

# We are Reborn to the Family of God

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## OUTLINE

### Part One: We Were Not a Family

- Genesis 3-11: An illustration of the sad and sordid consequences of the loss of what mankind had possessed from creation
- “In Adam we have all been one, One huge rebellious man”
- The only togetherness we enjoyed:
  - A common desire to do our own thing at the expense of everyone else
  - The prospect of spending eternity together in hell

### Part Two: We Are a Family—by the Grace of God

- Chosen
- Redeemed
- Reborn
  - By the gospel
  - Into one family
- A unity to treasure

### Part Three: We Live Together As a Family—to the Glory of God

- We Love One Another
  - ❖ The *Pattern* for love
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    - The 1 Corinthians 13 pattern
  - ❖ *Pardon* for lovelessness: The blood of Christ
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- We Protect One Another
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    - What to do with the truth God has given us:
      - Guard it
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      - Avoid those who teach contrary to it
  - ❖ Do we have a monopoly on the truth?

“Brothers and sisters, go in peace. Live in harmony with one another. Serve the Lord with gladness.” By now these words are familiar to most of us. They introduce the benediction in both the Service of Word and Sacrament and the Service of the Word in *Christian Worship*. These words presuppose something, something we may take for granted, something we may pass by without much thought, something that may fall to register in our minds and hearts as the great and wondrous blessing it is. I am referring to the fact that we can call one another brothers and sisters, that we are family.

With the words “brothers and sisters” I am speaking, of course, not about the physical family but about the spiritual family, the family in which each of us can call God our dear Father, Jesus Christ our Elder Brother, and one another beloved brothers and sisters in Christ. As the title for this presentation suggests, membership in this family comes not from being *born* into it but from being *reborn* into it. And that is what I invite you to ponder on with me this morning the wondrous miracle and tremendous reality of the family of believers into which we have been reborn. We will take note of three things: 1) we were not a family; 2) we are a family—by the grace of God; and 3) we live together as a family—to the glory of God.

### **Part One: We Were Not a Family**

First, we were not a family. I don’t have to spend much time talking about how the whole human race lost its membership in the family of God. Nor do I have to elaborate much on the sad and sordid consequences of the loss of what mankind had possessed from creation. Just a brief perusal of Genesis 3-11 tells the story how, following the fall, the perfect unity of the family God created disappeared. Adam, intent on getting off the hook, pins the blame for the fall on the woman, the woman God had given him.

This was just the beginning. Love of brother for brother is replaced by hatred: Cain kills his brother Abel. That was not just an isolated event: “The Lord saw how great mankind’s wickedness on the earth had become and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time” (Ge 6-5). Mankind, created to give glory to God the Father as Creator and to live in harmony with one another as part of the family of God, was now doing just the opposite. Even the devastating judgment of the flood did not alter that situation. “Let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves” (Ge 11:4). So did unregenerate man boast after the Flood on the Plain of Shinar, a far cry from fulfilling the purpose of our Creator God and Father. The people whom he had formed for himself that they might in joyful unity of heart and purpose proclaim the Father’s praises were instead egotistically intent on proclaiming their own praises.

The result? “The Lord scattered them over the face of the whole earth.” God’s created children, created to serve the Lord in gladness, in God-pleasing, God-honoring harmony with one another, are now scattered to the four winds—separated by language and, in time, by increasingly different cultures, and especially by sin that affects both the vertical relationship with God and the horizontal relationship with one another.

This was the world into which each of us—without exception—was born. As Martin Franzmann put it, “In Adam we have all been one, one huge rebellious man.” St. Paul writes:

As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath (Eph 2:1-3).

As *children* of the world, we followed the *ways* of the world. Our head was not the ruler of the kingdom of heaven but “the ruler of the kingdom of the air,” Luther’s “old evil foe” who now means deadly woe,” whose “deep guile and great might are his dread arms in fight.” It was the old evil foe’s spirit, not the *Holy Spirit*, which was at work in us, causing us, as Paul says, to be “gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts.”

“At one time” Paul tells Titus, “we too were foolish, disobedient... and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures. We lived in malice and envy, being hated [or, perhaps, “hateful”] and hating one another” (Tit

3:3). This was a far cry from the grand design of our Creator that we live together as family under God, loved by and loving one another!

Instead, we—all of us, no exceptions—were by nature “objects of wrath,” sinners allied with and controlled by Satan, on our way to hell, and powerless to change our situation. We were not a family. The only togetherness we enjoyed was a common desire to do our own thing at the expense of anyone and everyone else and the prospect of spending eternity together in hell.

### **Part Two: We Are a Family—by the Grace of God**

We were not a family, but now we are a family—by the grace of God. It had to be by God’s grace, didn’t it, since we were “dead” in transgressions and sins, *unable* to change our situation and, even if we were able, *unwilling* to do so since by nature we were also enemies of God and each other.

By the grace of God we have become a family. This is the way Paul begins his letter to the Ephesians: Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing Christ. For he *chose* us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he *predestined* us to be *adopted as his sons* through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. In him we have *redemption* through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding (Eph 1:3-8).

Note the two actions here, both God’s doing entirely: Before the creation of the world he “*chose* us,” “*predestined* us to be adopted as his sons” and then he *redeemed* us. Both actions were solely the work of God. He chose us “in accordance with *his* pleasure and will.” Christ redeemed us “in accordance with the riches of God’s grace that he lavished on us.” The Greek word for “lavished” has in it the idea of overflowing. In an act of overflowing grace God chose us to be his children and in Christ redeemed us, paid the price of the death penalty for sin so that we now have the forgiveness of sins.

All that was needed was some kind of connecting link, a way to apply the benefits of Christ’s redemption to the hearts of those whom God had chosen and thus give them a brand new start. That God has supplied in the gospel, “the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes,” the gospel in Word and the gospel in Sacrament. Through the gospel those who were born as sinners are reborn as saints. Peter writes, “You have been born again, not of perishable seed [i.e., he is not talking about physical birth here] but imperishable, through the living and enduring Word of God” (1 Pe 2:23). “You were saved,” writes Paul to Titus, “through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit” (Tit 3:5), an obvious reference to baptism.

Chosen, redeemed, reborn—all by God’s grace—we are now a part of the one family of God, as Paul emphasizes when writing to the Ephesians: “There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called—one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (Eph 4:4-6).

We have been reborn into one family under one God. And that links us all together. Paul tells the Galatians. “You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus....There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Ga 3:26-28).

This is seen so dramatically in the way that the Jews and Gentiles, formerly separated from each other by a wide chasm, were united as brothers and sisters. Paul writes to the Ephesians:

Remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called “uncircumcised” by those who call themselves “the circumcision”...—remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you [Gentiles] who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made the two [Jew and Gentile] one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create

in himself one new man [children of God] out of the two [Jew and Gentile], thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. (Eph 2:11-16).

For a practical example of what this means we need only to look to the closing verses of Paul's final letter, his second one to Timothy, where he makes mention of people with names like Tubules, Pudens, Linus, and Claudia (2 Ti 4:21). What is notable about these names is that none of them are Jewish. These are Romans, Gentiles. And Paul, a Jew, calls them "brothers."

We find it difficult, perhaps, to comprehend the magnitude of this miracle—the miracle of bringing together into one family those, who were far away (Gentiles) and those who were near (Jews). Wouldn't it astound the world today if all of a sudden Jews and Arabs, who have been at each other's throats for the 50 years the Jewish state has existed in Palestine, should now not just give up fighting but actually become friends? That *did* happen 2000 years ago between Jews and Gentiles. Enemies became friends, became family, as both were "reconciled ... to God through the cross by which [God] put to death their hostility." Reconciled to God they were also reconciled to each other. They could call each other brothers and sisters.

St. Paul is lavish in his use of the imagery of family when he writes to congregations and individuals. Timothy is "my son" (1 Ti 1: 18). Titus is "my true son in our common faith" (Tit 1:4)—a faith that had joined Paul, a Jew, and Titus, a Gentile, into one family. Tychicus is "a dear brother" (Co 4:7). Onesimus, a slave, is likewise a "faithful and dear brother" (Co 4:9). The Colossian Christians are "holy and faithful brothers in Christ" (Co 1:2).

There is always a connectedness in Paul's letters. The church is family. God is Father. Jesus Christ is elder brother. Believers are children of God and thus brothers and sisters of one another. The church is *body*. Christ is the Head. We are the members, attached by rebirth to the Head and, *through* the Head, to one another.

Every time we come to the Lord's Table together we are expressing this connectedness to Christ and through Christ to each other. "Because there is one loaf," writes Paul, "we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf" (1 Co 10: 17).

This unity in the family of God is something to be enjoyed, to be savored, to be treasured. It is obvious from a reading of Paul's letters that he valued highly those who with him had been reborn into the family of God. Listen!

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church in Cenchrea.... She has been a great help to many people, including me. Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus. They risked their lives for me....Greet also the church that meets at their house. Greet my dear friend Epenetus, who was the first convert to Christ in the province of Asia. Greet Mary, who worked very hard for you. Greet Andronicus and Junias, my relatives who have been in prison with me.... Greet Ampliatus, whom I love in the Lord. Greet Urbanus, our fellow worker in Christ, and my dear friend Stachys. Greet Apelles, tested and approved in Christ. Greet those who belong to the household of Aristobulus. Greet Herodion, my relative. Greet those in the household of Narcissus who are in the Lord. Greet Tryphena and Tryphosa, those women who work hard in the Lord. Greet my dear friend Persis, another woman who has worked very hard in the Lord. Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, and his mother, who has been a mother to me, too. Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hennes, Patrobas, Hernias and the brothers with them. Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas and all the saints with them. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ send greetings (Ro 16:1-16).

These are all brothers and sisters, chosen, redeemed, reborn by the gospel to faith and membership in the family of God. Paul rejoices in every single one of them.

Paul himself, as you know, was what we today would call an adult convert. Sometimes those converted later in life appreciate this fellowship by rebirth more than those who by God's grace were reborn into the family of God through baptism 'in the early days of their lives. More than once in the course of my parish ministry a new convert confided in me that he or she felt closer to the members of the congregation than to the

members of his or her own family who were still unbelievers. It shouldn't come as a surprise to hear that. There is nothing that can bind hearts closer together—not even romantic love—than being bound together into the family of God by our Lord God who chose us and through Christ redeemed us and through the Holy Spirit gave us a rebirth by means of the gospel.

### **Part Three: We Live Together As a Family—to the Glory of God**

We were not a family. We have become a family—by the grace of God. Now, thirdly, we live together as a family—to the glory of God. In what follows we are going to zero in on two aspects of our lives together as children of God: We love one another and we protect one another.

#### **1. We Love One Another**

It is instructive to note how frequently the New Testament uses the reciprocal pronoun, often translated as “one another” or “each other,” with reference to those who have been reborn into the family of God—especially in connection with the word love (Greek *agape*). “A new command I give you: Love one another,” says Jesus. “As I have loved you, so you must love one another” (Jn 13:34).

These words were repeated in essentially the same form some 60 years later by the Apostle John who had heard Jesus speak them in the first place. John writes in his First Epistle: “This is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another” (1 Jn 3:11). Again: “This is his command: to believe ‘in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us’ (1 Jn 3:23). And again: “Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another” (1 Jn 4:11).

The Apostle Paul also emphasizes the practice of reciprocal love on the part of those reborn into the family of God. He writes to the Romans: “Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves” (Ro 12: 10). And, “Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law (Ro 13:8).

We also find encouragement to reciprocal love in the general epistles. The author of Hebrews writes: “Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds” (Heb 10:24). Peter encourages his readers: “Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, love one another deeply, from the heart” (1 Pt 1:22).

Love one another. This is something we could not do, of course, before we were reborn into the family of God. A distinctive mark of BC, before Christ, life is hatred-hatred of God and hatred of one another. Those without Christ are both unable and unwilling to love God or each other. Those who have been reborn into the family of God are able and willing to love God and one another. In fact, a distinguishing mark of those who have been reborn into the family of God is the love that they have for one another. Jesus says, “By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (Jn 13:35). The Apostle John wrote, “Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God [i.e., love for one another is evidence of our rebirth]” (1 Jn 4:7).

I know that the word love is bandied about so much that it has perhaps lost its luster. In the way that it is used by many it has become a soft, wishy-washy word that excuses any and all behavioral or doctrinal aberrations. That, however, is no reason for us to ignore it, in view of the emphasis our Savior and his apostles put on it. Rather, we need to seek to understand correctly the scriptural meaning of love and then apply it rightly to our lives together in the family of God.

That we can do because the Scriptures reveal a *pattern* for love and they also provide *power* for love. The pattern for our love is clear: “Love each other as [literally, “in the same way as”] I have loved you” (Jn 15:12). So says our Lord.

Well, how did our Lord love us?

- 1 Jn 4: 10 - This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.
- Jn 3:16 - God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

- Ro 5:6-8 - You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.
- Jn 15:13 - Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.

I can think of at least five adjectives to describe love like that:

- God's love was *unilateral*: "Not that we loved God—so that God had something to respond to, "but that he loved us." It did not depend on who we were or what we had done.
- God's love was *active*: "He sent his Son." It was more than a feeling.
- God's love was *giving*: "God so loved the world that he gave..."
- God's love was *unselfish*: "For a good man someone might possibly dare to die"—as might a parent who dies while trying to rescue his child from a burning building. "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."
- God's love was *sacrificial*: "He laid down his life for his friends." One can give no more than that.

That's the pattern. That's the *agape* of God in action—unilateral, active, giving, unselfish, sacrificial.

First Corinthians 13 gives us an additional pattern for love. Known more for its use at weddings, its application is really for all Christians.

"Love is patient—parents and teachers with children, pastors with members, members with pastors. Paul writes, "Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love" (Eph 4:2). With our Lord, "a bruised reed we will not break and a smoldering wick we will not snuff out" (Isa 42:23), even if we have the power to do so.

"Love is kind." Paul urges the Ephesians, "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you" (Eph 4:32). He advises the Christians in Thessalonica, "Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always try to be kind to each other" (1 Th 5:15). He warns the Galatians, "If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other" (Ga 5: 15). In my early years in the ministry I made use of Oswald Riess' Bible information course, "What Does the Bible Say?" In his course notes he reproduced a poem that I have sought to measure my actions by over the years. It's called "Three Gates of Gold," and goes like this:

If you are tempted to reveal a tale  
Someone about another has told,  
Make it pass before you speak  
Three gates of gold  
Three narrow gates: first—Is it true?  
Then, Is it needful?  
And there is the last and narrowest:  
Is it kind?  
And if at last it leave your lips  
And passes through these gateways three,  
Then you the tale may tell,  
Nor fear what the result may be.

"Love does not envy." Paul counsels the Galatians, "Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other" (Ga 5:26). Envy, of course, is selfishness. It is being more interested in what I can get for myself, even at the expense of others, than what I can give to my brother or sister in Christ.

"Love does not boast, it is not proud." "All of you," writes the Apostle Peter, "clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, 'God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble'" (1 Pt 5:5). Members of a conservative church body such as ours must always be on guard against an attitude which gives the impression that we are better than others or that *we* are the ones who have kept *ourselves* pure. What do we have that has not been given to us?

“Love is not rude.” “Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths,” Paul exhorts the Ephesians, “but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen” (Eph 4:29).

“Love is not self-seeking.” Love subordinates personal wants and desires to the needs of my brothers and sisters in Christ. Instead of being ‘intent on serving self, its desire is to “serve one another in love” (Ga 5:13), as Paul urges the Galatians to do. Unselfish love leads us to submit to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Eph 5:2 1), to “offer hospitality to one another” (1 Pt 4:9), to “teach and admonish one another” (Co 3:16), and to “keep on praying for” one another (Eph 6:18). How much time, brothers, do we spend at God’s throne of grace in prayer *for* one another? Do we perhaps need to spend more time in prayer for each other than in grumbling *about* each other?

“Love is not easily angered.” St. Paul urges us, “Let us make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification [building up one another]” (Ro 14:19). Spiritual leaders need to heed this also. Paul instructs Pastor Timothy: “The Lord’s servant must not quarrel [must not be contentious]; ...Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, “in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth” (2 Ti 2:24-25).

“Love keeps no record of wrongs,” just like our Lord who does not mark our iniquities (for then who could stand?); but it is quick to forgive. “Bear with each other,” writes Paul to the Colossians, “and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you” (Co 3:13). Love is ready to forgive when wronged. It is also quick to confess when wrong, as God’s Word urges us: “Confess your sins to each other” (Ja 5:16). Again, note the reciprocal pronoun. Members of the family can help each other and be helped as they in repentance receive absolution from those they have wronged and as they grant absolution to repentant brothers and sisters who have wronged them.

“Love does not delight in evil, but rejoices with the truth.” I will have more to say about this later—the fact that love and concern for the truth go hand in hand.

“Love always protects.” The Greek word has the idea of covering. Love keeps a lid on things. It is not quick to pass on to others a juicy tidbit of gossip. “Brothers,” James writes, “do not slander [literally, “speak evil of”] one another” (Ja 4:11). Love doesn’t put blinders on, but it goes first, not to others, but to the person involved and brings up the matter, as Jesus says, “just between the two of you” (Mt 18:15).

“Love always trusts.” This doesn’t mean that love is gullible, but it does mean that it will always, as Luther puts it, take our neighbor’s “words and actions in the kindest possible way.” It assumes the best about the person since he or she is a brother or sister reborn by the same grace of God into the same family.

“Love always hopes, always perseveres.” It is optimistic. It hopes for the best. And even when hopes are repeatedly disappointed, it does not give up hoping.

Love, reciprocal love, is *the* hallmark of living together as a family to the glory of God. Writing to the Colossians, Paul says, “As God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity” (Co 3:12-14). Love is the grace, the virtue that binds all the other graces together. “The only thing that counts,” writes Paul to the Galatians, “is faith expressing itself through love” (Ga 5:6).

In 1 Corinthians 13 St. Paul reminds us, to take just one example of the several he cites, “If I have ... all knowledge ... but have not love, I am nothing” (1 Co 13:2). Paul is not putting down knowledge here, of course, knowing the truth of God’s revelation. But he is making it clear that it is not only *what* you know that is important but *how you use* what you know. As we bring to others in the family of God—to our children, to our school classes, to our congregations, to our fellow church workers—that which we know because God has revealed it to us in his Word, do we do so with patience, with kindness, with humility, with gentleness? Does the 1 Corinthians 13 pattern of *agape* underlie and surround our dealings with one another?

If you are anything like me, then you are thankful that God not only gives us the *pattern* for practicing *agape*, but also is there to grant us *pardon* for our frequent failure to do so. “If we confess our sins,” his Word promises, “[God] is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness” (1 Jn 1:9). That he will do for the sake of “the blood of Jesus, his Son,” that holy precious blood which “purifies us from all unrighteousness” (1 Jn 1:7).

With pardon also comes *power*, power to walk “in closer conformity to the biblical pattern of love for one another as members of one family. Paul writes in Romans 5: “God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us” (Ro 5:5). He continues to do just that every time the good news, the gospel, of absolution is spoken. So, let us be of good cheer. Our sins are forgiven. Believe and rejoice in that truth. And then, in our joy and by his power let us love one another even more intensely.

We have spent quite a bit of time on the reciprocal love aspect of living together as a family. We’ve done so for two reasons. For one thing, I wanted us to have the opportunity to ponder again on the marvelous mercy of our God who has brought us formerly loveless, hateful creatures into his family where we—loved by our God ‘in Christ—are now able to love our brothers and sisters and also be loved by them, all to the glory of our God. That’s worth marveling over.

Secondly, I felt it good to remind all of us that we dare not be selective in our use of God’s Word. We’re going to be talking next about protecting one another within the family of God, about the need to practice church discipline and to warn against false teachings and teachers. This means that we must at times be quite blunt and forthright. This means that at times we must take stands that will not win popularity contests. But it does *not* mean that we can forget about love, about being patient, kind, considerate, and humble in our dealings with one another. Speak the truth, yes, but we will want to be, as the Scriptures say, “speaking the truth in love” (Eph 4:15). Failure to do both—either to speak the truth or to do so in love—places us in danger of having Jesus’ reprimand of the Pharisees come down on us also: “You should have practiced the latter without neglecting the former” (Mt 23:23).

## **2. We Protect One Another**

So, let’s look now at a second key way by which we children of God live together as a family to the glory of God: We protect one another. This topic could have been placed under the broad heading of love, of course, since family members who love one another will naturally seek to protect one another from danger. But with the attention the Scriptures give to this subject and the present atmosphere of our society, it is appropriate to set it apart for special treatment. It is also appropriate to do so because we perhaps need to reinforce one another here.

Protecting one another in the church has to do with distinguishing between truth and falsehood and between right and wrong. The spirit of our times has blurred the distinction between these opposites. It has, in fact, almost totally obliterated any distinction between them. What is true to me is true and what is true to you is true—even if what you believe to be true and what I believe to be true are on opposite ends of a spectrum. What is right to me is right and what is right to you is right, again, even if we have diametrically opposed ideas as to what constitutes right and wrong. That is the climate in our age of spiritual and moral relativism.

I’ll give just one example of the hundreds that could be cited to illustrate this. The religion page of the June 14, 1997, edition of the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* reported on proposals to be voted on this summer by three large Reformed bodies (the Reformed Church in America, the Presbyterian Church USA, and the United Church of Christ), by the Episcopalian church, and by the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA). If these proposals are adopted by all (as of this date they have been adopted by some), it would bring the major share of Lutherans in the United States, three major Reformed bodies, and the entire Episcopalian church into full communion fellowship with each other. The article stated that committees from these three groups had debated for some time “whether it was proper for Lutherans, who believe they really are receiving the body and blood of Jesus Christ, to commune with Reformed Christians for whom the bread and wine are symbols of Jesus’ real presence.” Since they could not agree on this doctrine, they put together a document ironically entitled the Formula of Agreement, which will be voted on by these three groupings. This document permits the



participating bodies to continue to disagree about the manner of Christ's presence "in the Lord's Supper—even while they commune together.

The article quoted Rev. Douglas Fromm, Associate for Ecumenical Relations for the Reformed Church in America: "What we came to understand in a recent dialogue was that each side with its own perspective was right. We are holding each other in a tension of completeness"—whatever that might mean. Rev. Lowell Almen, Secretary of the ELCA, called the different ways of speaking about the Lord's Supper "facets on the one diamond of Christ's presence." This is a far cry from Luther at the Marburg Colloquy, which concluded with Luther telling Zwingli, "You have a different spirit than we." But such is the spirit, the climate, of our times—where everything is true or relatively so.

### **We Protect One Another Through the Responsible, Loving Practice of Church Discipline**

This is certainly not the spirit of the Scriptures. "If your brother sins," says Jesus in the familiar Matthew 18 passage. There is such a thing as sin, as deviating from the line of truth and falsehood, right and wrong. Sin, any sin, is serious. Sin separates people, separates them from their God and from their brothers and sisters in the family of God. Left to run its course, sin will separate people eternally from the family of God and from God himself. That is why we practice church discipline. It's what we do in the family of God to protect one another.

The Apostle Paul did not hesitate to practice church discipline—always with the purpose of doing everything possible to protect the soul of the brother so that on the last day he would not have to hear the terrible words, "Depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels." Paul instructed the congregation at Corinth, which had taken a *laissez faire* attitude toward a man guilty of the sin of incest: "When you are assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present, hand this man over to Satan" (1 Co 5:4-5a). But note the purpose: "so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord" (1 Co 5:5b). He tells Timothy about Hymenaeus and Alexander, who had "shipwrecked their faith," even denying the resurrection, "I have handed [them] over to Satan." Why? That they might be "taught not to blaspheme" (1 Ti 1:20).

The consistent and firm, yet patient and loving, practice of church discipline is one key way by which we today protect the members of the family, both individually and collectively. Every pastor has heard at his ordination and each time he has been installed to serve in a new congregation these words of Paul to Timothy: "Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction" (2 Ti 4:2). *Correcting*, exposing error, bringing it to light, and *rebuking*, reproving, warning sternly, and doing this "with great patience and careful instruction—that's an important part of a pastor's calling through which the Lord protects the flock.

Many of you lay delegates here, I'm sure, are presently serving or have served as elders in your congregation. Elders share with their pastor the responsibility to "correct" and "rebuke." It is often difficult to do so, especially if the one needing rebuke is a prominent member of the congregation, or a generous contributor, or if to rebuke this one person will upset his many relatives in the congregation.

But what happens if we turn a blind eye to the growing number of unmarried "live-ins" within our congregations? What happens if we do not "correct" or "rebuke" and, if necessary, even excommunicate the person who, in defiance of God's clear Word, insists on obtaining a non-scriptural divorce? What happens if we fail to discipline those who are despising Word and Sacrament or if we simply drop them from the membership roll because of non-attendance and/or non-contributions? What care are we bestowing on those souls by acting as though their sin is not a sin? Are we protecting a brother or sister's soul by permitting him or her to live in unrepented sin without rebuke? What are we saying to all the members of our congregation if we fail to "correct" and "rebuke" open sin in the congregation? Are we not saying, "Such behavior is not all that bad"? And with that are we not inviting, perhaps enticing, other brothers and sisters to follow the same path?

Living together as a family to the glory of God means being consumed with concern about one another's souls, it means risking ridicule for being narrow-minded, risking hostility for daring to say, "Thus saith the Lord," risking rejection for standing up for what is clearly right and wrong. Is it worth it? Well, how valuable is

a soul? If unrepented sin ultimately condemns a person to hell, is it not worth doing everything to protect a person from that fate so that, as Paul put it, “His spirit [may be] saved on the day of the Lord”? The answer, I will assume, is obvious to you.

### **We Protect One Another Through the Responsible, Loving Practice of Church Fellowship**

Responsible, loving practice of church discipline is one way we protect each other in the family. A second way is through a responsible, loving practice of what we have come to call church fellowship.

There are probably few, if any, doctrines held by the WELS that draw more questions even among WELS members—than the doctrine of church fellowship. If the practice of church discipline is relatively rare in our day, the practice of church fellowship, the “avoid them” aspect of this doctrine in particular, is even more rare. It’s simply out of synch with our times. I’ve been reading with interest the Question and Answer section in our new WELS web page on the Internet. In the first few months that it appeared, about one-fourth of the questions dealt in one way or another with the subject of fellowship. One person, for example, asked. “I’ve heard that your church body believes that its members should avoid other Christians whose beliefs are different. Is this really part of your church body’s doctrinal stand? I don’t think that a church in the 20<sup>th</sup> century would actually believe such a thing. Please let me know, since the person who told me this swears that he knows this for a fact.”

My intent in what follows is not to repeat the doctrinal studies others have done over the years. Those interested in a thorough study of the matter would do well to purchase the 1996 NPH publication, *Essays on Church Fellowship*, compiled by NPH editor, Curtis Jahn. To put it very briefly, this is the doctrine: Practice fellowship, express your faith jointly, with those who hold to the truth of the Word; do not practice fellowship, do not express your faith jointly, with those who deviate from the truth. It’s not always that simple in application, of course, for a number of reasons:

- We need to determine what a person’s confession is.
- We need to determine if the person is holding to a particular position in ignorance or in willful defiance of the Word.
- We need to determine what potential for offense, i.e., causing another person to stumble, there may be. Therefore in some cases the application between the private practice of fellowship and the public practice may be different.
- We need to determine whether a particular joint action truly is a practice of fellowship, a joint expression of faith. Some actions are clearly always joint expressions of faith: joint prayer, for example, and joint worship (often called pulpit and altar fellowship). Other actions aren’t so clear-cut. Shaking hands with a person, for example, more often than not has no religious connotations; but on certain occasions its intent might be to symbolize unity of faith.
- We need to determine whether a biblical doctrine is involved or whether it is a matter of adiaphora, something neither commanded nor forbidden in the Scriptures and which therefore should not be divisive among Christians. The Formula of Concord states:

A distinction should and must by all means be observed between unnecessary and useless wrangling, on the one hand, whereby the Church ought not to be disturbed, since it destroys more than it builds up, and necessary controversy, on the other hand, as, when such a controversy occurs as involves the articles of faith ... where for the defense of the truth the false opposite doctrine must be reproved (Thorough Declaration, “Of Articles in Controversy,” 15).

Yet, it is still basically simple: Practice fellowship with those who hold to the truth of the Scriptures; don’t practice fellowship with those who don’t.

This is not a new teaching. The intent of the Lutheran Confessions was, as the final confessional writing, the Formula of Concord, puts it, “to afford the Christian reader, who delights in and has a love for the divine truth, clear and correct information concerning each and every controverted article of our Christian religion, as to what he should regard and receive as right and true according to God’s Word... and what he should reject, shun, and avoid as false and wrong” (Thorough Declaration, “Of Articles in Controversy,” 16).

Again and again the Confessions use terminology that makes it very clear that their purpose was to sharply distinguish between true teachings and teachers to be embraced and false teachings and teachers to be avoided. That is why the Formula of Concord was written in thesis/antithesis form, i.e., stating the true doctrine and then stating the opposite, false doctrine. This was done in order that “the foundation of divine truth might be manifest in all articles, and that all unlawful, doubtful, suspicious, and condemned doctrines, wherever and in whatever books they may be found, and whoever may have written them, or even now may be disposed to defend them, might be exposed, so that everyone may be faithfully warned against the errors” (*Formula of Concord*, Thorough Declaration, “Of Articles in Controversy,” 19-20).

This has been the teaching of orthodox Lutheranism from the time of the Reformation; but little by little it has been discarded by most Lutheran bodies. Two reasons especially come to mind. The first, and major, reason is that many bodies no longer embrace the Bible in its entirety as the inspired, inerrant Word of God. If God does not speak clearly, unambiguously, and authoritatively to his Church, then it should not be surprising that people put their own spin on things. This will inevitably lead people to follow the path of least resistance. Which leads to a second reason why most Lutheran bodies no longer hold to the historic Lutheran practice of fellowship: It’s not the popular thing to do in our society. It’s more popular, in the name of tolerance, to gloss over differences as minor variations in interpretation than to say, as the Lutheran Confessions say over and over, that false doctrine and false teachers shall not be tolerated in our midst.

Difficult as it may be (and it will probably become more difficult as we draw closer to the end), this is a doctrine to which we must continue to hold firmly. It is what the Scriptures teach and it is a major way by which we protect one another within the family of God.

Error “spreads like gangrene,” says St. Paul (2 Ti 2:16). Slowly but surely gangrene, if it is not cut out, kills. So it is with error. Error is poison to the soul. Every once and a while we read about a diabolical scheme hatched by a husband or wife to kill his or her spouse over a period of time by putting minute amounts of poison into his or her food. It might take longer than giving a massive amount of poison all at once, but the end result is the same. Poison is poison, whether in a massive one-time dose or in small amounts accumulating in the body over a period of months.

Whole church bodies have been poisoned unawares through the injection of little bits of error over an extended period of time, as teachers ask Satan’s “Has God really said?” about this doctrine or that, with the result that in time very little of the truth is left. Just look at what has happened to much of Lutheranism in our country and the world. It did not occur all at once but little by little as people let down their guard, permitting error to coexist with the truth, only in time to find that error had taken over.

There is only one truth and that is to be found in the message God has given to us. Paul tells the Galatians that the “different gospel” to which they were turning “is really no gospel at all” (Ga 1:6-7). There is truth and there is error, not Truth A and Truth B.

What shall we do with the truth God has given to us?

1. The Lord calls upon us to *guard* the truth.

In his first letter to Timothy Paul tells him, “Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to your care. Turn away from godless chatter and the opposing ideas of what is falsely called knowledge” (1 Ti 6:20). Paul underscores the importance of doing this by repeating essentially the same command in his second letter to Timothy: “Guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you—guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us” (2 Ti 1: 14). The book of Jude talks about the need to “contend for the faith,” the body of truth, “that was once for all entrusted to the saints” (Jude 3). It is a solemn trust: Guard the truth. Contend for the truth.

2. The Lord calls upon us to *continue in* the truth.

Paul tells Timothy: “Continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of. . . All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Ti 3:14,17).

3. The Lord calls upon us to *teach* the truth.

Paul says to Titus, “You must teach what is in accord with sound doctrine” (Tit 2: 1). “Sound doctrine,” that’s one of the phrases we find again and again in the Pastoral Epistles. Only sound doctrine, i.e., the truth, preserves and builds one up in the faith.

4. The Lord calls upon us to *pass on* the truth.

Paul encourages Timothy: “The things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others” (2 Ti 2:2). One of our grave responsibilities is to pass on intact to the next generation the whole body of truth we have received.

5. The Lord calls upon us to *warn* against those who would distort and destroy the truth.

I’ve taught the Pastoral Epistles for the 13 years I’ve been at the Seminary. They are beautiful letters of encouragement for two young pastors, Timothy and Titus. At the same time they are filled with warnings against false teachings and teachers. Paul began his first letter to Timothy by warning him against false teachers disturbing the church right then: “As I urged you when I went into Macedonia, stay there in Ephesus so that you may command certain men not to teach false doctrines any longer nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies.... They want to be teachers of the law, but they do not know what they are talking about or what they so confidently affirm” (1 Ti 1:3-4,7). In his second letter Paul warns Timothy about false teachers who would arise in the future: “The time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths” (2 Ti 4:3-4).

It’s not just in the Pastoral Epistles that Paul issues such warnings. He exhorts the Colossians, “See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ” (Co 2:8).

Peter warns in his second epistle: “There will be false teachers among you. They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them bringing swift destruction on themselves” (2 Pt 2: 1). And, of course, our Lord Jesus himself says, “Beware of false prophets” (Mt 7:15). These are just a few of the multitude of passages that permeate the Scriptures warning against false teachers and teachings.

6. The Lord calls upon us to *avoid* those who teach contrary to the truth.

Quite obviously, this means avoiding the practice of fellowship with *unbelievers* as Paul brings out in 2 Corinthians 6: “Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? ... Therefore come out from them and be separate, says the Lord” (2 Co 6:14,17). But the admonition to avoid false teachings and teachers would also include the *heterodox* who mingle truth and error. The error they teach is no less destructive than that which comes from the lips or pen of the unbeliever. So our Lord God, through his inspired spokesman Paul, urges us in the words of Romans 16:17, “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.”

In a paper on Romans 16:17-18, Prof. Armin Panning comments on what is meant by the word “teaching” (Greek *didache*) in this passage:

In the New Testament, *didache* (teaching) seems regularly to refer to a teacher’s whole body of instruction, not simply his exposition of a particular doctrine.... So also here, the *didache* to which the errorists’ teaching runs counter would be the whole truth of God as Paul has presented it very systematically to the Romans in this epistle.... Nothing is said about the motives or the sincerity of conviction that the errorists bring. Nothing is said about the specific doctrines that are being subverted, whether they be major or minor points, fundamental doctrines or non-fundamental. The only thing stated is that by departing from the “teaching which you learned” the errorists are...“causing dissensions and offenses,”...things that are injurious to faith, things that could in fact bring an unwary soul to destruction. Persistently adhered to and carried out to its logical conclusion, every error ultimately is faith-destroying. It is against the bringers of such evil that Paul urges his readers to be on guard.

The truth sets free; error enslaves. Cling to the truth; avoid error. Some might respond, “Aren’t you being a bit arrogant? Do you think you have a monopoly on the truth?” To that we can only reply, “No, we do not. No human being has a monopoly on the truth. But God does. And he has seen fit to reveal his truth in his Word and in his Word alone. So to the Word we must cling with all our heart and soul.” And we must just as earnestly—but always lovingly—warn against and avoid teachings and teachers that go contrary to the Word of truth, even at the risk of being labeled rigid, narrow-minded, intolerant, or worse.

Brothers, it was more than 40 years ago that the WELS detected a change in the way its former sister synod, the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, was interpreting and putting into practice the biblical doctrine of fellowship. This compelled us to dig deeply into the Word and restudy this doctrine. Times of controversy serve the good purpose of forcing one to do this. This resulted in the Theses on Fellowship adopted by the 1959 Synod Convention as a doctrinal statement of our church. The majority of our pastors, teachers, and lay people today did not live through those times. Some perhaps are wondering just how important this doctrine really is. It’s time we thoroughly studied it again, as the Conference of Presidents is urging our pastor and teacher conferences and congregations to do, and give the Holy Spirit the opportunity to impress its truth and its vital importance upon our hearts. For through the loving, responsible practice of church fellowship we protect one another within the family of God.

At one time we were not a family. Now by the grace of God we are a family. As brothers and sisters we have the blessed privilege of living together as a family. We love one another in the same way as Christ loved us, with a 1 Corinthians 13 kind of love. We protect one another through the responsible, loving practice of church discipline and church fellowship. And we do it all to the glory of God.

So, brothers and sisters reborn into the family of God, go in peace. Live in harmony with one another. Serve the Lord with gladness. We are family.