

The Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Conference



The Eternal Word: A Lutheran Confession for the Twenty-First Century

Article VII.

The Church: Unity of Spirit—Bond of Peace

**THE ETERNAL WORD: A LUTHERAN CONFESSION
FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY**

ARTICLE VII

THE CHURCH: UNITY OF SPIRIT – BOND OF PEACE

Christians confess in the Apostles' Creed, "I believe in the Holy Ghost, the Holy Christian Church, the communion of saints." This one church of Christ Luther explains in his *Large Catechism*:

I believe that there is upon earth a little holy group and congregation of pure saints, under one head, even Christ, called together by the Holy Ghost in one faith, one mind, and understanding, with manifold gifts, yet agreeing in love, without sects or schisms. I am also a part and member of the same, a sharer and joint owner of all the goods it possesses, brought to it and incorporated into it by the Holy Ghost by having heard and continuing to hear the Word of God, which is the beginning of entering it. (LC II:51,52)

I. THE INVISIBLE AND THE VISIBLE CHURCH (THE ONE CHURCH OF CHRIST)

The nature and essence of the church: the church is the assembly of believers in Christ.

All who believe in Jesus as their Savior – and only those who believe in him – belong to the church of God. This church is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Jesus Christ as the chief cornerstone (Ephesians 2:19–22). 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).

The church is the creation of the Trinity.

God the Father planned our salvation in eternity (Ephesians 1:3–6; Romans 8:29,30; John 3:16). In time he sent his only begotten Son to save us from our sins and reconcile us that we might be his children having union and communion with him. God the Son gave himself up as the redemptive sacrifice for all people of all time (Galatians 4:4,5; 2 Corinthians

5:19, 21; 1 John 2:2). God the Holy Spirit worked faith in the Savior in our hearts through the means of grace and has united us with all believers as members of his church, the body of Christ (2 Thessalonians 2:13; 1 Peter 1:2; Galatians 3:26,27).

Justification is the chief doctrine of the church.

The teaching of justification by grace through faith in Jesus Christ is the chief teaching of the Bible. 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. 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 one tampers with Scripture, he tampers with Christ. To lose the biblical teaching on justification is to lose the Christian faith (Galatians 5:4; SA II I:1-5; FC SD III:6-8).

Attributes of the church

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. Jesus said, "There shall be one flock and one shepherd" (John 10:16). To stress the unity of Christ's church, Paul uses the word "one" seven times in Ephesians 4:3-6. Paul also declared, "You are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28).

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. God's people do serve him with holy works (1 Peter 2:5; Romans 12:1,2), but 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 Christian. The church is Christian because it belongs to Christ and is built on him. He is the church's foundation and cornerstone (Matthew 16:18; Acts 11:26; 1 Corinthians 3:11).

The church is universal or catholic. The church is found throughout the world wherever the gospel is proclaimed (Mark 16:15; Isaiah 55:11). It includes individuals from every nation, tribe, people, and language who trust in Jesus as their Savior (Revelation 5:9, 7:9).

The church is apostolic. It is apostolic because it is built on the inspired message of the apostles and prophets (Ephesians 2:20).

There is no salvation outside the church. There is no salvation outside the church because there is no salvation apart from faith in Jesus (John 14:6, 3:16–18) and only those who believe in Jesus as their Savior are members of the church.

The church is invisible. The church consists of believers. Faith is a matter of the heart and cannot be seen by human beings. Only God can look into a person's heart to see if he believes (1 Kings 8:39; Luke 17:20,21; 2 Timothy 2:19; SA III XII:1,2).

The church is imperishable. Though the devil seeks to destroy Christ's church, raging against it and attacking it in every way he can, he cannot succeed. Christ promises to protect and preserve his church through all ages (Matthew 16:18; John 10:27,28; Psalm 46:4,5).

The marks of the church are the gospel rightly proclaimed and the sacraments rightly administered.

Since the church is essentially invisible, the church in this life always remains hidden. However, the marks of the church indicate that it is present. The term "mark" (*nota*) is used to mean that which creates the church and that by which the church is recognized. The church (the assembly of believers in Christ) is found wherever the gospel is rightly proclaimed and the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper are rightly administered because the Holy Spirit works through these means of grace to create and sustain faith. We know the church is present because the means of grace are always efficacious for accomplishing God's purpose (Isaiah 55:10,11; Romans 1:16, 10:13–15, 17; Acts 2:41,42; Titus 3:4–7; 1 Peter 3:21, AC V, VII; Ap VII/VIII:20).

The term "church" is used in a narrow and a broad sense.

In the narrow or proper sense the church is made up of believers and only believers (Matthew 16:16,17). Both Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions also use the term in a broad sense to include all those who are gathered around the means of grace. These visible gatherings may include hypocrites (Matthew 13:24–30, 36–43; Galatians 1:2; AC VIII). Such assemblies bear the name church only because of the true believers in them. Thus, the term church is also used in a synedochical sense, that is, the whole is named when only the part (believers) is meant. We may therefore speak of the invisible church and visible churches, visible gatherings around the means of grace.

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.

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. 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).

A synod and other associations like the Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Conference are assemblies of Christians from different churches and various areas, who unite to carry out the work Christ gave to his church. All are believers gathered around the gospel. Since the marks of the church (the gospel in the Word and in the sacraments) are present, these larger associations are also church. They exist for mutual encouragement and assistance. 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 world missions and training pastors and teachers. 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.

Orthodox and heterodox churches

An *orthodox* church is a right-teaching church. Scripture indicates that there are three standards of orthodoxy. 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 (Matthew 28:19,20; Revelation 22:18,19; Matthew 7:15; 1 Timothy 1:3).

A *heterodox* or wrong-teaching church is one which adds to God's Word or takes away from God's Word; or one that does not administer the sacraments as Christ instituted them; or one that does not discipline those who teach false doctrine, thus creating a difference between its profession of faith and its practice.

St. Paul 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). The Bible frequently warns against false teachers (2 Corinthians 11:3,13; Titus 1:10,11). How do we find a right-teaching church? We look at the church's public confession. If a church's confession does not agree with Scripture, then it is a false-teaching church.

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 it proclaims Jesus Christ as the Son of God and the Son of Man, as long as it teaches 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.

Thus, we will not join a church which teaches or tolerates error in its midst. We do not join it as a testimony against its error. We do not join it lest we cause people to stumble in their faith, giving the impression that its error is not objectionable. We do not join it lest we expose ourselves to error which could destroy our faith. 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.

God builds and nurtures the church through the means of grace.

Jesus gave 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 and to sustain faith (Isaiah 55:10,11; Romans 1:16, 10:13-15,17; Titus 3:4-7).

We reject the following errors:

1. We reject any attempt to identify the church with an outward organization.
2. We reject any claim that the church must operate through certain outward forms.
3. We reject the idea that the marks of the church make the invisible church visible rather than merely indicating its presence.
4. We reject the idea that the true unity of the church consists in the unity of rites and ceremonies rather than in the unity of faith.
5. We reject the belief that Christians may join with the heterodox (those who publicly teach and hold false doctrine) in the work that God has given the church to do.
6. We reject any attempt to build the church on anything other than the foundation of Christ, the teaching of the prophets and apostles, and the use of the means of grace, the gospel in Word and sacraments.

II. THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH

The Great Commission

Our Lord gave his church one great command, which is to proclaim the gospel of salvation. "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matthew 28:18-20). Disciples are made by baptizing and by teaching them as individuals to observe all that Christ has commanded us.

The church will preserve God's Word in its truth and purity so that its members can be properly taught. Thus, the mission of the church is also to help the light of faith of its members to continue shining in holy living. The Word of God which the church teaches keeps believers in faith through the work of the Holy Spirit. The Word 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).

The mission of the church is to proclaim salvation full and free in Jesus Christ.

The great purpose of the church is to preach the message of Jesus as the Savior. The church carries out its mission by preaching 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. We hold that the state has the power of the sword, and the church has the power of the Word (see AC 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. The church is to teach people everywhere 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 to take up the sword (AC XXVIII:18,21). Our mission is to preach the good news to all people.

The law will be preached in all its severity so that even the most self-righteous person sees his lost condition.

It is part of the church's mission to preach repentance and forgiveness. When making disciples we use both the law and the gospel. 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. 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). Once the law demands perfection from a sinner, he becomes desperate, just like someone drowning looks for a rescue team.

From this we can see that as a church we must use both law and gospel. We do this before and after conversion. The law is used as a curb, as a mirror, and as a rule or guide. This is what we call the threefold purpose of the law.

- 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. This is St. Paul's point when he writes, "When Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them" (Romans 2:14,15). "For although they are regenerate and renewed in the spirit of their mind, yet in the present life this regeneration and renewal is not complete, but only begun, and believers are, by the spirit of their mind, in a constant struggle against the flesh, that is, against the corrupt nature and disposition which cleaves to us unto death. ... It is needful that the Law of the Lord always shine before them, in order that they may not from human devotion institute wanton and self-elected cults [that they may frame nothing in a matter of religion from the desire of private devotion, and may not choose divine services not instituted by God's Word]; likewise, that the old Adam also may not employ his own will, but may be subdued

against his will, not only by the admonition and threatening of the Law, but also by punishments and blows, so that he may follow and surrender himself captive to the Spirit" (FC Ep VI:4).

- B. God's law as **mirror** shows all people their sins and their need of a Savior: "Indeed I would not have known what sin was except through the law" (Romans 7:7). The law performs a very distinct and important office: it breaks down in man that self-sufficiency, that self-righteousness, that pride before God which boasts and trusts in one's own merits. The law makes us realize our lost condition and the need of a Savior (Romans 7:24,25). Our Confessions state, "Therefore, as often as believers stumble, they are reproved by the Holy Spirit from the Law, and by the same Spirit are raised up and comforted again with the preaching of the Gospel" (FC SD VI:14).
- 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 ways they may 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 the inner man, they do what is pleasing to God, not by coercion of the Law, but by the renewing of the Holy Ghost" (FC SD VI:23).

The mission of the church is to preach the gospel in all its beauty so that even the most burdened sinner feels the joy of heaven.

We all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God; we are sinful from birth and deserve eternal punishment in hell (Romans 3:22-24; Psalm 51:5). God did not let sin continue destroying us. In his lovingkindness he justified us freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. Jesus willingly went to the cross as the sinner's substitute to pay for the sins of all people. He became a ransom for us all (1 Peter 1:18,19; 1 Timothy 2:5,6). This action of Christ in which he willingly went to the cross as the sinner's substitute is often called his *passive* obedience. Christ Jesus became a sinner who bore the sins of the world, i.e., he took all our sins upon his body in order to make satisfaction for them with his own blood (1 John 2:2). This is just one side of the substitutionary and vicarious work of Christ. There is also what we call *active* obedience. God himself had to send his Son to save mankind (2 Timothy 1:9,10). Jesus had to be born at the right time and obey the law in our place so that we would be seen as perfectly obedient before God (Galatians 4:4,5). Christ had to fulfill the law on our behalf; he fulfilled every requirement for us in order that we could be saved. This is the grace of God known as Christ's passive and active obedience.

Jesus did everything to win our salvation. We are the objects of God's grace. We did not cooperate in acquiring this salvation. The salvation is complete; there is nothing we need to do. Because of such love of God in Christ, the redemption is universal. This means that Christ's ransom or payment for sins was sufficient to cover the sins of all people. God wants all people to be saved; he does not want anyone to perish. He extends his love to all mankind (John 3:16). The mission of the church is to inform the world that salvation is for all despite their condition, that salvation is certain, free and unconditional, and is received through faith (2 Corinthians 5:19; Romans 3:24; Ephesians 2:8). God in Christ has won forgiveness of sins for the whole world. God in Christ has paid the ransom that has set the entire world free. God in Christ has atoned for the sins of the whole world (1 Timothy 2:6; 1 John 2:2).

The mission of the church is to preach the gospel in all its beauty by explaining the universality of our justification, the objectivity and subjectivity of justification. Justification is by grace. 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 benefit from this freedom until he heard about it and received 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 was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them" (2 Corinthians 5:19). This is universal or objective justification, which means that God declared the whole world righteous or not guilty on the basis of Christ's redemptive sacrifice. 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). This is subjective justification.

Our salvation can only be complete in Christ. God declared us righteous, changed our status from condemned to acquitted. Justification is complete and universal, but it is received personally through faith. After we are declared righteous there has to be some receiving instrument, i.e., through faith, sinners receive the benefits of the work of Jesus (John 3:16; Mark 16:16). Faith is God's ordained instrument for receiving the blessings of justification which come to us through the means of grace.

The church will make disciples by baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This duty of discipleship is summarized in the Great Commission of Matthew 28:18-20 where Jesus commanded us to baptize people. In the gospel invitation of 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 baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned" (Mark 16:16). This blessing is available to all, including children, because in Baptism little children are brought to faith in Jesus as their Savior and they receive new life. The Holy Spirit makes little children disciples of Christ through Baptism, and thereafter we teach them to obey all that Christ has commanded. We baptize 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). It is our mission to make sure that all are baptized: adults and infants (Acts 2:38,39). We ordinarily instruct the adults and then baptize them because Baptism strengthens and preserves faith. "Of Baptism they teach that it is necessary to salvation, and that through Baptism is offered the grace of God, and that children are to be baptized who, being offered to God through Baptism are received into God's grace" (AC IX:1-3).

The church will feed and nourish the disciples of Christ through the Supper of Christ's body and blood.

This is the Lord's Supper which is the second of the two sacraments established by Scripture. The Lord's Supper is a divine and permanent institution which is to be practiced by the church until the end of time. According to the words of institution, 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 of the Lord's Supper, "Instituted by Christ himself, it is the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, under the bread and wine, given to us Christians to eat and to drink" (SC VI, 2).

As we administer the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, we should be mindful of the divergent doctrines which are taught by other churches. Roman Catholics teach *transubstantiation*. This means that 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. Roman 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 regards transubstantiation, we care nothing about the sophistical subtlety by which they teach that bread and wine leave or lose their own natural substance, and that there remain only the appearance and color of bread, and not true bread. For it is in perfect agreement with Holy Scriptures that there is, and remains, bread, as Paul himself calls it, 1 Cor. 10, 16: The bread which we break. And 1 Cor. 11, 28: Let him so eat of that bread" (SA III VI:5). 1 Corinthians 11:28 states, "A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup." Even if the eating and drinking takes place after the consecration, the communicants still eat bread and drink wine. Therefore the bread and wine must still be present.

On the other hand, 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 physically 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:

Whether in the Holy Supper the true body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ are truly and essentially present, are distributed with the bread and wine, and received with the mouth by all those who use this Sacrament, whether they be worthy or unworthy, godly or ungodly, believing or unbelieving; by the believing for consolation and life, by the unbelieving for judgment? The Sacramentarians say, No; we say, Yes. (FC Ep VII:2; see also Ephesians 4:10)

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. The word "is" cannot be taken in a figurative sense to mean "represent" or "signify"; "is" should be "is" (FC SD VII:7-10).

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 Roman transubstantiation (SA III VI:5). 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).

The Supper of Christ's body and blood, which is effected by his all-powerful words of institution, gives great blessings. It bestows the complete forgiveness of sins as the institution narrative declares (Matthew 26:28). The Supper provides strengthening for our faith-life so that we can face all the problems and troubles of life with a firm confidence in Jesus as our Savior. Finally, as we eat with him in the sacrament, we have the certainty that we will eat with him forever in the feast of the Lamb.

The church will feed and nourish the disciples of Christ through the Word.

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. The Lutheran Confessions strongly insist that "the enthusiasts should be rebuked with great earnestness and zeal, and should in no way be tolerated in the Church of God, who imagine [dream] that God, without any means, without the hearing of the divine Word, and without the use of the holy Sacraments, draws men to Himself, and enlightens, justifies, and saves them" (FC SD 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. (LW 40:146)

Certain branches of Reformed theology turn the two around. They stress an immediate working of the Spirit rather than the mediate working of the Spirit through the means of grace.

Synergism is yet another faulty concept concerning the means of grace. This concept is commonly taught in Arminianism. Arminians claim that a man should cooperate with God to become a Christian. But the Confessions reject this:

[We condemn ...] the doctrine of the Synergists, who pretend that man is not absolutely dead to good in spiritual things, but is badly wounded and half dead. ... When the Holy Ghost ... calls us through the Gospel ... then the free will, from its own natural powers, can meet God, and...help and cooperate thereto, can qualify itself for, and apply itself to, grace, and apprehend, accept it, and believe the Gospel, and can also cooperate, by its own powers, with the Holy Ghost, in the continuation and maintenance of this work. (FC SD 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 in Word and sacrament) 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 are the tools of the Holy Spirit that enable us to call people to eternal salvation.

Therefore God, out of His immense goodness and mercy, has His divine eternal Law and His wonderful plan concerning our redemption, namely, the holy, alone-saving Gospel of His eternal Son, our only Savior and Redeemer, Jesus Christ, publicly preached; and by this [preaching] collects an eternal Church for Himself from the human race, and works in the hearts of men true repentance and knowledge of sins, and true faith in the Son of God, Jesus Christ. And by this means, and in no other way, namely, through His holy Word ... and the holy Sacraments when they are used according to His Word. ... Now, all who wish to be saved ought to hear this preaching [of God's Word]. For the preaching and hearing of God's Word are instruments of the Holy Ghost, by, with, and through which He desires to work efficaciously, and to convert men to God, and to work in them both to will and to do. (FC SD II:50, 52)

Christian charity and mission work

The Bible tells us, “Therefore as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers” (Galatians 6:10), and “If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him. Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth” (1 John 3:17-18). 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). Jesus tells us that he will point to our life of sanctification and acts of charity on judgment day (Matthew 25:34-36).

When our Savior walked this earth, he not only preached and taught, he also fed thousands and healed many (Matthew 15:29-38). He used healing as a point of contact for the gospel (Matthew 9:27-31). Helping people in their time of need is God-pleasing and can become a point of contact that the Christian may use to help touch a deeper need.

Christian charity can help people all over the world hit by disasters like earthquakes, floods, droughts, volcanoes, hurricanes, poverty, and disease. Charity work can be done on an individual level, a congregational level, a synodical 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). As Lutherans we preach the gospel and use charity work to demonstrate our faith, the fruits of the gospel. Let charity work be a visible sign of our appreciation for what Christ did for us. It is a response to the saving act of God and provides an opportunity to share the gospel, but it should not be treated as a means to salvation but as a fruit of faith (1 Corinthians 10:31; 1 John 4:19).

We reject the following errors:

1. We reject that the church is to use any other means than the means of grace to accomplish its mission.
2. We reject any attempt to minimize the severity of the law or the comfort of the gospel.
3. We reject the concept that Christ’s physical presence is confined to heaven and that his body and blood cannot be present in the Supper.
4. We reject transubstantiation, consubstantiation, and impanation.
5. We reject that the Holy Spirit works immediately and apart from the means of grace.

6. We reject that Christian charity is the primary mission of the church or that it should be carried out apart from the gospel.
7. We reject the idea that there is no room for charity work in the mission of the church.

III. THE GOVERNANCE OF THE CHURCH

A Swedish Lutheran in the north of Sweden brings his family by sleigh through the snow to the great cathedral church. His church is organized in the historical episcopal manner. The leaders of his church are bishops and the archbishop at Uppsala. A man from Stettin in traditional Pomeranian garb attends the great *Jakobikirche*. The head of his church is the general superintendent in Stettin. In Pennsylvania in the middle of the 18th century pastors establish a ministerium to govern their church. In the 1860s the Norwegian churches around Decorah, Iowa, have a congregational type of church polity, complete with a president of their Norwegian Synod.

All these Lutherans living in various areas and at different time periods subscribed to the historic Confessions of the Lutheran Church as they are compiled in the Book of Concord. Their pastors promised to be faithful to these Confessions in their ordination vows. Yet, from their church polity, one would have had a difficult time affirming they were all part of the Church of the Augsburg Confession. They contended for unity in doctrine and confession, but a particular church polity was not essential as it was in so many other denominations. How, then, do Lutherans view church polity or the governance of the church?

Church polity and the Scriptures

The one head of the church is Jesus Christ, our Savior. 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 authority and absolute ruler. He “is the head of the body, the church” (Colossians 1:18), and he is the head and redeemer of his bride (Revelation 21:9). 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 in the Scriptures gives certain directives concerning his church and its ministry. The one holy Christian Church is the body of Christ, the whole number of believers, gathered around the means of grace (1 Corinthians 12:12,13). Here new members are given birth in the watery womb of Baptism and incorporated into the body of Christ

(Titus 3:5; Ephesians 5:26,27). Members of the body are to regularly gather (Acts 2:42; Hebrews 10:25) so that they are nourished and sustained with the pure milk of the Word (1 Peter 2:2) and the life-giving body and blood of Christ (Matthew 26:26–28). To Christ’s body, the church, and to each member individually, the keys have been given (Matthew 18:18; 1 Corinthians 3:21–23) with the responsibility to proclaim the gospel to every creature (Mark 16:15). To publicly administer the means of grace God instituted the public ministry (Acts 20:28–30; Ephesians 4:11,12; Titus 1:5–9). It is God’s will that Christians choose one or more to administer the keys publicly in the stead of Christ and on their behalf. The public ministry in its various forms will nourish and build up the body of Christ through the means of grace.

The Scripture does give directives concerning the church and its ministry, but it does not command a particular form of church polity or outward church government. There is no directive concerning the outward governance of the church other than that all should be done decently and in order so that the gospel proclamation be furthered (1 Corinthians 14:40). There were variations in church polity already in the New Testament. There appears to be a difference between the organizational patterns of the Jewish congregations and the gentile congregations in the New Testament. Even the organization of the Pauline congregations was not uniform. The lists of offices in the congregations differ in number and nomenclature indicating the various forms of the public ministry and church polity in the early church.

The common terms used for the office in the New Testament, “presbyter” (πρεσβύτερος) and “bishop” (ἐπίσκοπος), were used interchangeably. In Acts 20:17 St. Paul called together the presbyters or elders of the Ephesian congregation to give them his farewell address, and yet in that same address he named them “bishops” shepherding the church of God (Acts 20:28). This interchange of terms continued in use to the close of the first century as is seen from the *Epistle of Clement* (42–44) and the *Didache* (15). This indicates that an episcopal hierarchy is not commanded in the New Testament.

With Ignatius of Antioch at the beginning of the second century, the two terms “presbyter” and “bishop” were distinguished and designated as two offices. The bishop was regarded first as the head of a congregation surrounded by a council of presbyters, and afterward as the head of the diocese and successor of the apostles. Formerly all the presbyters were equally bishops with one of them chosen to lead and conduct the liturgy. In Ignatius’ time the leader received special power and prestige and thus evolved the monarchical bishopric. Slowly within the Roman Empire all congregations accepted an

episcopal form of church government through the influence of the state. However, outside the empire, where churches were not as influenced by Roman organization, many variations in church government developed.

This process of elevating the bishops resulted in a clerical hierarchy in the Middle Ages with its tripartite ministry (three-fold ministry of bishop, priest, and deacon). Subordinate to the bishops were the priests, who were formerly called presbyters, and under the priests were the deacons. Above the bishops were archbishops, culminating in the Pope of Rome who was considered to be the visible head of the church and the vicar of Christ. A separation between clergy and laity became more and more marked. The clergy became a spiritual estate (*ein geistlicher Stand*) different from the laity.

It was commonly taught that through ordination by proper bishops (apostolic succession—the idea that the ministry and the keys were passed down from the apostles in an unbroken succession of bishops) the Holy Spirit impressed upon the individual an “indelible character” (*character indelebilis*), which marked him a priest for all times, even though by gross sins he might render himself unworthy for the sacred office. Through ordination the priest received supernatural power; that is, the authority of the keys, or more specifically, the power to consecrate the sacrament and the power to forgive or not to forgive sins. No longer was the office of the keys a possession of the whole church of Christ. Now it was the right of a privileged few who belonged to the spiritual estate.

Church polity and the Lutheran Confessions

The Lutheran Reformation never intended to establish a church in opposition to the western church as it existed in the sixteenth century. It desired a reformation of the same and no more. Therefore, the reformers initially asked only that the bishops should provide for the unhindered preaching of the gospel and the proper administration of the sacraments. In all other respects they declared their willingness to obey the bishops as far as God and conscience would allow (AC XV; AC Ap XXVIII:12-15; SA III X:1-3). When the majority of the bishops rejected this suggestion as contradicting their understanding of the church as a hierarchical institution, the reformers had no choice but to establish a polity of their own.

The Lutherans were willing to employ the historic episcopacy as long as the doctrines of the inspired Scripture were accepted because it was a valid form of church government. This willingness, however, did not imply that the historic episcopacy was commanded in the New Testament. They accepted it not by divine right but by human right.

In organizing a new polity, the reformers did not look back for an ideal form of church polity in the early church. Such an ideal form of church government never existed. They did not single out any particular polity as divinely instituted. Luther points out that the basic tenets of the Roman Catholic hierarchy are not based on Scripture:

It is pure invention that pope, bishop, priests, and monks are called the spiritual estate while princes, lords, artisans, and farmers are called the temporal estate. This is indeed a piece of deceit and hypocrisy. Yet no one need be intimidated by it, and for this reason: all Christians are truly of the spiritual estate, and there is no difference among them except that of office. (*To the Christian Nobility*, LW 44:127)

If the bishops would be true bishops [would rightly discharge their office], and would devote themselves to the Church and the Gospel, it might be granted to them for the sake of love and unity, but not from necessity, to ordain and confirm us and our preachers.... But because they neither are, nor wish to be, true bishops ... the Church ought not on their account to remain without ministers [to be forsaken by or deprived of ministers]. Therefore, as the ancient examples of the Church and the Fathers teach us, we ourselves will and ought to ordain suitable persons to this office.... (SA III X:1-3)

The Scripture mandates no particular form of church government. Therefore, the church and its unity do not rest on a uniform organization, nor upon the universal acceptance of the head of the hierarchy, but only on the marks of the church. The marks of the church are the gospel taught in its truth and purity and the sacraments rightly administered. If the marks are pure, differences in church organization and church government will not affect the unity of the church. Likewise different church rites, liturgies, and hymnbooks will not hinder the fellowship. These things are in the realm of Christian liberty and adiaphora. In these areas Christians will bear with one another in love. This is the doctrine of our Lutheran Confessions:

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 (AC VII)

According to Lutheran teaching, all matters of external church polity are subject to human insight and decisions. Any polity is satisfactory as long as the two important marks of the church are present, and as long as it serves to promote these marks, the means of grace. Every form of church government that infringes on the use of these means is not only suspect, it is detrimental to the life of the church. Those forms of church polity which promote the means of grace are right and proper.

Inherent dangers in church structures

The historic episcopacy

The historic episcopacy is a valid form of church polity for Lutheran churches. Lutherans have used it with benefit. However, they have never considered the historic episcopacy to be of the essence of the church. The danger inherent in this form of church government is that it may blur the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. Because all Christians are priests (1 Peter 2:9), they are the possessors of all heavenly treasures. They are, therefore, possessors of the keys of the kingdom of heaven. The authority of the keys is the right and responsibility to preach the gospel, administer the sacraments, and to forgive or not forgive sins. St. Paul reminds us that all things belong to the believers (1 Corinthians 3:21-23). The keys have been committed by God to the entire church, which is Christ's body and, therefore, to each Christian which is his member individually. Luther says, "The keys belong to the whole church and to each of its members, both as regards their authority and their various uses" (LW 40:27). The authority of administering the keys publicly, that is, on behalf of Christ and his body the church, is conferred by God to the public ministry through the church. Those in the public ministry function on behalf of Christ and his church. Whoever, therefore, hears Christ's ministers hears Christ speaking to them (Luke 10:16).

In a hierarchical structure, there is the tendency to view the keys not as the possession of the church, but as the property of the ministerium which is used for the good of the church. The authority of administering the keys publicly is seen not as conferred by God through the church. Rather, it is seen as passed down by the ministerium through proper ordination by the bishop. Such a hierarchical form of church government would deprive the church and individual Christians of their God-given rights and privileges.

Democratic church structures

Democratic forms of church structure are predominant in Lutheranism today. Synodical and congregational structures are generally democratic in nature. The democratic model is a proper form of church polity and has been used with benefit in America and elsewhere. Luther himself speaks of the right of congregations to choose their pastors (LW 39:303–314). The inherent danger in this form of government is rugged individualism. The church is perceived as a freewill association we join, much like joining some civic or volunteer organization which one can decide to join or leave at will. Many see little difference between belonging to church or the local country club, and they probably expect a country club Christianity, rather than the theology of the cross.

This conception obscures the true nature of the church. The church is not a volunteer organization, a freewill association. It is the body of Christ (Romans 12:4,5) into which we were grafted and incorporated in Baptism and are nourished and sustained through Word and Supper. The church is not joined by free will, for no one can say that Jesus is Lord but by the Holy Ghost (1 Corinthians 12:3). Church membership is not optional like membership in a civic group. It is essential to our faith-life because here the forgiveness of sin is dispensed and faith in the Savior is strengthened and preserved. One is the church and one is a member thereof, not through a sociological adherence, but precisely through incorporation into this body of the Lord through the means of grace (1 Corinthians 12:12, 13).

Denominational loyalty is at an all-time low. People no longer feel bound to adhere to the official confession of their church body. They assume that they have the right to believe (and teach) what they want, when they want. This individualism can easily be fostered by democratic structures. I can join the club that I want to join, and I can join the church that I want to join. If this church does not fulfill my perceived felt needs, if it doesn't satisfy my longing for community and isn't user-friendly, then I can join one of those nice churches which offer all this and more, regardless of their confessional stand. The directive of Romans 16:17, "Watch out for those who cause divisions" etc., is considered to be completely irrelevant.

Business organization and church structure

Business management techniques continue to influence church structures. Synods and congregations are organizing to be more efficient. Old boards and committees are merging and new ones are being established. The number of management positions in many

synods has increased considerably. Nearly every organization has a carefully delineated list of responsibilities and a vision plan. Synods and congregations need to be properly organized to grow.

Our church bodies and congregations should be as organized and as efficient as possible. St. Paul urges that all things should be done decently and in order (1 Corinthians 14:40). Disorganization and ineptitude should not be allowed to hinder the proclamation of the gospel. In the early church the preaching of the gospel was being hindered by the apostles spending time serving tables (Acts 6:2). Therefore, they reorganized so that they were more efficient. They selected seven deacons to carry out the charitable work of the church.

Confessional Lutheran congregations and church bodies should make every effort to be well-organized and to use proper managerial skills in the interest of the gospel. However, the latest techniques are not the new means of grace. Efficient organization and the latest technology will not in and of themselves bring one soul to faith in our Lord Jesus as the Savior. Only the gospel is the power of God unto salvation (Romans 1:16). The Scripture declares that faith comes from hearing the Word (Romans 10:17), that Baptism saves us (1 Peter 3:21), that whenever you forgive sins they are forgiven and whenever you do not forgive sins, they are not forgiven (John 20:23), and that the Lord's Supper gives the forgiveness of sins (Matthew 26:28). The Scriptures clearly state that God works through these means, as Luther taught:

For he wants to give no one the Spirit or faith outside of the outward Word and sign instituted by him, as he says in Luke 16:29, "Let them hear Moses and the prophets." Accordingly Paul can call baptism a "washing of regeneration" wherein God "richly pours out the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3:5). And the oral Gospel "is the power of God for salvation to every one who has faith" (Romans 1:16). (LW 40:146)

Proper Lutheran church polity

Both the episcopal and the more democratic forms of polity have their advantages and also their inherent dangers. Either of them may be used with benefit for the church of Christ. This is also true of all the variations of polity in the spectrum between these two extremes. Each may be more advantageous in one situation or another.

The Scripture mandates no particular form of church government. The church and its unity do not rest on uniform organization, but only on the marks of the church, that is, the gospel taught in its truth and purity and the sacraments rightly administered. The church has existed and does exist under many different forms of government. She has functioned with an episcopal type of government and also with a congregational type. The Lutheran church has been a state church and a free church. In America a synodical type of government has developed. The attitude of the Lutheran church to the question of church polity is well illustrated by the seventh article of the Augsburg Confession: "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" (AC VII).

With this variation in church polity the Lutheran church stands on a biblical basis because no one type of church governance is declared to be essential in the New Testament, either by direct command or example. Any polity is valid and legitimate as long as the two important marks of the church are kept pure and as long as it serves to promote those marks, the means of grace. Every form of church government that hinders the use of these means is not only suspect, it is detrimental to the life of the church. Those forms of church polity which promote the means of grace are right and proper.

We reject the following errors:

1. We reject the teaching that the Holy Scripture has mandated a particular form of church government.
2. We reject the teaching that apostolic succession with a tripartite ministry is necessary for the essence of the church.
3. We reject any form of church polity that denigrates the public ministry or denigrates the universal priesthood of believers.

IV. THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE CHURCH

Through the means of grace, the gospel in Word and sacrament, the Holy Spirit created faith in the Savior and, thus, united us with Christ and his body, the church.

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: "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” (Ephesians 4:1-3).

God, the Holy Spirit, creates saving faith through the preaching of the gospel where and when he wills to do so (Romans 10:17; 1 Peter 3:21; Matthew 26:28; 1 Corinthians 12:13, 10:17; AC V). 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: “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” (1 John 1:3).

Christians will desire to gather with other Christians to use the means of grace and to acknowledge and exercise the fellowship of the church.

It is a natural fruit of faith to seek fellowship with other believers in Christ. The apostle Paul wrote, “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” (Romans 1:11,12). Believers want to confess and rejoice in their common faith, encourage one another, and share in the means of grace to build 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 to God. Concerning the Jerusalem congregation we read, “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” (Acts 4:32,33). It is the Lord’s will and command that Christians gather regularly around the means of grace (Hebrews 10:25; Acts 2:42).

Jesus in his High Priestly Prayer prayed for the *unity of all believers* “that they may be one as we are one” (John 17:11). We do well not to 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 we can to build up and strengthen those who confess Christ and his Word in true fellowship based on the Word of God. The apostle John brings this truly ecumenical view into our focus when he gives us a glimpse of church fellowship in perfection, i.e., in the *church triumphant*:

“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” (Revelation 7:9; see also Revelation 5:9, 11:9).

Although the church is invisible Christians can find fellow believers with which to gather because wherever the means of grace are used, there is the church and there believers are found.

To our physical eyes, faith in Jesus is invisible, but the men and women, young and old, who have this saving faith in their hearts are not. God’s Word does not return empty. Through the prophet Isaiah God comforts his people: “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).

Therefore the Lutheran Confessions rightly name the gospel in Word and sacraments as the *marks of the church*: “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” (AC VII).

Where the gospel is being preached and the sacraments are rightly administered there the church is present. There believers are found. Luther often made use of the expression “*Wo das Wort im Schwange geht*” (“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 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. (Martin Hoffmann, “*Evangelische Kirchengemeinschaft*,” unpublished essay)

There is only one church fellowship which is the fellowship of the holy church.

We believe, teach and confess the one holy Christian and apostolic church, the communion of saints or invisible church (*una sancta ecclesia*). But the fellowship of the holy Christian church 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 (Ephesians 4:4-6). However, we do not doubt the reality of the one, true, Christian church because we trust the words of the prophet Isaiah that God’s Word does not return empty (Isaiah 55:10,11). 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. God knows all those who truly belong to him. He does that in spite of the pitiable state of the visible church in this world, which because of weakness, false doctrine, and sin is split up into countless numbers of congregations and groups of believers of all confessions, denominations, and synods. The apostle Paul reminds us for our comfort: “Nevertheless, God’s solid foundation stands firm, sealed with this inscription: ‘The Lord knows those who are his’” (2 Timothy 2:19).

Christians will desire to practice fellowship with other believers to preserve the means of grace pure and unadulterated, to be strengthened through the means of grace, and to extend and maintain that fellowship. This fellowship includes every joint expression of a common faith.

Fellowship according to the will of God as revealed in the Bible will always strive to listen to and preserve the whole counsel of God. Christians gather to grow in the knowledge of divine truth and to work together in Jesus’ name with the 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, “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" (Matthew 18:19,20). 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.

Christians exercise church fellowship on the basis of the pure marks of the church, the Word and the sacraments.

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).

We believe, teach and confess that where the marks of the church (*notae ecclesiae*) are still present, even in the midst of false doctrine (heterodox churches), there will be true believers – as long as the gospel is being heard (Romans 1:16, 10:17). But ordinarily we do not practice 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 the gospel is being preached without compromise, where the Word of God is the only norm and rule for doctrine and practice and where the sacraments are administered according to Christ's institution, there we can and should practice church fellowship (*orthodox churches, truly confessional churches*)

Church fellowship is exercised by agreement in the faith which is confessed (fides quae) and not by faith in the heart (fides qua).

Jesus warned his disciples to be on their guard against false teachers who will try to lead them away from him: "By their fruit you will recognize them" (Matthew 7:20). What Jesus tells his disciples as a warning against false teachers we can apply accordingly to the good fruits produced by believers: "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" (Matthew 7:16-18). James in his letter admonishes believers who were not living up to their doctrine: "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" (James 2:17,18). If we are denying our creeds by our deeds we need to be instructed in the same way to distinguish "living faith" from "dead orthodoxy."

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 notes: "It is written: 'I believed; therefore I have spoken.' With that same spirit of faith we also believe and therefore speak" (2 Corinthians 4:13; see also Romans 10:9-17). So Christians will be recognized by their *fruits of faith*. But because we cannot see into a person's heart we cannot base our fellowship practice on the faith of the individual believer. We cannot judge from fruits to faith with certainty. A Christian's fruits of faith (i.e., his life of sanctification) are never perfect. Sometimes we may not see any fruits at all. Sometimes we see bad fruits (Romans 7:18ff). Sometimes the "good" fruits we observe may be fruits of a hypocrite (Matthew 6:5). There may be genuine Christian fruits without having a clear confession in all biblical doctrines. Therefore we base our practice of church fellowship not on our subjective observation of whether or not we think an individual has saving faith in his heart (*fides qua*). We base our practice of church fellowship on his or her objective *confession of faith* in word and action because this is God's perfect standard and norm, not changed by human imperfection (John 10:35, 17:17; Matthew 24:35).

Faith in Christ always wants to confess the full truth of God's Word (*fides quae*) and keep away from error (i.e., adding to, subtracting from, changing the Word of God). 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. It is important to note that we do not just look if a group of believers has a sound biblical confession of faith written

down in its constitution. This confession must also be the standard and norm by which everything in the life of the church is governed (*de iure* and *de facto* principle). This means, for example, that there has to be the willingness to practice church discipline if doctrine or practice is compromised against the clear Word of God (Matthew 18:15ff; Titus 3:10).

Church fellowship is a unit both (1) in respect to the doctrine of Scripture, that is, there must be consensus in all the doctrines of the Word for fellowship, and (2) in respect to the various expressions of a shared faith that they all be considered a unit or an indivisible whole. There is either complete fellowship or none at all.

According to Scripture, church fellowship must be dealt with as an undivided whole in two different respects. **(1)** 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 (John 8:31,32; Ephesians 4:4–6; Revelation 22:18,19). **(2)** 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 (Romans 16:17; 2 John 9–11; 2 Timothy 2:16–19; Galatians 1:8,9; Matthew 7:15–19). 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 (John F. Brug, *Church Fellowship – Working Together for the Truth*, 21,106).

Jesus reminds us, “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:31,32). So we cling to every single word of Jesus. When he tells his disciples “to obey *everything* I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:20), we understand that to be united in his truth is not limited to only certain doctrines but all of them. The doctrine of Christ (1 Timothy 6:3; 2 John 9) includes all he has revealed in his Word. Biblical doctrine is not ours to change or adjust to our tastes. Jesus makes this very clear when he tells the church through his apostle John: “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”

(Revelation 22:18,19; see also Martin Luther's remarks in his commentary on Galatians 5:9, where he compared biblical doctrine with an unbroken "round golden circle" [LW 27:37–39, W² 9:644–646]).

All expressions of Christian fellowship call for the same measure of agreement, namely full unity in all biblical doctrines. We read about the believers in Jerusalem that they "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer" (Acts 2:42). Formal activities between churches, joint use of the means of grace as well as all other activities in which Christians join together expressing their faith (prayer, joint mission work, worship activities) call for the same full unity of faith.

Even though there is a distinction between the *means of grace* (God comes to us in the gospel in Word and sacraments), *prayer* (we come before God with praise and petition), and other *social fellowship activities* – 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, and joint exercise of love and charity require the same prerequisites, i.e., full agreement.

Expressions of courtesy or social fellowship are not necessarily understood as expressions of faith (even when done out of Christian motivation). Those things would not necessarily be *expressions of Christian fellowship* (e.g., being present in a church service, greeting one another, showing hospitality). However, 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 may become expressions of fellowship for Christians who join in them as a fruit of their common faith (Galatians 2:9; 1 Corinthians 16:20; 1 Thessalonians 5:26).

Christians will defend the unity of faith by being on guard against false doctrine and lovingly warn those in error.

Through false doctrine Satan is striving to separate the believer from the Good Shepherd and drag him to the pit of destruction. Because of this, Christians will always be on their guard against error and falsehood. In his protective care Jesus urges, "Watch out for false prophets" (Matthew 7:15). St. Paul writes, "I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have

learned. Keep away from them” (Romans 16:17). The present active infinitive σκοπεῖν in this passage means “to keep on watching out for.” It refers to the Christian’s ongoing activity of being on guard against those who cause divisions and offenses by teaching contrary to God’s Word. Christians will be on guard against false teaching and lovingly warn and admonish those in error. Those who teach false doctrine are to be avoided. Christians will not assist or encourage those who do not continue in Christ's teaching (2 John 10,11; 2 Timothy 2:16-18).

Christians will defend the unity by patient instruction and loving admonition.

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 for us. To remain faithful to his Word will never be harmful to us or the people around us. This is true also when we face a lack of understanding or even ridicule from within the church or from those outside our fellowship. We know from Jesus’ words that the disciple is not above his teacher (Matthew 10:24,25). People will not necessarily understand the biblical doctrine and its correct application immediately. This gives us an opportunity to study God’s Word together.

The biblical fellowship principles are not an end in and of themselves. We will teach and practice them out of love for God, for our fellow believers and for our neighbors outside our fellowship. We strive to do so in an evangelical spirit giving a clear testimony to win people for the full truth of God’s Word.

The biblical practice of church fellowship is always an act of love. Its purpose is always to serve the well-being of others: to strengthen fellowship where it already exists and to lead others to their Savior and into fellowship based on full agreement in his Word. 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 (Ezekiel 33:1-9; Matthew 18:15ff; Galatians 3:1, 6:1-5). 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: “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” (2 Thessalonians 3:14,15).

1. Those in error who will receive instruction from the Word show themselves to be *weak brothers*. We will do everything possible to preserve and strengthen our fellowship with them (Galatians 1:1-6; 2 Corinthians 6:11-14; 2 Timothy 4:2).
2. Those who after patient admonition *persist in error* must be avoided (Romans 16:17; 2 John 9-11; 2 Timothy 2:16-19; Galatians 1:8,9; Matthew 7:15-19).
3. *Termination of fellowship* with a church body or group of believers is not a judgment on the personal faith of the individual because we deal on the basis of the public confession of the church.
4. Termination of fellowship with an individual errorist is not necessarily a judgment on the person’s faith (*excommunication* – Matthew 18:17), because saving faith (although in danger) can still be present, if the error does not directly affect a fundamental article of faith.

When we evangelically apply the principles of fellowship 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 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:

1. Love leads us to warn the errorist concerning 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 concerning 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 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).

(John F. Brug, *Church Fellowship*, 118)

When we apply the biblical principles of confessional fellowship we do this knowing that we are loved and redeemed children of God. In the gospel of redemption through Christ we have full forgiveness for all our shortcomings in our dealings with each other as fellow believers. Here we find grace upon grace if we have failed to confess his truth boldly and lovingly. We rejoice in the fellowship we have with Jesus our Redeemer and through him with our Father in heaven. Motivated by this comforting message, we confess his saving truth to others so that they may find lasting comfort and peace in Christ. Him we praise for the fellowship he established among us. We join in the song of believers of all ages who gladly thank God for their unity: "How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity!" (Psalm 133:1).

Commonly used terms in the doctrine of church fellowship

1. **Prayer Fellowship:** Prayer is an act of worship in which we speak to God from the heart, asking something of him, or thanking him for his mercies (Psalm 19:14; Philippians 4:6; ELS Catechism, question 232). Joint prayer expresses oneness in Christ as joint proclamation of the Word and joint celebration of the Lord's Supper express oneness in Christ or agreement in the doctrine of Scripture. We may pray with those who hold to and confess the truth, but not with those who teach and live contrary to the Word of God (Proverbs 28:9; Romans 16:17; ELS Catechism, question 242).
2. ***In Statu Confessionis:*** To be "in a state of confession" means that a public protest is made concerning a perceived toleration of error in a church body. This protest is demonstrated by provisionally not practicing fellowship with those of one's own church body or fellowship who are propagating or supporting error until the situation is rectified by either the removal of error or by a complete severance of fellowship. Generally to be "in a state of confession" is understood as a tentative arrangement.

3. **Unionism:** Religious unionism is joint worship and joint church work of those not united in doctrine. It would be wrong to base Christian fellowship on anything less than full agreement, e.g., to practice Christian fellowship with those who confess faith in Christ or with all who adhere to the ecumenical creeds (ecumenical movement). It also would be wrong to conceal differing views and opposing doctrines by using a common traditional or even biblical language (Neo-Orthodoxy).
4. **Cooperation in Externals:** Cooperation in externals is cooperation in such matters as do not necessarily involve joint expressions of a common faith. Christians of different denominations and even non-Christians could work together in helping disaster victims, providing for the poor and the homeless, working on translation projects, and in opposing legislation which promotes abortion, same sex marriage, and euthanasia.
5. **Separatism:** 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. But there will always be a willingness on the part of the believer to listen to the voice of his Good Shepherd, be corrected by the Word and grow in his faith. Separatism is refusing to have fellowship with a church body even when the marks of the church are pure, that is when it practices and teaches in accord with Scripture. Unity in doctrine does not require uniformity in *terminology*. It would be wrong to break or deny fellowship because of mere differences in words (2 Timothy 2:14-26). Even though it is desirable to agree on a certain common terminology to avoid confusion we are free to use different expressions if we agree in the content (2 Thessalonians 2:3; 1 John 2:18; Revelation 17:1). It would be wrong to deny fellowship for reasons other than false doctrine or practice (FC SD X:31). Agreement in things not commanded in Scripture is *not a prerequisite* for the practice of church fellowship (*adiaphora*, cf. Romans 14:5f; AC VII:2-4).

We reject the following errors:

1. We reject the view which equates the spiritual fellowship of the *una sancta* with any visible fellowship in a certain church body, organization or denomination (Romanizing ecclesiology).
2. We reject the view which bases the practice of church fellowship only on agreement in certain *fundamentals*, holding only some doctrines as divisive of fellowship (e.g., justification, bodily resurrection, verbal inspiration). To practice church fellowship it

is both *necessary* and *sufficient* to agree in all biblical doctrines (*de iure* and *de facto*). 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.

3. We reject selective fellowship, that is practicing fellowship with those who appear to be teaching correctly in a heterodox church body while not practicing fellowship with the church body as a whole.
4. We reject the view that there are *levels in our fellowship* relations with other Christians (joint expressions of faith that demand lesser or greater unity). We do not 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). We reject the view that the type of fellowship permitted depends on the level of doctrinal agreement, e.g., inter-church prayer services between churches acknowledging the Trinity while only having joint communion with those in full doctrinal agreement.

V. THE DISTINCTIVE BLESSINGS OF THE LUTHERAN CHURCH

The confessional Lutheran church stresses the saving doctrine of the Scriptures.

Our Lutheran church confesses that the canonical books of the Holy Scriptures are God's infallible and inerrant Word. Every single word in these books was inspired by God the Holy Spirit (2 Samuel 23:2; 1 Corinthians 2:12,13; 2 Timothy 3:16; 2 Peter 1:20,21). He gave the human writers both the thoughts and the words they wrote. The Scripture has its origin not in the will of man but in the will of God.

Jesus acknowledged that the Scriptures were God's Word (Matthew 4:4; John 17:17). He said to God the Father, "Your word is truth" (John 17:17). That declaration and the fact that the Holy Scriptures are God's Word assure us that the Scriptures have no error, and that we can trust all the promises of the Scriptures.

Our Lutheran church interprets the Scriptures in accord with sound biblical hermeneutics.

Because the Scriptures are God's Word, no one is allowed to add his own ideas, visions, or teachings (Deuteronomy 4:2; Revelation 22:18); to subtract from the Scriptures by leaving out what he does not want to believe or teach (Deuteronomy 4:2; Revelation 22:19);

or to change the Scriptures by twisting its meaning or by saying that it is a collection of cleverly invented stories (2 Peter 1:16).

Because the Scriptures are God's Word, God forbids man to interpret the Scriptures in accord with his own interpretation (2 Peter 1:20). Our Church agrees with Paul who wrote, "This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words" (1 Corinthians 2:13).

Our church interprets the Scriptures in its historical setting according to its grammar and syntax, in its immediate context, and in the light of the rest of the Scriptures. We believe, teach, and confess that figurative sections and clear, literal sections of the Scriptures do not contradict each other. All miracles recorded in the Scriptures happened actually and historically.

The central doctrine of our Lutheran church is justification by faith alone.

Justification by faith in Jesus, which means that a sinner is declared righteous before God on the basis of Christ's redemptive work, is the central doctrine and the most important doctrine in the Scriptures. It is the doctrine by which a Christian church either stands or falls (Matthew 16:18). No one can change the foundation of the Christian Church (1 Corinthians 3:11).

Jesus kept God's law for all people (Galatians 4:4,5; Hebrews 4:15). He had no sin, but God made him to be sin for all people (2 Corinthians 5:21). Jesus made a complete atonement for all the sins of all people (1 John 2:2). He brought about a perfect and eternal reconciliation between God and all people (2 Corinthians 5:19; Hebrews 10:14-18).

The doctrine of justification is universal. What Jesus carried out is an objective fact. God's act of reconciliation applies to every person from the beginning to the end of the world. God wants all men to be saved (1 Timothy 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9). The doctrine of universal justification moves Christians to share the gospel with all people (Mark 16:15).

Our Lutheran church is both Trinitarian and Christological.

It is true that the terms "Trinity" and "triune God" are not used anywhere in the Holy Scriptures. However, we believe, teach, and confess that the doctrine of the triune God is clearly taught in the Holy Scriptures. It is not a cleverly invented story. God reveals

himself as three distinct persons in one divine being or essence in both the Old Testament and the New Testament.

Moses said to the Israelites, “Hear O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one” (Deuteronomy 6:4). Deuteronomy 6:4 is God’s infallible and inerrant Word. We accept it and obey the First Commandment. The only true God exists from all eternity, and there are no other gods.

But we also accept that God speaks of himself in the first person plural: our and us. “Let us make man in our image, in our likeness” (Genesis 1:26). “The man has now become like one of us” (Genesis 3:22). “Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other” (Genesis 11:7). “Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?” (Isaiah 6:8).

Moreover, the three persons are distinctly listed. The prophet Isaiah writes, “Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations” (Isaiah 42:1). God the Father is speaking of his special servant here. From the context and from Matthew 12:17–21, it is clear that the servant is Jesus, the Savior—God the Son. And as Matthew explains, Isaiah 42:1 was fulfilled on the day of Jesus’ Baptism. At the moment when Jesus came up out of water, heaven was opened, God the Holy Spirit descended on him, and God the Father said from heaven, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased” (Matthew 3:16,17).

Before being taken up into heaven, Jesus gave the Great Commission to his disciples of all times, saying, “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19,20). The word “name” is a singular noun because the three persons are one in the essence of God. The triune God is the one God who can save human beings from eternal death.

Our Lutheran church is also Christological. Our Christology is not a modern teaching, but an orthodox teaching, derived from the Holy Scriptures. We will never cast off God’s infallible and inerrant Word. We believe, teach, and confess that Jesus is true God and true man in one person (John 1:1–3,10,14, 8:58, 10:30; 1 Timothy 2:5; Hebrews 2:14). Jesus completely carried out his atoning work as the Savior in the union and communication of his two natures (the Athanasian Creed, 33). Jesus had and has a threefold office—Prophet, Priest, and King. As our Prophet, Jesus stands behind our witness (John 1:14; Ephesians 4:11). As

our Priest, Jesus has atoned for all the sins of all people by one sacrifice—by his own holy and precious life—and continues his priestly office by interceding for people and by answering our prayers for harvest workers (1 John 2:1; Matthew 9:38). As our King, Jesus promises us final victory and royal blessings, even as we witness in the face of opposition (Luke 23:43; Revelation 2:10).

The confessional Lutheran church subscribes to the Lutheran Confessions because they are a correct exposition of the Holy Scriptures.

The constitution of the Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Conference (CELC) says,

The Conference accepts the canonical books of the Old and New Testament as the verbally inspired and inerrant Word of God and submits to this Word of God as the only infallible rule and authority in all matters of doctrine, faith, and life (Article II:1).

The Conference also accepts the Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church contained in the Book of Concord of 1580, not in so far as, but because they are a correct exposition of the pure doctrine of the Word of God (Article II:1).

The Lutheran Confessions include the Small and Large Catechisms of Dr. Martin Luther, the Augsburg Confession, the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, the Smalcald Articles, the Formula of Concord, and the three ecumenical Creeds—the Apostles’ Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed.

The Confessions above, with the exception of the three ecumenical creeds, are statements from the time of the Reformation. They were written by Martin Luther and his co-workers. They were written for maintaining God’s truth and the gospel. They are important for us because they are our banner under which we oppose false teachers who claim to be coming in the name of God or in the name of Christ (Matthew 7:15, 24:5; Revelation 13:11, 17:1-5). They are also important for us Lutherans today, to be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks us about our faith (1 Peter 3:15).

In short, our subscription to the Lutheran Confessions is not a *quatenus* subscription—not an “insofar as” subscription but a *quia* subscription—a “because”

subscription. We subscribe to the Confessions not insofar as they agree with the Bible but because they agree with the Bible.

The confessional Lutheran church practices the doctrine of church fellowship in a way that promotes true unity and protects against false doctrine.

The constitution of the CELC states,

Membership in the Conference may be acquired and held only by such Lutheran church bodies which have accepted without reservation the doctrinal and confessional basis of the Conference described in Article II and which are not in fellowship with church bodies that in their doctrine or practice deviate from the confessional standard of the Conference. (Article IV:1)

We practice the doctrine of church fellowship as stated above because we know that this practice gives abundant blessings in two ways.

1. The blessings of the doctrine of church fellowship for our churches

The pastors of the confessional Lutheran church may exchange pulpits. Congregations can do this with the confidence that they will hear sound doctrine (law and gospel) from the guest preachers.

The pastors and members of the confessional Lutheran church may partake of the Lord's Supper together and can declare their oneness of faith. They can encourage each other by worshipping together. They can jointly pray with prayers derived from the same confession and unity of doctrine. They can join together for mission work, for Christian education, and for everything needed to carry out the Great Commission.

2. The blessings of our doctrine of church fellowship for those outside our fellowship

People outside our fellowship can know the doctrinal position we hold and how that position is different from that of other church bodies and federations. They can test if we have a sound, biblical foundation. They can know the one, unshakable foundation on which Jesus builds his church, which even the devil will not be able to overcome (Matthew 16:18; Revelation 12:13-16). They might want to join our fellowship after accepting our doctrine of church fellowship (Romans 10:13-15,17).

Our practice of church fellowship, to avoid fellowship with churches which confess, teach, and practice false doctrines, is the best way to show our love of God, our love of God's Word, and our love for those of other churches (Jeremiah 1:6,7; Ezekiel 2:3-5; Matthew 26:63,64; John 14:23; 1 Timothy 2:4, 6:20,21; 2 Timothy 4:2-4).

The confessional Lutheran church stresses the means of grace.

1. "For through the Word and the sacraments, as through instruments, the Holy Spirit is given..." (AC V:2).
2. The gospel is the means of grace.
 - Without the gospel no one can hear nor know of what God has prepared for those who love him (1 Corinthians 2:9).
 - Everyone who believes in Jesus will be saved, and saving faith comes from hearing the message concerning Jesus Christ (Romans 10:13,17).
3. Baptism is a means of grace.
 - It is an instrument God ordained for washing away the sins of human beings (Acts 22:16; 1 Corinthians 6:11).
 - It is an instrument God ordained for offering and giving forgiveness of sin to sinners (Acts 2:38).
 - It is an instrument God ordained for offering and giving sinners deliverance from the power of death and Satan (Romans 6:3; Hebrews 2:14,15).
 - It is an instrument God ordained for offering and giving sinners eternal salvation (Mark 16:16; 1 Peter 3:20,21).
 - It is an instrument God ordained for rebirth of sinners as justified children of God and heirs of eternal life (John 3:5; Galatians 3:26,27; Titus 3:5-7).
4. The Lord's Supper is a means of grace.
 - In the Supper with his body and blood Jesus offers and gives us the forgiveness of our sins (Matthew 26:26-28; 1 Corinthians 10:16).
 - In the Supper with his body and blood Jesus gives us strength and willingness to live for him (2 Corinthians 5:15) and to proclaim his atoning death for all people until his second coming (1 Corinthians 11:26).

- In the Supper with his body and blood Jesus strengthens our oneness of faith (2 Corinthians 5:17; Ephesians 4:4).
5. “For Christ...offers his grace to all men in the Word and the holy sacraments...” (FC SD II:57). Jesus said, “The words I have spoken to you are spirit and they are life” (John 6:63). For that reason, “we reject and condemn the error of the Enthusiasts, who imagine that God without means, without the hearing of God’s Word, also without the use of the holy Sacraments, draws men to Himself, and enlightens, justifies, and saves them” (FC Ep II: 13).

The confessional Lutheran church promotes the historic liturgy and the traditions of the Lutheran church. At the same time it does not make legalistic rules about adiaphora.

Adiaphora refer to things “which are neither commanded nor forbidden in the Word of God” (FC SD X:1). Because Jesus fulfilled the ceremonial law and cancelled the written code, in the Holy Scriptures there are no rules about the style or manner of a Christian worship service (Romans 10:4; Colossians 2:16).

The principal and vital elements in the service are the Word of God—the teaching and preaching of it—and the proper administration of the sacraments (Matthew 28:20; Acts 2:42; 2 Timothy 2:15). The history of God’s people in the Old and New Testaments shows that when God’s Word was silenced, people turned to myths, and their worship became a self-righteous attempt to earn God’s grace and salvation (2 Kings 22:8–13; Isaiah 1:4,5,11,12; Mark 7:5–9; 2 Timothy 2:16–18).

The history of the medieval church also shows us the same cause and effect. Luther says, “A Christian congregation should never gather together without the preaching of God’s Word and prayer, no matter how briefly” (LW 53:11). Luther returned God’s Word to its rightful position. Without the Word of God it is impossible for Christians to worship God in spirit and in truth (John 4:24; Philippians 3:2,3). Luther preserved and strengthened every vital feature in the traditional liturgy and deleted all corrupt intrusions (LW 53:XIV).

We Christians are declared to be righteous by God’s grace for the sake of Jesus’ atoning death, but we have our sinful nature as long as we live in this world. Our faith can easily waver. Our faith needs to be trained in the Word of God proclaimed in the liturgy. Because the liturgy proclaims the gospel, it can lead unbelievers to faith in their Savior and

help them grow in faith. It helps us worship God in a fitting and orderly way (1 Corinthians 14:40). It serves as a reminder to the pastor of what he should be preaching. And if the pastor fails to preach law and gospel clearly, at least the clear message of the liturgy will be there for the people.

Some of the content of the historic liturgy

Collects

“Luther wrote and translated a number of collects and formal prayers. Some of Luther’s collects were parts of the order for the mass, the Litany, baptism, ordination, and marriage; others were scattered in the hymnals that came out under his personal supervision. ... And—as in the case of the hymns—Luther may have used or adapted earlier translations. It is not possible to determine with certainty to what extent these collects can be credited to Luther, but at least he sanctioned their use and general acceptance in the Lutheran liturgy” (LW 53:129).

Liturgical Chants

“He [Luther] wanted hymns and chants to be sung by the congregation as well as the choir. ... Some items, such as the *Gloria in Excelsis*, *Sanctus*, *Agnus Dei*, or *Te Deum*, could be classified either as chants or as hymns. But it was this basic simplicity and folklike character of Luther’s chants that made it possible for the congregation actively to participate in the liturgy” (LW 53:149).

The *Agnus Dei*, “O Christ, Lamb of God,” is sung before the reception of the Lord’s Supper (John 1:29).

“The *Te Deum* is one of the grandest hymns of Christendom. It combines a confession of faith with a song of praise and a prayer for help. Its beginnings go back to the first centuries of the Christian church. Luther loved the *Te Deum*” (LW 53:129). It begins with the phrase: “We praise you, O God, we acclaim you as Lord” (*Christian Worship*, 48).

The *Magnificat* begins with the phrase: “My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord” (*Christian Worship*, 57). With the *Magnificat* we joyfully sing of the grace and blessing which the merciful God had shown to us, praising and thanking him for it; we sing of God’s wonderful work which he did, does, and will do for all people (Luke 1:46–55).

Gloria Patri is the doxology beginning with the phrase: “Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost” (*The Lutheran Hymnal*, 41).

Gloria in Excelsis is the greater doxology beginning with the phrase: “Glory be to God on high, and on earth, good will toward men” (*Christian Worship*, 16). This doxology is based on the song of the angels who showed great joy at the birth of the Savior (Luke 2:14).

“The text of the *Sanctus* [Holy, holy, holy] is a paraphrase of Isaiah 6:1–4” (LW 53:60).

Basil the Great (330–379) publicly used the Kyrie—“Lord, have mercy on us. Christ, have mercy on us. Lord, have mercy on us”—in Latin (Luther’s Works, Japanese Edition, 5:283).

The *Nunc Dimittis* is based on Simeon’s song of praise to God, who kept his promise of the Savior (Luke 2:29–32; *Christian Worship*, 61).

The *Benedictus* is based on Zechariah’s song in Luke 1:68–79 (*The Lutheran Hymnal*, 38).

A proper understanding of adiaphora in general

Adiaphora are those acts or things which are neither commanded nor forbidden in the Word of God, but are in the area of Christian freedom (FC SD X:1–3). Adiaphora do not give the Christian license to be selfish. God does not want his church to be one of disorder (1 Corinthians 14:40). He wants Christians to do everything for his glory (1 Corinthians 10:31). When Christians decide what to do or not to do in an area of Christian liberty, they must be careful not to cause weak believers to stumble (1 Corinthians 8:6–13; 10:23–30).

When under the title and pretext of external adiaphora such things are proposed as are in principle contrary to God’s Word (although painted another color), these are not to be regarded as adiaphora, in which one is free to act as he will, but must be avoided as things prohibited by God. (FC SD X:5)

The congregation of God of every place and every time has, according to its circumstances, the good right, power, and authority [in matters truly adiaphora] to change, to diminish, and to increase them, without thoughtlessness and offense, in an orderly and becoming way, as at any time

it may be regarded most profitable, most beneficial, and best for [preserving] good order, [maintaining] Christian discipline... and the edification of the Church. (FC SD X: 9)

The confessional Lutheran church stresses a rich Lutheran spirituality and devotional life.

We know the importance and value of Luther's Small Catechism—"the basic book for teaching both young and old. Everything written in the catechism is based on the Bible." Luther's Small Catechism is a treasure that Lutheran Christians want to use daily. About the chief parts of the Catechism, Luther said, "I study them daily and remain a pupil of the Catechism" (LW 14:7).

We go on seeking first God's kingdom and his righteousness—God's gracious rule of grace in our hearts and the forgiveness of sin in his presence, earned by Jesus' atoning death for us (Matthew 6:33).

We enjoy peace with God and do not fear God's holy and just wrath because of forgiveness of sin through faith in Jesus (Romans 5:1). The world cannot give us this peace (John 14:27). As God's beloved children we approach his throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in our time of need (Hebrews 4:16).

With prayers—a prayer is not a sacrament but a fruit of faith—we have communication with God (Psalm 50:15). We can bring all our requests to God, not through Mary or the saints, but only through Jesus (John 14:13).

We believe, teach, and confess that Baptism is a sacrament instituted by God. In it God offers and gives forgiveness of sin, delivers from the power of death, sin, and Satan, and gives eternal salvation and the gift of the Holy Spirit to adults and children (Acts 2:38). Baptism is not a mere outward symbol or meaningless rite. Baptism means that "the old Adam in us, together with sins and evil lusts, should be drowned by daily sorrow and repentance and be put to death, and that the new man should come forth daily and rise up, cleansed and righteous, to live forever in God's presence" (SC IV:12).

We believe, teach, and confess that the Lord's Supper is a sacrament instituted by God. In the Supper we receive the true body of Jesus together with the bread and the true blood of Jesus together with the wine (Matthew 26:27,28; 1 Corinthians 10:16). By giving us

his body and blood, Jesus again and again assures us of forgiveness, life, and salvation (Romans 5:9; 6:22,23; 1 Corinthians 11:25,26). We encourage proper preparation of the heart before coming to the Lord's Table. "A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup" (1 Corinthians 11:28). Whenever we receive Holy Communion, it is a great blessing for us that we can remember that our Lord died for us.

We are confident of the resurrection of our bodies and of eternal life in heaven (John 5:28,29, 11:25,26; 1 Corinthians 15:16; 1 Thessalonians 4:16). With confidence we are waiting for Jesus' second coming. On that day he will take us to heaven (1 Thessalonians 4:16,17).

We enjoy oneness of faith (Ephesians 4:3; Philippians 2:2, 4:2), carry out the Great Commission in cooperation with each other (Matthew 28:19,20), and look for churches which want to share with us fellowship based on God's Word (Psalm 133:1; Hebrews 10:23-25). It is our great joy and privilege to hand down the pure Word of God to the next generation (2 Timothy 2:2).

Authentic Lutheranism is defined by the Lutheran Confessions for they are the correct exposition of the Holy Scripture. Lutheranism is both Trinitarian and Christological. Confessional Lutheranism has a precious heritage centered in Jesus, the Word made flesh present in written Word; the means of grace where the treasures of redemption are brought to us; the divine service around Word and sacrament where God feeds us with himself; and a rich Lutheran spirituality and devotional life.