the Concordia Lutheran

"The Scripture cannot be broken." John 10:35.

"Thy Word is a Lamp unto my feet, and a Light unto my path." Ps. 119:105.

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"God, who ... spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by His Son."

Heb. 1:1-2

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STATEMENT OF PURPOSE:

To set forth in simple and plain language the pure doctrine of God's Word as taught by the true Lutheran Church in full accordance with the **Book of Concord of 1580** and the **Brief Statement of 1932.**

To show, **on the basis of Scripture,** what true Christians are to believe and how, out of love for their Savior Jesus Christ, they are to lead godly lives.

To furnish aids for Bible study and articles for Scriptural devotion and meditation.

To demonstrate, by our Scriptural stand, that our **Concordia Lutheran Conference** is not a sect or a false church, but that the congregations which form it confess, teach, and practice the Word of God in its full truth and purity and use the Sacraments according to Christ's institution. All who do this are the true visible Church on earth.

To seek out all who truly share our Scriptural position in doctrine and practice, and to urge the mutual public acknowledgment of such God-given unity. Thus we shall be able thereafter to practice a God-pleasing fellowship with them.

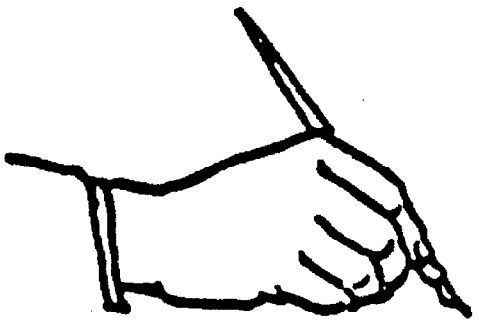
To show that we do not have among us a mixture of divergent teachings but that we are "perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment."

To set forth pertinent historical information which has a bearing upon the Church and to expose modern philosophical thought and the so-called scientific theories which contradict the Word of God.

To expose particularly the false teaching and practice of the various so-called "Lutheran" church bodies by comparing their teachings and practices with what is plainly recorded in the Word of God, in the Lutheran Confessions, and in the old orthodox Lutheran writings.

To expose false teaching and practice wherever it makes its appearance and to keep abreast of the current happenings in the church and among the nations as signs of the times.

To be truthful and factual in our reporting and freely to correct any misinformation of which we are not aware and which has been called to our attention. Also to clarify any information or statement of doctrine or practice which may be unclear to our readers or which may create a wrong impression.



The President's Column

EVERY PASTOR IN THE CONCORDIA LUTHERAN CONFERENCE PREACHES THAT HUMAN BEINGS ARE MADE CHRISTIANS BY THE HOLY GHOST THROUGH BAPTISM AND THE WORD OF GOD

Most so-called Christian churches teach that it is the **act** of Baptism which is pleasing to God (Reformed and other sectarian churches) or which removes original sin and rewards the recipient with the *prima gratia* (Romanists). Nothing could be further from the truth because the act of Baptism, in itself, accomplishes absolutely nothing!

The **sectarian** churches teach that by submitting to the outward act of Baptism (and some insist that this outward act be by immersion) a Christian is merely performing a work which is **required** by the Lord in His Word and which, therefore, is pleasing to God. They generally speak of it as an "outward sign of an inward grace" — sort of an initiation ceremony by which a Christian or prospective Christian **professes** his acceptance of the Christian faith and that he is a believer in Christ Jesus. This is all that the act of Baptism is in the hearts and minds and teaching of the Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, United Brethren, etc., etc., etc. (Their false teaching here stems from much deeper errors in the area of Original Sin and Conversion.) Can you imagine church bodies which call themselves "*Lutheran*" overlooking such false teachings and establishing fellowship with the Reformed? Yet, this is what is being done in the so-called Lutheran church world of today!

In the teaching of the **Romanists**, Baptism, by its very act, bestows upon the recipient the forgiveness of **original** sin, which is NOT, to the Romanist, the total corruption of our human nature and the inability to do anything pleasing to God (as Scripture plainly teaches), but merely a **defect** in our human nature. The Romanists also teach that by the **act** of Baptism the *"prima gratia"* is bestowed upon the person who is baptized, by means of which that person is enabled to do good works which can earn the favor of God, the forgiveness of sins, and even provide a person with sufficient grace, if properly utilized, to become a Saint and to be canonized by Holy Mother Church. Can you imagine church bodies which call themselves "*Lutheran*" overlooking this ingrained false teaching of Roman Catholicism in order to establish fellowship with Rome? Yet, this is what is being done! What a gross misuse of the name "Lutheran" and denial of our precious Lutheran heritage based solidly on the Bible and set forth plainly in the *Book of Concord of 1580* and in the *Brief Statement of 1932.*

Baptism, even as the Lord's Supper, is not Law but GOSPEL. It is not something that we do for God but which God, in and for the sake of Christ's work of Redemption, uses, as a Means of Grace, to work saving faith in the hearts of infants and little children and to strengthen in the hearts of adults the saving knowledge of Jesus their Savior. Thus we find in **Matthew 28:20** the words of the Lord Jesus in His Great Commission, telling us to "make disciples of all nations" **1)** by "Baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost," and **2)** by "Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you," namely, properly applying "Law and Gospel."

The pastors of our Conference, therefore, teach that the Lord God uses His Word and Sacraments as His vehicle or as His instrument to do or to accomplish His great work in us —the work which must be done if we are to become the possessors of the blessings which the Lord Jesus has earned for us, namely, the forgiveness of sins,

life, and eternal salvation. We, of course, do not deny that God could indeed make people Christians and bestow His rich spiritual blessings upon them without the reading or hearing of His Word. We know that God's power is unlimited. But the question is NOT what God is able to accomplish by His almighty power. The question is rather WHAT MEANS has God appointed and promised to use to work and nurture saving faith in the human heart and to shower His gracious blessings upon us. Here the Bible does not point us to our prayers, contrition, fellowship, or any outward act. It consistently directs us **only** to the Word of God, specifically the Gospel, and to the Sacraments where it is the Word of God which is in and with the water in Holy Baptism, and the words here written, "Given and shed for you for the remission of sins," in the Lord's Supper.

The great work which, for our salvation, the Lord God has to accomplish in us —because "we cannot by our own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ our Lord or come to Him"— is the creation of saving faith in our hearts, namely, that faith by which we accept the Lord Jesus, as He is revealed to us in the Scriptures, as our personal Savior and trust only in Him for our salvation — finding true joy and lasting comfort in Him alone! Such faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God. Thus, St. Paul writes, "I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God unto salvation!" (Romans 1:16) Yes, it is the Gospel in God's Word and Sacraments which has this power.

This teaching, which is stressed throughout our Conference, should be of the most vital and practical importance for all of us. It alleviates all concern about the number of members in our Conference and congregations. This is **God's** concern, not ours, for it is the Lord "[who adds] to the Church daily such as should be saved" (Acts 2:47), and He does this by the power of the Holy Ghost through the regular and consistent preaching, teaching, and hearing of His Word in all its truth and purity (properly distinguishing and applying Law and Gospel) and the correct use of

the Sacraments according to Christ's institution. Where this is **not** done, true growth is impossible! Our job, by God's grace (as pastors and members of congregations in our Conference), is, therefore, to be vitally concerned that the whole "counsel of God" (Acts 20:27), as the "rain cometh down and the snow from heaven" (Isaiah 55:10,11), is thoroughly taught and defended in doctrine and practice in our respective congregations. O, if this were only done in Christian congregations throughout the world, the world itself would hardly be able to contain the promised blessings of the Lord to cause His Word to "accomplish what [He] pleases" and to "prosper in the thing whereto [He] sends it!" When thinking of God's blessings this Christmastide, don't forget to think of the Means of Grace through which alone we are enabled to believe in the Christ of Christmas and to make the real Gift of Christmas our own.

— P. R. B.

CONVENTION ESSAY

delivered to the

46th Annual Convention of the *Concordia Lutheran Conference*

by

The Rev. David T. Mensing, Pastor
Peace Ev. Lutheran Church
Oak Forest, Illinois

"The Nature, Exercise, and Preservation of Christian Fellowship"

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II. The Exercise of Christian Fellowship

Before we address the exercise of Christian fellowship and the various activities in which those in fellowship with one another engage as individuals, within the local congregation, in wider organizational contexts, and even across such organizational lines, it behooves us to touch briefly upon some of the *terminology* that has developed over the years, especially in outward Lutheranism, and is used chiefly among theologians and dogmaticians in the discussion of this very point. Thus far we have simply defined and used the term ***"fellowship"*** to denote ***"the God-given intimate relationship that exists between those who are truly ONE in faith and confession on the basis of God's Word."*** But those who have studied the writings of our orthodox fathers, particularly those of the last 150 years or so, have run into terms which *seem* at first hearing to describe either different *kinds* of fellowship or different *degrees* of fellowship among Christians. These terms can be confusing to the ordinary layman who, from the simple passages of Scripture, understands that professing Christians either **are** or **are not** in *"fellowship"* with one another. For some reason, we seldom hear the term "*personal* fellowship," for example, but we do hear of "*church* fellowship," "*doctrinal* fellowship," "*confessional* fellowship," "*prayer* fellowship," and "*pulpit and altar* fellowship." These do **not** describe different *kinds* or progressive *degrees* of fellowship to which

a person *becomes eligible* (after a period of probation or as the result of longevity, severe trial, particular faithfulness, and growth in sanctification, for example); but they really speak to different *manifestations* of fellowship which become evident and are practiced as fellowship is "established," or, again, to use a better expression, as the *existence* of fellowship becomes "recognized" and its exercise is initiated. For the sake of consistency with what has been written in the past by our orthodox fathers, we shall refer to these terms parenthetically as they naturally arise in our discussion of the exercise of fellowship; and their meaning should in context be completely clear as to what they entail.

Since Christian fellowship is a relationship first and foremost between Christians who *"speak the same thing"* in matters of doctrine and practice, we shall initially explore the exercise of Christian fellowship between *individuals*. No doubt the most obvious application of the fellowship principle in this limited context is found in the **Christian family**. Scripture itself makes the intimate relationship between husband and wife a *type* of that which exists between Christ and His bride, the Church (Ephesians 5). While marriage is indeed a civil estate, instituted by God even for the unregenerate for mutual companionship and love (Genesis 2:18), for the lawful procreation of children (Genesis 1:28), and as an aid against unchastity (Hebrews 13:4), the love between a *Christian* husband and wife, the procreation of *their* children, and the intimacy of *their* marriage bed and home together is graciously blessed by God Himself (Psalm 128). This promised blessing, in addition to the high responsibility given to Christian fathers (and to their wives by association as their "helpers") to bring up their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord (Ephesians 6:4), should be a powerful incentive for pious, believing young adults to seek a mate *from among the **fellowship*** or to make sure that a prospective mate is *of the **fellowship*** before a marriage commitment has been made.

Those who have in this regard spurned the pious example of Abraham in seeking a Godly wife for Isaac, of Isaac and Rebekah in sending Jacob to Padanaram for the same reason, of Ruth and Boaz, of Mary and Joseph, of the divine wisdom of the Holy Spirit through Solomon in Proverbs 31, and of the warnings of St. Paul in I Corinthians 15:33

and II Corinthians 6:14-18, have learned to regret their shortsighted folly. Why? Because they have no ***fellowship*** with their spouses; they cannot pray with them; they cannot rely on them to teach their children the way to heaven and to cultivate in their lives a walk in the Spirit; they cannot expect them to serve as Godly role models for the souls entrusted to their care; they cannot assure them of God's blessing and protection; they cannot look for their spouses to cheer them with the precious Gospel in times of trouble and heartache. On the contrary, such spouses are likely to instill into their families gross indifference to and despisal of the Word of God, which they themselves ignore. And, if the spouse is a manifest *unbeliever*, one has the prospect ever before him that the person he loves most dearly here in this world will spend eternity in hell!

On the other hand, when ***Christian fellowship*** is the **first priority** for young adults seeking their life's companion —above looks, personality, "chemistry," animal magnetism, money, intelligence and other such carnal considerations— when Christ is valued by both as the Head of their house, the precious Savior of their souls, their incomparably good Shepherd, their ever present Friend, and their almighty Helper in every need— **and** when His Word in its truth and purity is cherished as their dearest possession, His Gospel their comfort and the motivator of their lives, and His Law the measuring stick of their behavior as they and theirs walk a life of Christian discipline in the paths of righteousness for their Savior's sake, it should be reasonably expected of Christians that these concerns are reflected in their "dating habits" and in the friendships that they cultivate among their peers. For if it is thus evident that "each his lesson has learned with care" about spiritual "family values" **before the fact**, then surely "all the household well shall fare" (Luther) when a family is established *in Christian fellowship* with the Lord's gracious blessing upon it!

Moreover, Christians who enjoy the spiritual intimacy of this God-pleasing relationship, whether as part of a family *"endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace"* (Ephesians 4:3), or as individual members of *"the household of faith"* (Galatians 6:10) in the same God-pleasing pursuit, will **exercise** and celebrate the privileges of Christian fellowship. Thus their joint study of God's

Word, their joint prayer in semi-private devotions, their joint praise of God's abiding grace in the hymns they sing together, their application of Holy Scripture to the problems and concerns of daily life, their brotherly admonition of one another, their bearing of one another's burdens in love —all of this *"Godliness"* in the exercise of ***personal*** **Christian fellowship** will redound to their great joy and blessing, not only for *"the life that now is, [but for] that which is to come"* (I Timothy 4:8), according to the Lord's own promise.

The application of the fellowship principle is also found in the context of the **local Christian congregation**, the only God-ordained external grouping of Christians, instituted specifically for the regular and consistent ***public use*** of the Office of the Keys under the oversight of Christ's ambassador, the called pastor or shepherd of the Savior's local flock. Therefore Dr. Walther rightly states: *"Every Christian is obliged, for the sake of his salvation, to profess allegiance, and adhere, to orthodox congregations and their orthodox preachers wherever he finds such."*[1] Thus we read concerning the Christians at Jerusalem, who gathered together regularly for the exercise of fellowship and love: *"And they continued steadfastly in the Apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers. ... And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart, praising God, and having favor with all the people"* (Acts 2:42,46,47). This external fellowship, this visible group with its favorable reputation among men, this congregation of which even hypocrites were "members in good standing" until their wickedness became manifest, Acts 5, was called *"the church"* (Acts 5:11; 8:1; 11:22 and 26; 15:3); and similar *"churches"* (Revelation 1:11) were established by the Apostles throughout Asia Minor. Moreover, Paul writes to Titus that there was a definite **lack** or **deficiency** where the Pastoral Office of the local congregation had not been established *"in every city"* (Titus 1:5) where professing believers were living. *"Therefore the formation of Christian congregations, and membership in them, is not a human,*

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[1] Thesis VIII, C quoted from Dallman and Engelder (Ed.), *Walther and the Church,* 1938, p. 68.

but a divine mandate."[2] Why? Because, as we still correctly hold according to Scripture, without them the following Christian obligations —obligations requiring **group participation**— cannot be performed:

> a) The regular hearing and learning of God's Word as it is proclaimed by the divinely called ministers who are to feed the flock over which God has placed them. (Acts 20:28; Titus 1:5; Eph. 4:10-12; I Pet. 5:2-3; Acts 2:42-47; 14:23)
>
> b) The regular celebration of Holy Communion under the loving and careful watchfulness of the divinely called shepherd. (I Cor. 11:23-29; 10:17; Acts 20:28)
>
> c) The continuous exercise of the duties of Christian fellowship and love. (I Cor. 11:23; 1:10; Col. 3:15-16; I Cor. 9:7-14; Gal. 6:6-7; Heb. 10:23-25; Eph. 4:3-6; Acts 6:1-6)
>
> d) The careful, evangelical exercise of church discipline as commanded by the Lord in Matthew 18:15-17. (*Compare:* I Cor. 5:13; II Cor. 2:6-8,10)[3]

All of the above functions of local congregations involve the **exercise** of ***Christian fellowship***, that is, not merely the "existence" of those things which the believers share in common —the precious Means of Grace (the Word of God in its purity and the Holy Sacraments as Christ instituted them); a faithful shepherd properly trained, *"apt to teach"* (I Timothy 3:2), and made the overseer of the flock by the Holy Spirit of God mediately through the congregation's call; love of God, His Word, his Church, and their brethren in the faith; and the mechanics of Christian discipline as outlined by the Savior in Matthew 18— not merely the "possession" of those things, but their **use**. To such a list of commonly shared blessings should also be

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[2]F. Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics,* III, p. 421.

[3]Concordia Lutheran Conference, *This Scriptural Position We Still Hold,* 1968, pp. 5-6.

added the *heritage* (including the *history*) of Christ's true visible church on earth with the orthodox writings of stalwart "fathers" in the faith who, enabled by the grace of God, fought vicious foes and seemingly overwhelming odds and made huge personal sacrifices to preserve His truth for themselves and for future generations. To this *heritage* belong, for example, our precious Lutheran Confessions, including Luther's Catechisms; our treasury of Bible-based, edifying hymns; the liturgy of our worship services, consisting of direct quotations from the Scriptures and prayers and praises based on the words and promises of God Himself in His Holy Word; works of art and Christian symbols as visual reminders of events recorded in the Scriptures and of the divine names, attributes and works of God; and even instrumental musical compositions by gifted faithful Christians, written to the glory of God and the praise of His grace, not to *edify* the Christians (as does *"the Word of truth"*) but to enhance their worship, to facilitate their praise, and to beautify the habitation of God's House.

Merely to **have** all these things, to **possess** them in common, and even to **treasure** them in our hearts *individually* indeed belongs to ***Christian fellowship*** in the sense of their communal stewardship. And, while we rejoice that we "have" the Word of God in its truth and purity, that we "have" faithful shepherds, that we "have" a heritage or legacy of orthodoxy in our historical past, merely "having" them is of little value if we do not **use them**. In this connection, we will find it valuable for a few moments to go back to some basic terminology briefly referred to earlier in our essay and to distinguish well how certain traditional expressions describe in various facets both the nature and exercise of Christian fellowship.

The term ***"doctrinal* fellowship"** refers to the fact that churches (and/or church bodies) not only share a common position "on paper" but that they actually **teach** the same thing from their pulpits, in their classes, in their seminary courses, and in their official publications.[4] Whether that fellowship exists can easily be verified by objective examination —certainly even by Christian laymen who are to *"try* [or

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[4] F. Pieper, *op. cit.*, p. 423. (Cf. also the *Brief Statement of 1932*, §29.)

test] *the spirits* [the teachers of religion] *whether they are of God"* (I John 4:1), to *"know them"* as to whether they are true or false prophets on the basis of *"their fruits"* (Matthew 7:16), that is, their doctrine and practice. A church's *publica doctrina*, if indeed it is "public," is no secret or private matter when it is taught; neither can an individual claim a privately held opinion or privately held agreement which he is unwilling to acknowledge openly as a supposed basis for "doctrinal fellowship" with any person, church, or church body.

"*Confessional* fellowship" is said to exist between those who *"confess"* the same thing regarding Christian doctrine. St. Paul's exhortation in I Corinthians 1:10, *"that ye all speak the same thing ... [and] that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment"* is "a demand for uniformity in speech (λεγειν) or in the profession of Christian doctrine. ... Here he clearly says that Christians are to use the same words also in the same sense. Agreement in words with disagreement in meaning is altogether contrary to the unity God calls for; and to seek such a 'unity' ('we agree to disagree') is immoral, a trifling with sacred, divine things, which is unseemly for Christians."[5] *Confessional fellowship* has therefore been defined as that which "constitutes the actual discoverable fact that two or more individuals, congregations, or church bodies, are confessing the same doctrine of Holy Writ. It requires more than a mere common name and formal acceptance of the same creeds. Actual teaching and practice must be thoroughly Scriptural."[6] Your present essayist admits quite frankly his inability to distinguish in any substantive manner between "doctrinal" and "confessional" fellowship as here defined, unless public doctrine is not *actually discoverable as to fact* (which seems to be self-contradictory) or unless what is *taught* is somehow different from what is *confessed,* a case of transparent, blatant duplicity which we can scarcely visualize or even imagine! Nevertheless, we hasten to

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[5]F. Pieper, *op. cit.,* p. 426.

add that in the use of human terms such as these, we find nothing divisive, as long as there is no compromise of Divine Truth in the way the terms are either defined or applied.

Both **"*prayer* fellowship"** and **"*church* fellowship"** (also known as **"*altar and pulpit* fellowship"**) are the actual **exercise** of Christian fellowship, where those who have recognized themselves to be in the *"unity of the Spirit"* (Ephesians 4:3) **manifest** their *fraternal* (or *brotherly*) relationship by engaging **jointly** in those **acts** which testify to their complete agreement in doctrine and practice. The fact that the **exercise** of Christian fellowship, *"walking together"* as brethren, *assumes* and *demands* ***unity*** as a **prerequisite** is evident from Amos 3:3, where the prophet asks the rhetorical question: *"Can two **walk together** except they be agreed?"* Such exercise of Christian fellowship is the natural result or *"fruit"* of that unity, whether between individuals in their personal relationships, between individuals in a congregational setting, between congregations in a wider context (as, for example, among the churches in the early New Testament era, Romans 15:26; II Corinthians 8) —and even in and between federations of congregations organized, not by God's command, but in Christian liberty for purely practical reasons. "Joint church work and worship" is the expression often used to describe the extent of this exercise; and that covers just about every activity which testifies to ***the God-given intimate relationship that exists between those who are truly one in faith and confession on the basis of His Word.***

For the purpose of this present essay, particularly because of the wording of our Convention Motto this year after Acts 2:42, we intend to use that passage here with its concise synopsis of the exercise of church fellowship by the congregation at Jerusalem as our illustration: *"They continued steadfastly in the Apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers."* By inspiration of the Holy Ghost, St. Luke here describes with striking simplicity the church life of that first Christian congregation, noting four facets of

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[6]O. W. Schaefer, *"True Christian Fellowship — A Mark of Orthodoxy."* (Essay) Proceedings of the 32nd Annual Convention, CONCORDIA LUTHERAN CONFERENCE, 1983.

how the brethren **functioned** in that God-ordained external grouping and how they **exercised** among themselves their God-given relationship. The Apostle pairs these four activities to show their interdependency and complete harmony in the sequence that one would expect from the Scriptural relationship between justification and sanctification, and between sacramental and sacrificial acts in the worship services of the church:

We note that the Christians *"continued"* to *"adhere with strength"* to the *"doctrine"* of the Apostles, to their *"teaching,"* as it was set forth in their public gatherings. Here the whole counsel of God was proclaimed with regularity and consistency according to the Savior's instructions in Matthew 28:20, Mark 16:15-16, and Luke 24:47 — Law and Gospel, sin and grace, *"repentance and remission of sins,"* yea, *"all things whatsoever [He] had commanded [them]."* It was this preaching, already in Peter's sermon on the first Christian Pentecost, through which the Holy Ghost brought thousands of souls to true contrition for their sins and saving confidence in their Redeemer, created in their hearts new spiritual life, and established in them and for them a foundation of perfect integrity, inerrancy, and clarity upon which to base their confidence and by which to norm their faith: *"The foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the Chief Cornerstone"* (Ephesians 2:20). And, as the early Christians in Jerusalem "stuck" to that doctrine, as they *"continued daily with one accord in the temple"* (Acts 2:46), as they assembled regularly to hear *"the Apostles' doctrine"* and to *"grow in grace and in the knowledge of [their] Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ"* (II Peter 3:18), they found themselves in an intimate relationship with one another because of the *"unity of the Spirit"* which they enjoyed together. And they continued in this common ground which they shared, this *"fellowship,"* not because of an emotional bond with the Apostles, not because of common interests in their community, not even because of "the gift of their common faith,"[7] but because of *"the Apostles' doctrine"* to which they steadfastly adhered and

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[7]This term is used by the W.E.L.S. in setting forth its false doctrine on the Church and Ministry indicating a means (***other*** *than the Word*) through which the Holy Ghost works in men's hearts and leads them to establish various forms of the church and of the ministry. (Enthusiasm)

through which the Holy Spirit both created and preserved His blessed *"unity"* in them.

They also *"continued steadfastly"* or *"adhered with strength"* to *"breaking the bread"* of the Lord's Supper, to the celebration of the New Testament meal instituted by their Savior as the seal and surety of the forgiveness of their sins, for the strengthening and preservation of their confidence in Him, for increase of strength to amend their sinful lives and to walk in evidence of their faith, and as a testimony of their unity with their fellow communicants. **"*Altar* fellowship"** is the privilege of those who are **one in faith**, those who are in *"the unity of the Spirit,"* those who enjoy together the blessed, intimate, God-given relationship of dear brethren, to partake of the Savior's body and blood to their souls' benefit. The picture which St. Paul paints for us in but two verses of his first epistle to the Corinthians is indeed worth much more than "a thousand words" of rationalistic wrangling about the necessity of "close" or "closed" communion, for he likens the closeness of fellowship at the Lord's Table to the close relationship or *"communion"* between the visible elements in the Holy Sacrament and the body and blood of the Savior. He says: *"The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? For we, being many, are one bread and one body; for we are all partakers of that one bread"* (I Corinthians 10:16-17).

The Christians in the congregation at Jerusalem also *"continued steadfastly"* or *"adhered with strength"* to *"the prayers,"* Luke writes of them. It appears from the context, both near and remote, that this expression refers not only to the recitation of prayers, but to their entire worship and praise of God, to the "sacrificial" elements of their church life, both in their own assemblies and in the devotions of the temple during this transitional period. **"*Prayer* fellowship"** is the privilege of those who are one in faith and confession, those who are in *"the unity of the Spirit,"* to engage in **joint worship**, to "bring their petitions before God ... and to offer up praise and thanksgiving to Him" (Catechism Q/A 201). Concerning such joint prayer, the Psalmist writes: *"In the congregations will I bless the Lord"* (Psalm 26:12), certainly not *"congregations"* made up of worshipers

professing mixed doctrine and advocating mixed practice in defiance of God's Word; for in the Proverbs we read: *"He that turneth away his ear from hearing the law, even his prayer shall be* ***abomination****"* (Proverbs 28:9). On the contrary, the blessing of fellowship is based on true unity, as the Psalmist exclaims: *"Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!"* (133:1); and in the brief Psalm 134, this very unity in the worship of God in His sanctuary is extolled. *"Dwell[ing] together in unity"* and *"walk[ing] together ... agreed"* (Amos 3:3) describes the proper use of the **Doctrine of the Church** in "joint church work and worship," namely, that as brethren we "do all in our power to maintain, promote, and extend this [orthodox visible] church [or congregation] by prayer, personal service, and financial support" and that we "avoid [in church work and worship] all false churches, other organizations, [and even **individuals**] that profess a religion that is false." (Catechism Q/A 186, C and D, amplified for clarity and completeness.) Concerning the rejection of the latter point by those who practice "religious unionism" more will be said in the third part of our essay.

The congregation in Jerusalem also exercised Christian fellowship in the practice of Christian discipline, though we note only one specific example, namely, in Acts 5, and this with special circumstances under the direct auspices of the Apostle Peter. Nevertheless the Lord Jesus in Matthew 18:17 makes it incumbent upon Christians, after fruitless admonition of a *"brother"* (or sister) in the semi-private stage for a sin or *"trespass,"* to *"tell it unto* ***the church,"*** the **local congregation**, so that the offending brother may *"hear* ***the church****"* in **its** admonition from the Word of God, to the intent that he repent of his sins and be *"gained"* for heaven. Should such a *"brother"* **refuse to hear the church** (Gk: παρακουση, *turn away from hearing;* cf. Proverbs 28:9), he is to be regarded by every individual member of the congregation (*"let him be unto* ***thee****"*) as *"an heathen man and a publican,"* no longer a *"brother,"* no longer a member of the Christian congregation, no longer a member of the Communion of Saints, but an unbeliever. Such action of the congregation is not to be regarded merely as an "ecclesiastical judgment" or the personal judgment of the Pastor, who, in the name of the congregation, pronounces that judgment upon the impenitent (Luther: ***Office of the***

Keys, *"What Do You Believe According to These Words?"*), but it is a judgment that is *"as valid and certain in heaven also, as if Christ our dear Lord dealt with us Himself."* **He** says so; **He** guarantees it, saying: *"Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven"* (Matthew 18:18), and *"Whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained"* (John 20:23). We note that similar congregational discipline was exercised by the church at Corinth under the direction of the Apostle Paul (I Corinthians 5:13; II Corinthians 2:6-8,10).

The Jerusalem congregation engaged in joint intercessory prayer for those in peril and distress (Acts 12:5) and in works of Christian charity toward brethren in need (Acts 2:45; 4:34-35; 6:1ff., etc.). While in the Lord's Word we are commanded to pray *"for all men"* (I Timothy 2:1), even for our enemies (Matthew 5:44), and the Apostle Paul exhorts us to *"do good unto all men"* (Galatians 6:10), these works of love are *especially* enjoined upon us with respect to our Christian **brethren**, those of *"the household of faith"* (Galatians 6:10), our brothers and sisters (James 2:15ff; I John 3:17; 4:21; etc.). This too, therefore, belongs to the exercise of Christian fellowship, not only between individuals but in the context of the Christian congregation, where the brethren know one another, assemble together regularly, and have *"opportunity"* to be of service to one another in love.

Now we consider yet in this section the ***exercise of fellowship*** in a **wider** context, as Christians in and through their respective congregations cooperate with one another in joint church projects and worship activities. We speak particularly of the exercise of fellowship between congregations organized in federations, conferences, or synods, not by God's command, but in Christian liberty for purely practical reasons. Just such a federation is our beloved ***Concordia Lutheran Conference***. Nowhere in the Bible is there even mention made of any man-made organizations of churches with formal structures, polities, regulations, and statements of purpose. In fact, as our Conference **Constitution** makes it perfectly clear,

> "According to Scripture teaching and example, each congregation, or church, is independent, sovereign, autonomous in its own affairs, subject alone to Holy

> Scripture; and a conference or synod is neither of higher nor of equal authority to any of its congregations (Matthew 18:17,18; Mark 10:42-45). Therefore, in relation to its members, the Conference is not a church or church-government exercising legislative or coercive powers, but, with respect to the individual congregation's right of self-government, it is but an advisory or service body."[8]

We also confess in the sketch of our Conference's doctrinal position:

> "Synods and conferences, therefore, are not so-called 'super-churches' with the combined church-power of all their member congregations, nor are they churches *at all* in the Scriptural usage, but are rather humanly-devised organizations OF church*es*, established BY local church*es* in their liberty for the purpose of carrying out joint endeavors and projects which may be difficult for an individual church to handle locally."[9]

Since, however, the Conference and every member thereof subscribes without reservation to its **confessional standard**, namely, the canonical Scriptures as the verbally inspired Word of God and the only norm of Christian faith and life, all of the symbolical writings comprising the *Book of Concord of 1580,* and the *Brief Statement of 1932,* all of the Conference congregations, their members, and their pastors mutually recognize that, by God's grace, they *"all speak the same thing, and that there [are] no divisions among [them], but that [they are] perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment"* (I Corinthians 1:10). They therefore enjoy *"the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace"* (Ephesians 4:3) and, on the basis of that unity, the ***God-given, intimate relationship that exists between those who are truly one in faith and confession in both doctrine and***

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[8] Concordia Lutheran Conference, *CONSTITUTION,* Article VI, 1.

[9] *A Sketch of the Doctrinal Position of the Concordia Lutheran Conference*, p. 9.

practice. For that reason, and only for that reason, we legitimately exercise Christian fellowship in this wider context and engage in joint church work and worship with those who are our true brethren. (Needless to say, we repudiate the kind of loose fellowship practiced by most Lutheran church bodies today, where differences in doctrine and practice *within their own midst* are regarded as "healthy pluralism" and not at all divisive of their fellowship! Concerning such aberrations, more will be said in the third part of our essay.)

How do the member congregations of our ***Concordia Lutheran Conference*** exercise Christian fellowship in their joint church work and worship? Our congregations and their members have the privilege of worshiping together, both privately and publicly, as brethren in the faith. Provided that they are in good standing in their home congregations, members may be received as guest communicants at one another's altars. Their pastors may exchange pulpits at the invitations of one another's congregations. They gather together at annual conventions for joint edification from the Word of God in essays, sermons, and devotions; for joint worship and praise of the God of all grace, who is the Author and Finisher of their faith, of their unity, and of their fellowship; for the joint consideration of mutual problems and the joint carrying out of mutual endeavors; and for joint participation in the Holy Supper of their Savior's body and blood as guests of the local host congregation. And as to the specific projects upon which they work together, the *Objects of the Conference* summarize them simply and concisely as follows:

> 1. The conservation of the unity of the true faith (including the exercise of due care in the reception of new member congregations and pastors).
>
> 2. Joint testimony and defense against all public errors in doctrine and practice (including "doctrinal discipline" in our own midst so that no one is permitted to remain in membership or fellowship who departs from our confessional position in doctrine or practice and refuses to heed correction).
>
> 3. Joint effort toward God-pleasing union with other Lutherans, namely, such union as is based upon the

unity of the spirit —full agreement in doctrine and practice on the basis of God's Word.

4. Joint extension of the Kingdom of God through cooperative mission work of our congregations.

5. The adequate training of pastors for the work of the ministry in our midst, and of parochial school teachers and other helps to the ministry.

6. The publication and distribution of orthodox religious books, periodicals, and other literature for the promotion of the true faith.

7. The endeavor to bring about the best possible uniformity in orders of service, church customs, and other congregational externals, without, however, abridging any congregation's right in matters indifferent (*adiaphora*).[10]

It bears repeating at this juncture, before beginning the third part of our essay, that, contrary to common jargon even among those who know (or should know) the principles of fellowship, **we** do not "establish" fellowship between ourselves and others, as if fellowship were something to be manipulated, granted, and withdrawn as a religious favor or perquisite. Fellowship is a treasured gift of **God**, who establishes this blessed relationship between His children on the basis of the **unity** into which **He** brings us through His precious Word. We can only "recognize" fellowship where it already exists and "exercise" it in accordance with God's will as we continue in His Word and walk in His ways as the fruit of saving faith in Christ Jesus. We **can**, however, ***forsake*** the foundation of faith, ***destroy*** our unity and thus ***scuttle*** our fellowship if we do not give due heed to its preservation in our midst. *"From this preserve us, heavenly Father!"*

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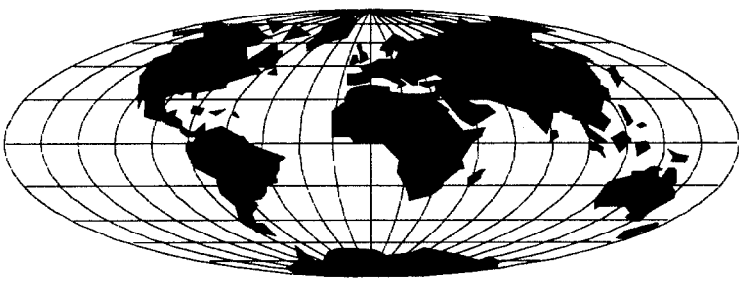
[10] Concordia Lutheran Conference, *CONSTITUTION,* Article III.

Around the World



with editorial comment
by M. L. Natterer

Lutherans took a step toward lifting the condemnations they and the Roman Catholic Church heaped on one another during the 16th-century battles that split Western Christianity. The nation's largest Lutheran church Tuesday declared the two religious bodies agree that all persons depend on the grace of God — and not human merit — for their salvation. Delegates to the Church-wide Assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America voted 958-25 to approve the statement ... Delegates stood and applauded after approving the agreement on justification by faith alone — the issue at the heart of the Reformation. The Catholic Church is studying the document. So far, the two largest churches of the Lutheran World Federation, the 5.2 million-member ELCA and the Church of Sweden, have endorsed the declaration. The 1997 declaration was drawn up by an international group of Catholic and Lutheran theologians. It is being sent to the 123 member churches of the federation and the Vatican for approval. In rejecting Reformation stereo-types that Catholics believe they can earn their salvation, the declaration said 16th-century condemnations of Catholic teachings in Lutheran confessions no longer apply. (Albany (OR) Democrat-Herald, Aug. 20, 1997)

It is almost beyond comprehension that those who would claim to be Lutheran pastors and professors could possibly agree with the Roman Catholic position on the doctrine of justification! TRUE Lutheran teaching is the Biblical teaching! And what does the Bible teach concerning justification before God? "God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them" (II Cor. 5:19). God so loved the world that He sent His only begotten Son, who willingly sacrificed Himself as our

Substitute and was then raised from the dead by God the Father, who accepted His Son's substitutional sacrifice, and thereby declared the whole world to be righteous, forgiving the sins of all mankind. Jesus "was delivered for our offences, and was raised again for our justification" (Rom. 4:25). And he who accepts Jesus as his Savior from sin, death, and hell is now a dear child of the heavenly Father through faith in Jesus and has the promise of eternal life. All of this is without any merit, worthiness, or works, on the part of the individual. We are justified by grace! "Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us ... being justified by His grace, we should be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life" (Titus 3:5-7). "And if by grace, then is it no more of works: otherwise grace is no more grace. But if it be of works, then is it no more grace: otherwise work is no more work" (Rom. 11:6). In sharp contrast to this pure, comforting teaching of Holy Writ, the OFFICIAL teaching of the Roman Catholic Church blasphemously states, "If any one saith that justifying faith is nothing else but confidence in the divine mercy, which remits sins for Christ's sake, or that this confidence alone is that whereby we are justified: let him be accursed" (Council of Trent, sess. VI, can. 11,12). Note well: "it is being sent to ... the Vatican for approval!"

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