action as Paul says (2 Corinthians 4:13; cf. Romans 10:9-17): "It is written: 'I believed; therefore I have spoken.' With that same spirit of faith we also believe and therefore speak."

**Christians seek out one another.** It is a natural fruit of faith to seek fellowship with other believers in Christ as Paul did when he wrote (Romans 1:11,12): "I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong—that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith." Believers want to confess and rejoice in their common faith, encourage one another, and share in the means of grace to built up one another in their faith. They want to use the spiritual gifts the Holy Spirit has granted them to benefit their fellow believers and to give glory of God. About the Jerusalem congregation we read (Acts 4:32,33): "All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all."

Christians can be recognized by the *fruits of faith*. But is not our judgment from fruits to faith always somewhat tentative? How can we base our fellowship practice on the fruits of faith alone if often there are mixed fruits? Sometimes we may not see any fruits at all within those of our fellowship. On the other hand there may be genuine Christian love and a zeal to spread the gospel also outside our own fellowship. In both cases there could be seeming fruits although there is no saving faith at all. People may hear the Word and act like Christians. But in reality they could be hypocrites. Therefore we will have to base our practice of church fellowship not alone on our subjective observation whether or not we think a person has saving faith (*fides qua*). We will base our practice of church fellowship on his or her objective *confession of faith* in word and action. Faith always wants to confess the full truth of God's Word (*fides quae*) and keep away from error. By this objective standard we can determine whether or not one's confession is in accordance with the doctrine of Christ and whether we can practice fellowship with a person or a group of believers. In other words, we seek to practice Christian fellowship with those who believe, teach, and confess the whole truth of God's Word in word and action.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Martin Hoffmann, "Evangelische Kirchengzucht," unpublished essay.

<sup>8</sup> It is not enough that a church body has a sound biblical confession of faith written down in its constitution. This confession must also be the only standard and norm by which everything in the life of the church is governed (*de*

This being said, we still hold that where the marks of the church (*notae ecclesiae*) are still present in spite of false doctrine (heterodox churches), there we can assume that true believers are present as long as the gospel is there. But we cannot practice *selective fellowship* with the believers there because we cannot see faith in the heart of an individual. To each individual who confesses the full truth of God's Word but still is a member in an erring church body (because of weakness or ignorance), we want to give a clear testimony to help him or her in a loving way to take a clear confessional stand in word and action. Where the marks of the church are present purely (*notae purae*), i.e. where in spite of all weakness the Word of God is the only norm and rule for doctrine and practice (orthodox churches, truly confessional churches), there we can and should practice church fellowship.

#### 4. The Unit Concept of Fellowship in Light of the Gospel

Confessional Lutheran doctrine and practice of church fellowship in the last century has been termed as the *unit concept*. This term captures well biblical teaching and practice throughout the centuries. John Brug gives this helpful definition:

According to Scripture, church fellowship must be dealt with as an undivided whole in two different respects.

First, when the doctrines of Scripture are being discussed to determine if groups or individuals may practice fellowship together, all doctrine must be dealt with as a unit. Since all the teachings of Scripture have the same divine authority, we have no right to add anything to them nor to subtract anything from them. The practice of church fellowship, therefore, must be based on agreement in *all* of the doctrines of Scripture.

Second, the various activities which express church fellowship must be dealt with as a unit. Since various ways of expressing church fellowship (such as joint mission work, celebration of the Lord's Supper, exchange of pulpits, transfers of membership, and joint prayer) are merely different ways of expressing the same fellowship of faith, *all* expressions of church fellowship require the same degree of doctrinal agreement, namely, agreement in *all* of the doctrines of Scripture.

In short, the basic principles are that we "work together for the truth," but that we avoid all joint expressions of Christian fellowship with those who persist in error, that is, in any departure from revealed truth.<sup>9</sup>

*Christian fellowship* according to the will of God as revealed in the Bible will always be fellowship at Jesus' feet. It is gathering, listening, and working together in his name with the

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*iure* and *de facto*). This means for example that there is an earnest desire to practice church discipline if doctrine or practice is compromised against the clear Word of God (Matthew 18:15ff; Titus 3:10).

<sup>9</sup> John F. Brug. "Can There Ever Be Exceptions To Our Regular Fellowship Practices That Do Not Violate Scripture's Fellowship Principles?" *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, 99:3 (Spring 2002), pp. 163,164. See also John F. Brug: *Church Fellowship—Working Together for the Truth*, (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1996), pp. 21,106.

purpose of being strengthened in his truth and love, to cling to his Word fully and to share his saving message with others. Jesus said to his disciples (Matthew 18:19,20): “Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.”

The closer we are to the center and object of our faith, i.e. Jesus and the message of salvation, the closer we will be to one another. Does that mean that we can practice Christian fellowship with all who consider themselves Christians, as long as they confess faith in Christ as the *ecumenical movement* once claimed? Or should we envision church fellowship relations like so many steps of a ladder (i.e. the closer we are doctrinally with a church or group of believers, the more our fellowship activities could increase; *levels of fellowship*)? Is there something like fraternal relations between church bodies or church officials *below the level of church fellowship*<sup>10</sup> (joint mission work, occasional joint prayer and worship)? What do we mean by cooperation in externals?

To answer these questions we again need to listen carefully to what Jesus has to say and not to our feelings or the opinion of our time and age. Trusting that Jesus will not ask us to do anything harmful to our souls, we cling to every single one of his words. And what he says is very clear. He tells his disciples: “to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:20). He reminds us (John 8:31,32): “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

To be united in his truth is not limited to only certain doctrines. The doctrine of Christ (cf. 1 Timothy 6:3; 2 John 9) includes all he has revealed in his Word. And this is not ours to change or adjust to our tastes. Jesus makes this very clear when he tells the church through his apostle John (Revelation 22:18,19): “If anyone adds anything to them [the words of this book], God will add to him the plagues described in this book. And if anyone takes words away from this book of prophecy, God will take away from him his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.”

In his commentary on Galatians 5:9, “A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough,” Martin Luther compared biblical doctrine with an unbroken “round golden circle.” All biblical doctrine is from God and so we have no right to add or subtract anything. He wrote:

Therefore doctrine must be one eternal and round golden circle, in which there is no crack; if even the tiniest crack appears, the circle is no longer perfect. What good does it do the Jews to believe that there is one God and that He is the Creator of all, to believe all the doctrines, and to accept all of Holy Scripture, when they deny Christ? . . . If they [the sectarians] believed that it [the Bible] is the Word of God, . . . they would know that one Word of God is all and that all

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<sup>10</sup> E.g. “Die SELK . . . pflegt auch unterhalb der Ebene von offiziell festgestellter Kanzel- und Abendmahls-gemeinschaft zwischen verfaßten Kirchenkörpern lebendige Beziehungen zu lutherischen Kirchen in aller Welt. Das gilt in letzter Zeit besonders für lutherische Kirchen in Osteuropa, z.B. Lettland und Tschechien. Unterschieden werden muß zwischen „offiziell festgestellter Kanzel- und Abendmahlsgemeinschaft zwischen verfaßten Kirchenkörpern“ und der „innerlutherischen ökumenischen Praxis” [http://www.selk.de/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=224&Itemid=108](http://www.selk.de/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=224&Itemid=108).

are one, that one doctrine is all doctrines and all are one, so that when one is lost all are eventually lost, because they belong together and are held together by a common bond. . . . Therefore if you deny God in one article of faith, you have denied Him in all; for God is not divided into many articles of faith, but He is everything in each article and He is one in all the articles of faith.<sup>11</sup>

On the other hand, unity in doctrine does not require uniformity in *terminology*. We should not battle about mere words (2 Timothy 2:14-26). It is, however, desirable to agree on common terminology at least to a certain degree within our church fellowship to avoid confusion and unnecessary strife and tension.<sup>12</sup> Also unity in doctrine does not mean that all believers will have the same *level of understanding* of biblical doctrine or the same level of sanctification. Never in this life will any sinner-saint or group of believers match up perfectly to the doctrine of Christ—neither in knowledge nor practical application of biblical doctrine. But there will always be willingness on the part of the Christian to be corrected by the Word and grow in his faith. Martin Luther was right when he admitted:

Doctrine and life must be distinguished. Life is bad among us, as it is among the papists, but we don't fight about life and condemn the papists on that account.<sup>13</sup>

If only the doctrine remains pure, there is always the hope that life would also be straightened out through the power of the Word. If the Word was missing, there would be no hope for a changed life.<sup>14</sup> It is therefore wrong to deny fellowship for reasons other than false doctrine or practice unless an individual or church body refuses to accept biblical admonition. To declare and practice church fellowship, it is *not a prerequisite* to agree in things not commanded in Scripture (adiaphora, cf. Romans 14:5,6). We do not have to use the same liturgy or enjoy the same style of worship. There can be and has been a variety of forms and traditions among fellow believers in different times and places throughout the history of the Christian church. Our Lutheran Confessions state:

To the true unity of the Church it is enough to agree concerning the doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments. Nor is it necessary that human traditions, that is, rites or ceremonies, instituted by men, should be everywhere alike. As Paul says: One faith, one Baptism, one God and Father of all, etc. Eph. 4, 5, 6.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> *Luther's Works*, American Edition, Vol. 27 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1964), pp. 38,39. Cf. St. Louis Edition, Vol. 9, pp. 644ff. See also Brug, *Church Fellowship*, pp. 63ff.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Brug, *Church Fellowship*, pp. 36ff.

<sup>13</sup> *Luther's Works*, American Edition vol. 54 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), p. 110. Veit Dietrich, Fall, 1533; WAT, 1, 294.

<sup>14</sup> Luther put it this way: "If the teaching (*doctrina*) remains pure there is hope that life could easily be improved. The rays of the sun remain pure and shine brightly even if they fall on excrement. Thus God maintains something pure among us through which we readily condemn the error committed. The Lord magnifies this word and loves it." WA, 13, 688, *Proph. Mm*, 1524; quoted in George Wolfgang Forell, "Justification and Eschatology in Luther's Thought," [www.presenttruthmag.com/archive/XLIV/44-4.htm](http://www.presenttruthmag.com/archive/XLIV/44-4.htm).

<sup>15</sup> Augsburg Confession, Article VII: 2-4, *Concordia Triglotta*, p. 47.

We believe, teach, and confess also that no Church should condemn another because one has less or more external ceremonies not commanded by God than the other, if otherwise there is agreement among them in doctrine and all its articles, as also in the right use of the holy Sacraments, according to the well-known saying: . . . Disagreement in fasting does not destroy agreement in faith.<sup>16</sup>

We sum up the one side of the main biblical principle of church fellowship: To practice church fellowship it is both *necessary* and *sufficient* to agree in all biblical doctrines (*de iure* and *de facto*<sup>17</sup>). We base our practice of church fellowship on *fundamental agreement*, i.e. agreement in the foundation of faith and acceptance of instruction in all biblical doctrines.<sup>18</sup> We cannot base our practice of church fellowship on mere *agreement in fundamentals* as the fundamentalists teach who hold only some doctrines as divisive of fellowship.

But there is *another side*. What does church fellowship consist of? Does this term apply only to formal activities of believers joining together in the use of the means of grace such as altar and pulpit fellowship? Does the doctrine of church fellowship apply only to formal relations between church bodies and synods? While formal activities between churches and joint use of the means of grace surely call for full unity of faith, church fellowship, i.e. Christian fellowship is much more. We can define it as:

every joint expression, manifestation, and demonstration of the common faith in which Christians on the basis of their confession find themselves to be united with one another.<sup>19</sup>

In other words, *all expressions of Christian fellowship* call for the same measure of agreement, namely full unity in all biblical doctrines. The belief that there are *levels in our fellowship* relations with other Christians (joint expressions of faith that demand lesser or greater unity) is foreign to the Bible. We read about the believers in Jerusalem (Acts 2:42) that they “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.” On the other hand, Paul urges us “to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned.” He tells us: “Keep away from them” (Romans 16:17). The apostle John puts it even stronger when he writes (2 John 8-11): “Watch out that you do not lose what you have worked for, but that you may be rewarded fully. 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.” To “keep away” cannot mean: “It’s OK at least to pray with them.”

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<sup>16</sup> Formula of Concord, Epitome, Article X:7, *Concordia Triglotta*, p. 831.

<sup>17</sup> See footnote 8.

<sup>18</sup> For the term “fundamental agreement” cf. J. P. Meyer, “Unionism,” in *Essays on Church Fellowship*, edited by Curtis A. Jahn (Miwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1996), p. 64. Also Theodore A. Aaberg, “The Doctrine of Church Fellowship,” 1977 ELS General Pastoral Conference, in [www.wlssays.net](http://www.wlssays.net), p. 8.

<sup>19</sup> “WELS Statement on Church Fellowship” (1970), quoted in Brug, *Church Fellowship*, p. 164.

Surely there is a distinction between the *means of grace* (God comes to us in the gospel in Word and sacrament), *prayer* (we come before God with praise and petition), and *social activities*. But when we consider them as joint expressions of faith, they all lie on the same plane. This means that all of these expressions of faith such as joint prayer, exchange of pastors and teachers, joint use of the sacraments, joint education, joint work in spreading the gospel, joint exercise of love and charity require the same prerequisites, i.e. full agreement.

There may be things which could be only social in nature and would not necessarily be understood as expressions of faith. Those things would not necessarily be *expressions of Christian fellowship* (e.g. being present in a church, greeting one another, showing hospitality). But prayer and the use of the means of grace are never only social activities. Performed together with other Christians they are, therefore, always expressions of fellowship. Even things which could be understood as merely social activities often will become expressions of fellowship for Christians who join in them as a fruit of their common faith (e.g. the handshake in Galatians 2:9, the holy kiss in 1 Corinthians 16:20 and 1 Thessalonians 5:26, and other forms of encouragement for fellow believers).

## **5. Church Fellowship in Everyday Life Situations**

When we now discuss how to practice church fellowship in everyday life situations, we do well to remember two things: First, our fellowship principles are not an end in and of themselves. We will follow them out of love for God and our neighbor and do so in an evangelical spirit to give a clear testimony and to win people for the truth. Second, God's principles do not apply only to official relations between church bodies. Instead we will be led by them in all activities in which we join together expressing our faith. But when and where do we have a scriptural basis to practice fellowship? John Brug writes:

Since we cannot see the faith in people's hearts, outward fellowship must be established on the basis of the individuals' outward confession. If individuals or groups agree on the doctrines of Scripture, they should practice church fellowship together. If they are not in agreement in doctrine, they should not practice church fellowship with each other.<sup>20</sup>

Trusting in the power of our Savior's words, we need not be afraid to put his Word into practice. The principles we know from his Word are his principles not ours. We know that what God tells us is always good. To remain faithful to his Word will never be harmful to us or the people around us. This is true also when we face lack of understanding or even ridicule for our confessional stand. We know from Jesus' words that the disciple is not above his teacher (Matthew 10:24,25). People will not necessarily understand our practice. If they question us about our fellowship practice, this hopefully gives us an opportunity to study God's Word together with them. If they reject to listen or if we even have to suffer for our confession, this will give us reason to rejoice to bear the cross in Jesus' footsteps.

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<sup>20</sup> John Brug, "Applications of the Principles of Church Fellowship," Metro Conference, November 1994, in [www.wlssays.net](http://www.wlssays.net), p. 1.

So how do we decide when to practice fellowship as a group or individually? Where can we express our faith together in different ways such as joint prayer? Again we quote John Brug:

Our basic principle is that we cannot practice any form of fellowship with a persistent errorist. We can practice fellowship only with those who confess the whole truth. But how do we determine a person's confession?

The key evidence for determining a Christian's confession is that person's church membership. Normally our fellowship relations with a person are determined by whether or not we are in fellowship with his or her church.<sup>21</sup>

But is church membership the only evidence which we consider in all such decisions? It will occur frequently that somebody confesses faith in Christ and all his words. But he might be a member of a church body not in our fellowship. Under what circumstances could we pray together? Imagine there is somebody in our Bible information class. But before he completes the course and becomes a member of our church, the Lord calls him to his eternal home? Could a confessional Lutheran pastor conduct the funeral? Pastor John Vieths in his essay "Biblical Principles that Impact Christian Fellowship Practices" takes up cases like those and discusses situations where two or more biblical principles apply, and we struggle how to best put them to practice in an evangelical way.<sup>22</sup> He reminds us that the disunity of the visible church often makes our relationships with Christians of other denominations uncomfortable or even painful. If you were physically wounded, you would hurt. The spiritual wound of disunity between Christians of different denominations hurts. It does not feel good. And it should not. It will not surprise us that we feel uncomfortable when we realize that there are doctrinal differences which stand in the way of our fellowship or make us unsure how to deal with other Christians.

**What to do?** Situations and circumstances will vary. But the principles remain the same. We might be in a situation where we deviate from our regular practice. But we should be careful not to deviate from God's principles. *Prayer* is always an act of worship. To be in harmony with God's Word, joint prayer therefore requires the same agreement in all doctrines as all other expressions of fellowship. In difficult cases concerning prayer fellowship it is good to start with some questions. In the case of someone belonging to another church such questions could be: Do we know anything more about that person besides church membership? Does he defend the false beliefs of his church? Has he expressed a desire to follow whatever God's Word says? Is he willing to accept biblical correction of the false beliefs taught by his church? Is he even familiar with the false beliefs of his church?

Praying with somebody outside of our fellowship could strengthen him in his false beliefs that doctrine does not matter. This would be the case if we prayed with a person who is a knowledgeable and devoted follower of the teachings of a heterodox church. On the other hand, if a person merely suffers from a weakness in faith but is open to instruction, praying with him may be appropriate as part of your efforts to reach him with the truth. John Vieths gives another helpful insight:

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<sup>21</sup> Brug, "Can There Ever Be Exceptions?" p. 173.

<sup>22</sup> The following paragraphs are adapted from John Vieths' paper presented at the annual gathering of the Lutheran Confessional Church in Sweden (LBK) in 2009, Swedish translation published in *Biblicum* 3/2009.

So long as your church memberships divide you publicly, it would not be appropriate to pray with her in a public setting. That might give other people the impression that you and your church don't really care about the false teachings of her church. In private, prayer may be permissible, depending upon the answers to the earlier questions we asked about her personal beliefs.<sup>23</sup>

Another factor is the question whether the situation has some sense of emergency. Is there any reason to believe the faith of that person could suffer harm or be lost without someone else to help support it at this very moment? If not, we need to determine that we are dealing with a weak brother before proceeding with joint prayer. *Attending services* of another church does not necessarily communicate agreement with the teachings of that church. We could attend services at a church as a way of investigating its teachings. However, joining in the worship, praying and singing hymns, confessing the creed etc. would suggest that we accept the message of that church body. Vieths writes:

When attending weddings, funerals, and baptisms in the churches of another denomination for the sake of friends or family, we are there as observers. We don't want to disrupt the other worshipers or create a distraction. We don't want to participate in the worship, either. We watch what is happening quietly and politely. We might stand and sit when the congregation stands or sits only so that we do not distract the other worshipers.<sup>24</sup>

A similar situation arose in the Old Testament, when Elisha had cured Naaman of his leprosy (2 Kings 5). Naaman asked Elisha if he could still accompany his master when he would pray in the temple of Rimmon. Elisha did not confront Naaman about this practice or correct him. He simply told him, "Go in peace." Under these circumstances, it was understood that Naaman was not there to worship. He was there only to honor and attend his king. The same would apply if we might participate in some of the non-spiritual features of a wedding or at a funeral. That might include standing up as attendants to the bride and groom.

What if someone would ask you to give a *devotion* or a lecture or to lead in prayer, and you know that not all of the people present are in fellowship with you? A similar situation might occur when we meet for our regular worship services at our church or conduct family devotions in our home when guests are present.

In that setting it is clear that we are not giving approval to the false beliefs of guests who may be present. We are there to promote the truth, and our guests probably understand this. In our own homes, we do not hesitate to have devotions and lead prayers even when guests of another faith are present. It is a good way for us to witness to them. In other settings, the impression people receive may not be so clear. Vieths writes:

We have generally declined the invitation to lead prayers at official government functions, or to open the meetings of various organizations in the community with

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<sup>23</sup> Vieths *op.cit.*

<sup>24</sup> Vieths, *op.cit.*

prayer. These tend to reinforce in people's minds that the differences between churches aren't very important, and they suggest that we don't have serious objections to the false teachings in other churches.<sup>25</sup>

We may not in all cases come to exactly the same conclusions about what to do. The details of the situation and the context in which we have to apply the principles, help us decide how to best give a clear testimony for the truth and in this way show both love for God and our neighbor. How then should we deal with those who joyfully confess to be Christian but we know they still hold to false doctrine? How can we best serve them in truth and love? John Vieths has this helpful comment:

It gives me joy to know that other people profess faith in Jesus, in spite of their false doctrine. The joyful comment of the other person does not give us an immediate basis for fellowship. There is likely no pressure in such a situation to practice some kind of fellowship. However, this joyful reaction may indicate that this person would be willing to talk about Scripture with me. I think that I would take an interest in such a person, ask questions about his or her beliefs, and try to develop some sort of friendship. I would look for an opportunity to talk about my beliefs. Maybe we will never end up anything more than friends who respectfully disagree about certain Bible teachings. But maybe God can use me to help this person give up his false doctrine.<sup>26</sup>

We can take comfort knowing that many of our friends and relatives in other churches believe in Jesus as their Savior in spite of their erroneous thoughts about some biblical teachings. Our goal is to help them over their wrong notions whenever there is an opportunity. In hard cases we should ask ourselves, "How can I best give a clear testimony against error to the false teacher, to his adherents, and to everyone who observes my action? How can I best win them for the truth?" Professor Carl Lawrenz's comment may serve as a fitting illustration for this evangelical mindset in applying the biblical principles of church fellowship in everyday life situations.

The Lord in his Word tells us: "Him that is weak in the faith receive ye, but not to doubtful disputations." Wherever Christian faith manifests and expresses itself the Lord would have us strengthen and encourage it. After the manner of the Savior Himself we are not to break the bruised reed or quench the smoking flax. We are not to "offend" those who believe in Him, and who by their confession lead us to assume that they do believe in Him, even though they may still be weak in Christian understanding and judgment. We are rather to do all in our power to build them up in their faith and Christian understanding.

On the other hand, the Lord tells us in His Word to mark them which cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which we have learned and to avoid them. This clearly applies to all adherents of false doctrine and practice. It is clear that this will keep us from practicing Christian fellowship both privately and publicly with those who manifest themselves as persistent errorists. It will

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<sup>25</sup> Vieths, *op.cit.*

<sup>26</sup> Vieths, *op.cit.*

also keep us from practicing Christian fellowship publicly with all those who follow adherents of false doctrine and practice and who identify themselves with them, whether they themselves are fully conscious of what they are doing or not.<sup>27</sup>

## 6. Conclusion

In our relationships with people outside our fellowship we need to remember that the biblical principles of church fellowship are not an end in themselves. As children of God we delight in God's law (Psalm 1:2) because we know its ultimate purpose: It was given to serve people's good. So also in the principles of fellowship we see the gracious guidelines of our heavenly father who wants to protect us from spiritual harm and to enable us as his ambassadors to win over others for the full truth of his Word. John Brug, comparing the biblical principles of church fellowship with the Sabbath law, writes:

The law was given to serve people's good. "Therefore, it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath" (Matthew 12:12). . . . The Pharisees failed to understand that God desired "mercy not sacrifice" (Matthew 12:7).

In short, "the Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27). We shouldn't forget that "fellowship principles were made for man; man wasn't made for fellowship principles." If we remember that God wants mercy and not sacrifice, we won't condemn the innocent (Matthew 12:7).<sup>28</sup>

The biblical practice of church fellowship is always an act of love. It has always in mind to serve the well-being of others: To strengthen fellowship where it already exists and to lead others to their Savior and at the same time into the fellowship at Jesus' feet. Therefore, we will patiently instruct those who listen (Matthew 28:20). We will make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit in our fellowship (Ephesians 4:1ff; Acts 2:42; Hebrews 10:24,25). We will help each other as brothers and sisters by loving admonition where fellowship is in danger (Matthew 18:15ff; Galatians 3:1; 6:1). And we will keep away from persistent errorists and all who support their false teaching as long as they reject warning and correction (Romans 16:17ff; Titus 3:10).

However, we will make a distinction in our dealings with weak brothers as long as they are willing to take instruction from the Word of God. If somebody is not aware of the false beliefs tolerated or promoted within his church, we will patiently lead him to see what Christ says. We will point out error in doctrine and practice to win him over for the truth. Even if someone will not listen immediately, we will continue to talk to him until our efforts prove to be in vain (2 Thessalonians 3:14,15): "If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of him. Do not associate with him, in order that he may feel ashamed. Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother."

In doing so we are motivated by the love of Christ which compels us (2 Corinthians 5:14) to watch over one another as Christian brothers and sisters and to share the gospel with others. Our practice of church fellowship will have to avoid the notion of being legalistic or arrogant as well

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<sup>27</sup> Carl J. Lawrenz, "A Statement on the Applications of Our Fellowship Principles" in [www.wlsessays.net](http://www.wlsessays.net), p. 1.

<sup>28</sup> Brug, "Can There Ever Be Exceptions?" p. 169.

as the temptation to look for loopholes to avoid conflict. We do not just use a set of rules but always ask how to best apply God's principles evangelically. We are motivated by the gospel. It is our desire to show love for God, love for his truth, and love for the people around us. The following points highlight our motivation:<sup>29</sup>

1. Love leads us to warn the errorist against his errors in the hope that he can be won to repentance (Titus 3:10; Matthew 18:15; 2 Timothy 2:25-26; 1 Timothy 1:3-5).
2. Love leads us to warn others against the errorist, so that they do not fall victim to his false teaching (1 Timothy 4:1-6; 2 Timothy 4:2-5; Titus 1:10-14).
3. We seek to avoid even the appearance of going along with error, also in matters which are adiaphora (Galatians 2:3).
4. We separate from errorists to protect ourselves from the dangerous poison of error which is a threat to our souls (2 Timothy 2:17; Galatians 5:9).
5. We have a special concern for those weak in the faith (Jude 22,23).

When we study the biblical principles and applications of confessional fellowship we do well to always come back and sit at Jesus' feet. There we will always find his full forgiveness for all our shortcomings in our dealings with each other as fellow believers. We find grace upon grace for our failure not to have confessed his truth boldly and lovingly at all times. And at his feet as redeemed and justified children of God, we rejoice in the fellowship we have with Jesus our Redeemer and through him with our Father in heaven. We praise him for the fellowship he has created between us as brothers and sisters in Christ. And equipped with his comforting message, we can step out into the world again to confess his saving truth to others so that they may find lasting comfort and peace with us at Jesus' feet.

To him be all glory.

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<sup>29</sup> Taken from Brug, "Can There Ever Be Exceptions?" p. 166; and Brug, *Church Fellowship*, p. 117.

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## **Discussion Questions**

### **1. Our blessed fellowship**

Do we treasure enough the spiritual fellowship of all believers? What is our view of Christians outside our fellowship—reason to rejoice? possible threat? competitors?

Do we talk enough about the doctrine of church fellowship in our own circles? The unit concept: A clear confession as basis for all expressions of fellowship—a burden? a reason to rejoice over what God has entrusted to us? a blessing to share with others?

### **2. Speaking the truth in love**

How can we communicate the biblical truth to our fellow believers who struggle with this topic? to those outside our fellowship we want to reach with the gospel? to the next generation? How can we avoid both a legalistic approach in our practice as well as the danger to look for loopholes in God's law?

### **3. Unity of Spirit—Bond of Peace**

How much unity in things other than doctrine is necessary / advisable / possible—to keep the bond of peace within our fellowship? How much diversity in the area of adiaphora can our fellowship bear? How much uniformity are we willing or able to strife for in our fellowship? How much diversity are we willing to live with? rejoice over?

Challenges and opportunities of Augsburg Confession VII / Formula of Concord X? To what extend do we see this as a blessing? To what extend could it threaten our unity?

### **4. Outside the Framework of Fellowship**

What do we mean by this? Could this be an area we should make more use of, to grow in knowledge, extend our confessional fellowship, and advance the gospel (free conferences, input from outside our fellowship / cooperation in externals)? Could this become a loophole for a looser fellowship practice? How can we avoid falling in either one of the two ditches?

### **5. Other points for discussion**

What challenges do you face in your culture in applying the biblical doctrine of fellowship? What can we do to foster the “positive side” of fellowship in a better way?

Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Conference  
Seventh Triennial Convention  
June 4-6, 2011—New Ulm, Minnesota USA

*Unity of Spirit—Bond of Peace*

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Essay #5—

## **The Distinctive Blessings in Which the Lutheran Church Rejoices and Lives**

**Ezequiel Sánchez**  
Mexico

*Translated by Pastor Samuel Degner*

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During these days together, we certainly have been amazed by what we are enjoying and experiencing. It is truly amazing to be gathered here, since we come from so many different places, with different languages and customs. Only true faith can unite us. Certainly in our discussions we have seen how different we can be culturally and how we work in different ways. How good it is that we can get to know each other and also grow! We have traveled thousands of miles to be here, to rejoice in what we have and what we enjoy. God has made us his special disciples. He has given us an understanding that distinguishes us from others, that offers us joy and peace.

I would like us to think about what we *are*; nonetheless we cannot pass over what we *were*. The Bible describes it in a clear and precise manner: We were fleshly people without the capacity to understand and receive the things of the Spirit of God, considering them to be foolish. We could not see what was good, much less take hold of grace from on high or turn ourselves to the Lord.

Our reformer fathers, in the Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord, show this: “In spiritual and divine things, however, which concern the salvation of his soul, man is like a pillar of salt, like Lot’s wife, yes, like a log or a stone, like a lifeless statue which uses neither mouth nor eyes nor senses nor heart.”<sup>1</sup>

The Bible says it this way: “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 Corinthians 2:14).<sup>2</sup> It is Paul who declares that man is unable to understand the things that God has given; they simply seem to be foolishness. He said this in the context of life in Corinth. With the pagan religions and religious influences of the time, it was necessary to make it very clear how foolish man is in his understanding of the Lord. Jesus declares, “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day” (John 6:44). Thus the Lord shows us that man is lost without him, that natural

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<sup>1</sup> Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article II:20, *The Book of Concord*, translated and edited by Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), p. 525.

<sup>2</sup> All Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, New International Version*, 1984.

man does not have any correct motivation to approach the divine—an unfavorable condition that is nevertheless still not understood by carnal man.

This leads us to think about what the Lord says: “As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins” (Ephesians 2:1)—dead, without life, without the possibility of living on our own, without even the intent to make an effort or to want to do so, and, in addition, with the burden of condemnation and guilt by nature. This leads, then, to what the apostle Paul says: “All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one” (Romans 3:12). Thus all people, in their natural state, are opposed to God—are hostile—and this causes them to be far away from God, completely separated, and with a guilty verdict from God. We all need to be right with God, free from guilt and declared innocent—in other words, declared justified. The Bible says, ‘Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord’” (Hebrews 12:14).

It is this sad condition that some theologians, both past and present, have always denied, thinking that man is only a little damaged. Thus these heterodox theologians show how easy it is to form opinions that are contrary to clear Scripture.

Therefore the consequence of sin is death, eternal death, the absolute and irreversible separation of the sinner from God and his love. “Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned” (Romans 5:12). Only the perversity and blindness of the fallen nature of man leads him to talk about this need as if it were irrelevant.

The Augsburg Confession highlights the activity of God’s grace in justification:

It is also taught among us that we cannot obtain forgiveness of sin and righteousness before God by our own merits, works, or satisfactions, but that we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God by grace, for Christ’s sake, through faith, when we believe that Christ suffered for us and that for his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us. For God will regard and reckon this faith as righteousness, as Paul says in Romans 3:21-26 and 4:5.<sup>3</sup>

But even now we enjoy the fact that the Lord made a complete change in us. In his eyes, we have gone from being guilty to being acceptable before him. We never paid any price to be in this new condition, because we would always have to remember what our works are: “All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away” (Isaiah 64:6).

Thus God, in one external act, has given us what we needed. The wisest theologians have called this objective justification, because what happens in man comes directly from the Lord, from a verdict that is uniquely his, in which man is not at all involved.

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<sup>3</sup> Augsburg Confession, Article IV:1-3, *The Book of Concord*, p. 30.

This justification of man is caused by the grace of God and the merits of Jesus Christ. Neither of these two causes has anything to do with the participation of sinful human beings. Both causes exist completely in the sphere of God. Truly God has given us the greatest gift that man can receive: justification, the main principle of the Reformation, the heart of the Reformation, the center on which true religion rests. Justification frees us from the burden of condemnation and leads us to freedom; in it God's mercy is shown toward men. Thus justification is the focus of the Christian life. Our reformer fathers insisted on teaching this, because this doctrine is the gospel through which the Christian church in every place lives. Mankind will not live close to God by being more good, or trying to be better than others, or comparing themselves to others. Keeping God's law will only make one despair even more from anguish of conscience; people will not be closer to God through the pious fruit found in their lives. But believers receive forgiveness of sins and the declaration of innocence, and it is beneath that declaration that the simple, weak faith rests, because it points to Christ, who says: "You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me" (John 5:39). Our reformer fathers raised up this truth before everyone, when the church was passing through one of the worst moments in its history. Thus we, too, lift up this doctrine for the life of the church and for our mission as the church.

As we approach the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation, what a great tribute we pay to our reformer fathers by continuing to live under this teaching. Luther put his life into this message, and trusted in the hope of what the Bible teaches when it says: "A man is justified by faith apart from observing the law" (Romans 3:28). Thus, since this teaching is the center and the heart of our church, it has been called *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*, the article by which the church stands or falls. Clearly all other teachings revolve around this one. Yet at the same time this is the teaching that has been attacked most throughout the centuries.

We rejoice because God responded to our greatest need, the need to be freed from sin and the condemnation that it brings. Yet even now we could be quite sad because, in world Lutheranism, the doctrine of justification is not important. Many of those liberal Lutherans are so eager to make agreements with anyone, no matter if this doctrine is ignored. God in his love has pronounced the not guilty verdict that comes from his rule, far from the will or effort of man. This leads us to remember that the cause of this declaration is the grace of God and the merits of Jesus Christ, the Savior who said from the cross, "It is finished" (John 19:30), the Savior who did this work for all mankind.

Of course, Scripture teaches that Jesus died for all. Since Jesus completed his work, no one needs to do anything to pay for his sin. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). It also says: "He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world" (1 John 2:2). Scripture declares to us that God has *reconciled* the world to himself and paid for the sins of the world in Christ. The Bible reveals the marvelous truth that, through the life, death, and resurrection of his Son, Christ Jesus, God has *justified* the world. "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus (Romans 3:23-24). The term "justification" is applied universally when Paul writes: "He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification" (Romans 4:25).

Salvation is for “whoever believes” (John 3:16). God’s righteousness is “by faith from first to last” or “from faith to faith.” “The righteous will live by faith” (Romans 1:17). Universal righteousness, objective justification, is mine through faith. Trusting that God has done what the gospel says he has done, I have it.

God, therefore, reconciles us. Paul says that it is by grace: “All . . . are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus (Romans 3:23,24). His grace is an active love that brings us salvation. The many had died because of one man, and his love led him to give his one and only Son (John 3:16) to give us salvation. In his grace, he forgives us through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus; it is that redemptive work that constitutes the foundation of this forgiveness—atonement for our sins. In his death, he was expiating our sins and paying the debt that we had with the Father. The Father, in his love, accepts this perfect sacrifice. By his complete mediation and his innocence, we are on the receiving end of that which is most holy and perfect: his righteousness.

As confessional Lutherans in the midst of heterodox theological storms, we continue announcing the benefits of the declaration that we are justified: We now have peace with God; our Father tells us that we are reconciled. We have peace, knowing that we are not under the wrath of the Father, that we are forgiven, that his promises accompany us, that no punishment hangs over us; and we know that this is not based on our accomplishments but on the death of Jesus on the cross.

We arrive at the above conclusions because we see it clearly in the Scriptures; in them our redemption is described. However, that theological conclusion does not come by chance, but rather by having and experiencing and enjoying a solid system of interpreting the Scriptures. Throughout the years, the Christian church has been affected by systems of interpretation, from allegory to existentialism, pietism, and demythologizing, which have caused believers to suffer. God has been good; in spite of this, he has maintained the correct teaching of his Word in the midst of the snares of the enemy. Today, as theological uncertainties are not diminishing but rather increasing, it is obviously important to remember what Scripture says: “All Scripture is God-breathed” (2 Timothy 3:16). This drives us to guard the hope that we have. The greatest distinction that we have is the study and interpretation of his Word, the historical-grammatical method, which has come to strengthen our conviction about Scripture. Accompanying our study with the presuppositions of faith and a sure exegesis assures us that we are believing on a solid foundation; the Word is our guide. “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path” (Psalm 119:105). It is through that Word that we then comprehend the many blessings that he has given. Jesus says, “These are the Scriptures that testify about me” (John 5:39), and that testimony sows certainty in our hearts, as we recognize that “prophecy never had its origin in the will of man” (2 Peter 1:21).

In two senses, the church has grown in this blessing: Sharing this concept in its theological universities, in which seminarians grow in their love of Scripture, and in the churches, where it is taught that the Word comes from God and believers go home with the certainty of putting their hope in God, loving and trusting him above all things. It is thanks to diligent study that we have avoided falling into the errors that lead one to wander from the faith.

By loving the Word and considering it our only source of faith, we are led to seek and strengthen ties with other believers that see the Bible in the same way. Our evangelical Lutheran church lives and rejoices in the unity that it has and promotes. One of the joys that the believer can enjoy is Christian fellowship, as Psalm 133:1 says: “How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity!” We encourage each other to preserve this fellowship and guard our unity.<sup>4</sup> We express that bond of unity when we are concerned for the believer that is threatened by error and sin, when we help our brothers in their needs, and when we strive to grow in Jesus as his disciples.<sup>5</sup> This teaching therefore moves us to strengthen our ties of fellowship in order to build up our defenses against error. We show respect for this unity also by appreciating those teachers who support the truth; but, at the same time, we emphasize our responsibility toward the weak in faith. It is sad that, in the present moment, one of the greatest problems is ecumenism; groups that were once serious about the Word have fallen slowly into being weak in this aspect.

Our beloved Lutheran churches are not isolated. Our unity is due to the Holy Spirit, who unites us, and we express it as we maintain fellowship. Some denominations, in their fondness for wanting to be united and not feel alone in their countries, have tried to minimize the desire to maintain the doctrine of fellowship. It may be a very human desire to want to seek religious camaraderie, but it will be poison for the soul. Slowly it will destroy what the Lord has sown in hope in our hearts. The efforts of the CELC during these last years have served to allow conservative groups to see an opportunity to maintain brotherhood in a world that is moving toward secularism and globalization (in a negative sense). The CELC serves as a platform for brotherhood, a refuge for those who seek to be under the solid Word.

It is remarkable that, for other religious groups, unity is based on mere administrative ties and social connections, driving them to frequent error. Those heterodox groups that do not maintain unity in all aspects feel secure in the fictitious fellowship that they maintain. That may help the flesh, but it destroys faith.

It is important to remember that we maintain this unity thanks to the Lord himself, who gives us his Word and sacraments to sustain and strengthen faith. In his grace, the Lord uses the means of grace. God, in his omnipotence, works over, above, and around us. We are glad to enjoy these blessings. Sadly many others live in slavery to religiosity and their unity is based on human, fleshly efforts. Thus we could clearly deduce that this unity is a miracle of God’s grace and one more piece of evidence of his power to protect us against the constant attacks of the three enemies that attack us. Paul encourages us: “What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus” (2 Timothy 1:13).

Our challenge is to preserve the unity that God has given us as believers. Jesus 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” (John 15:5). We want to remember that it is not possible to maintain unity in the church by agreeing to disagree.

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<sup>4</sup> Ephesians 4:3: “Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.”

<sup>5</sup> John 13:35: By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

It is remarkable that some false teachings arise from not understanding the concept of *adiaphora*, things that God neither commands nor forbids, where doing or not doing them is a matter of indifference. Paul highlights the character of Christian ethics as well as Christian liberty and concludes that observance in external things is immaterial in its relationship to the kingdom of God.<sup>6</sup> Luther, in fact, defines the idea of *adiaphora* according to a legal criterion, when he distinguishes between things or works that are clearly commanded or forbidden by God in the New Testament and those that remain free, of which it can be said that omitting them is not wrong and observing them is not a good work. In our early history, Lutherans went through two adiaphoristic controversies, which had to do with matters of worship as well as disagreements with the Calvinists, which had to do with enjoying secular entertainment. In my country, denominations are founded on legalistic concepts as if they were true expressions of a faith relationship with God, using moral rules of their own conception to determine the proper exercise of faith and the purpose of life under the Lord. There is no worse slavery than when one chains himself; this happens when religious people assume that moral agreements are the same as divine directives when it comes to showing their piety. The point is that the evangelical Lutheran church enjoys worship with freedom and living a Christian life in the same freedom to which we were called.

God is with the confessional Lutheran church and makes her stand firm. He has given her the opportunity for understanding. Thus we have emphasized the challenges of remaining firm in that in which the Lord has made us take part. We are on the rock,<sup>7</sup> and that is how we confess it. We live in difficult times; heresies have not gone away, the arrows of our enemies are always present, and sometimes it seems as if the enemy is winning. I come from a city in which violence presents itself every day; in a similar way, heterodox groups constantly present themselves and sell the idea that they are the only way to heaven. Nonetheless I can say with gladness that I am on the way to heaven. Jesus earned it for me; he paid my ticket. God announces to me clearly who I am: a redeemed child (Ephesians 1). The world still needs to hear all the more who the Savior is, and we want to communicate that even further than we have already been able. As we approach the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation, we imitate and honor our reformer fathers by communicating God's Word in a hostile world—and we know that he will never abandon us. We have the truth and we live in the truth. Let us walk toward the future proud of what the Lord has done through his Lutheran messengers.

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<sup>6</sup> Romans 14:17: "For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit." 1 Corinthians 6:12: "'Everything is permissible for me'—but not everything is beneficial. 'Everything is permissible for me'—but I will not be mastered by anything." 1 Corinthians 8:8: "But food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do." Galatians 5:6: "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love." Colossians 2:20: "Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world, why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules?"

<sup>7</sup> Psalm 18:2: "The LORD is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer; my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge. He is my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold."

## Discussion Questions

This essay identifies four distinct blessings of God in our Lutheran church:

- Our Lutheran church teaches the doctrine of justification properly and puts it at the center.
- Our Lutheran church interprets the Bible correctly as God's Word.
- Our Lutheran church practices the doctrine of church fellowship in a way that promotes true unity and protects against false doctrine.
- Our Lutheran church does not make legalistic rules about *adiaphora*.

1. Has one of these blessings been especially influential in guiding you to our Lutheran church fellowship or keeping you in it?

2. Does one of these blessings make our Lutheran church especially attractive in your country and culture—in contrast to the other Christian denominations?

3. If you had been assigned this essay, is there any other distinct blessing of God in our Lutheran church that you would have mentioned?

4. As we close this convention, what are you going to take away from this experience?

5. As we close this convention, what final encouragement do you have for your brothers and sisters in the faith in the CELC?