

"CELEBRATING UNITY AMONG THE PASTORS OF OUR FELLOWSHIP"

By my figuring this is the seventy-fifth anniversary of fellowship between the Evangelical Lutheran Synod and the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. Wasn't it in 1920 that the small, courageous Norwegian Synod of the American Lutheran Church joined the Synodical Conference and thus allied themselves in mutual confession? Truly, we have something to celebrate whether this is a banner year or not. We thank God for our faithfulness to the past, by God's grace. We rejoice in our focus at the present. And we jointly pray for God's blessing in our continued fellowship in the future.

I. Our Faithfulness to the Past, By God's Grace

A. Jesus and the Apostles were unified in a close fellowship.

"Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. ... May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me" (John 17:17,23).

I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought (1 Corinthians 1:10).

Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf (1 Corinthians 10:17).

Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit (Ephesians 2:19-22).

It was he [the ascended Lord] who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the full measure of perfection found in Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work (Ephesians 4:11-16).

B. Luther and the Confessions

Luther certainly was not shy about standing squarely on scriptural fellowship principles.

We are surely prepared to observe peace and love with all men, provided that they leave the doctrine of faith perfect and sound for us. If we cannot obtain this, it is useless for them to demand love from us. A curse on a love that is observed at the expense of the doctrine of faith, to which everything must yield - love, an apostle, an angel from heaven, etc! (Quoted in Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly vol.88:3 p.196-197)

If religion is so central, then all human relations must be conditioned by it. Alliances, friendships, and matings will be secure only if grounded in a common faith. Contemporaries were sometimes appalled that Luther would disrupt human relations or churchly unities over a single point of doctrine. To which he replied that he might as well be told it was unreasonable to sever friendship over the single point of strangling his wife or child. To deny God in one point is to attack God in all. (Bainton, Roland H., Here I Stand, 1978, page 174)

The writers of the Lutheran Confessions rightly followed the lead of the Reformer. Fellowship based on a common confession was the foundation for all the Lutheran symbols.

After Luther died, Melanchthon did not have the commitment to doctrinal purity as did his colleague. But in the 1560s and early 1570s God raised up loyal theologians and laymen who carried the banner of confessionalism. Men like Martin Chemnitz, Jakob Andreae, Johann Brenz, David Chytraeus, Christoph Koermer, Joachim Moerlim, and Nikolaus Selnecker, raised the banner of truth and intently sought Biblical fellowship (Klug, Eugene F. Getting into The Formula of Concord, 1977, page 14). As controversies came up they expanded the confession that demonstrates their intent of Christian unity: The Formula of Concord. At the beginning of each article they confirmed the reason for the document: "Our churches, with common consent, do teach ... "

C. The history of our synods

In the early twentieth century conservative American Lutheranism was tested with the election controversy. Does God elect the chosen "in view of" their faith or is God's election absolute. The Norwegian synods thought they had the answer, the modern answer, to maintain "unity" - hear no evil, see no evil, speak no evil. The Madison Agreement of 1912 acknowledged "the legitimacy of both forms of teaching concerning election" (Nelson, E. Clifford, The Lutherans in North America, 1962, page 323).

A small confessional group objected. They sought to maintain true pedigreed fellowship. The direction of the mainstream Norwegian synods was set five years later in the Austin Settlement which led to the merger of the Norwegian Synod, the Norwegian Evangelical Lutheran Synod and United Norwegian Lutheran Church. The minority, few though they were, banded together to form the Norwegian Synod of the American Lutheran Church. These stout hearted men joined the Synodical Conference in 1920, adopting the name Evangelical Lutheran Synod in 1958.

The Joint Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Wisconsin, Minnesota, Michigan, and Other States was also committed to confessionalism. From the beginning in 1872 she was there to help form the Synodical Conference. The merger with other state synods (1892 and 1917) came about only after agreement in doctrine and practice.

How sad but necessary it is to dissolve fellowship. With heavy hearts the Synodical Conference broke-up. Because of improper fellowship practices of the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod and growing doctrinal laxity in that synod, the WELS and ELS withdrew its membership with the federation in 1963 (Lueker, Erwin L., Lutheran Cyclopedia, 1975, page 749).

Purity of doctrine and true biblical fellowship comes at a price, but the fruit is sweet. We have days like today. We celebrate unity among the pastors of our fellowship.

II. Our Focus at the Present, By God's Grace

A. Fellowship

The spectacles that give us the focus is God revealing himself through the Word. Since Scripture is a unit and *cannot be broken* (John 10:35), so those who believe its message wholeheartedly also form a unit and cannot be broken. The unity of the Church around the Word is an emphasis in Ephesians. *Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit - just as you were called to one hope when you were called ...* (Ephesians 4:3-4).

The Word also carries along with it precepts that shape our purpose. It gives us goals and commissions us in a certain direction. Our goals are crystalized by God as we meditate on the truth. We pray with the psalmist:

*Do not snatch the word of truth from my mouth,
for I trust in your word.
I will always obey your law,
forever and ever.
I will walk about in freedom
for I have sought out your precepts.* (Psalm 119:43-45)

A unique joy of our close fellowship is the sweetness of our close Communion. Haven't we all felt the warmth of our fellowship at conferences with our brothers? What a "reward of grace" it is to know that all of us agree in doctrine. We commune at each other's altars. To all the other church bodies it is a shallow practice to say the least. But when we partake together, there is a deep bond of brotherhood. There is an alliance of thought and conviction. There is a symphony of confessional notes where the trumpet gives a clear sound.

Evidence of this is in *This We Believe*. It's repeated verse is "We believe ..." followed by the antitheses, "We reject ..."

The antiphon returns sweetly to our ears in *We Believe, Teach and Confess*. Its wealth of Bible references demonstrates its conviction. Surrounded with ecclesiastical noise this ELS harmony soothes and calms, "The Evangelical Lutheran Synod therefore represents conservative, confessional Lutheranism, and its prayer is that God by grace will preserve it in its total allegiance to the inspired, inerrant Word of God" (*We Believe, Teacher and Confess*, last paragraph).

No wonder Arno J. Wolfgramm observed at the 1994 ELS Convention: "What a joy it was to hear the same gospel proclaimed by men who are not members of the Wisconsin Synod! Thank God for our fellowship! May God be pleased to preserve that fellowship as well as the pure preaching of his word in our midst!" (WLQ 91:4 p.298)

Much of this continued focus on confessionalism is due to where we put a major portion of our budget. We are willing to pay to keep God's Word as our great heritage and make sure "it shall be ours forever."

B. The Emphasis on Solid Biblical Education

A great blessing among us is the Lutheran elementary school. To be taught that God is the God of creation, to see HIS hand in history, to learn solid Bible truth for life and eternity all fortify our fellowship.

Prep schools and area high schools mature the mind and prepare young Christians to carry on the celebration of our fellowship in the full-time work of the church or serving God as loyal laypeople.

Our colleges and seminaries have maintained our focus with a rich tradition of excellence in education, with an emphasis on a study of religion, history, languages and the arts. The products speak for the quality of the institutions. What is said about WELS congregations could also be said about ELS congregations.

"On a given weekend I assume that a person could walk into any WELS worship service in the country and hear the same, true doctrine of God's Word. How has this marvel come to be? Certainly the exercise of careful church discipline is a part of it. But who can deny that from a human point of view it is due primarily to the fact that all of our pastors have received a thorough training in God's Word and Lutheran doctrine." (WLQ 91:4 p.264)

On April 2nd Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary and Northwestern College praised God for the blessings of our higher education. In the invitation Phil Hirsch affirmed the blessings. "God has blessed the faithful efforts of the servants of Northwestern College and Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary over the years. The Word of God is being proclaimed faithfully all over our globe." With the Evangelical Lutheran Synod and their partnership in the gospel we have been able to reach more areas across the world - the Czech Republic, Chili, Australia and the Ukraine.

The *Lutheran Sentinel*, the *Lutheran Synod Quarterly*, the *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, the *Northwestern Lutheran*, and other publications enrich our stand and apply biblical truths to life. They promote the principles that bring us together, pastors and parishioners alike.

C. The goal "*speaking the truth in love.*"

Unity doesn't mean we never err in our weakness. Paul wrote, "*Brothers, if a man is trapped in some sin* (context indicates doctrinal or moral), *you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself; you also may be tempted*" (*Galatians 6:1*). Sometimes we restore but not gently or we speak the truth but not in love. Sometimes we may be gentle to the point of compromise. How important it is that we continue to be our brother's doctrinal keeper! Yes, even to the point questioning some doctrinal statement in conference papers.

We need to be there for each other because of our individual strengths and weaknesses. Some among us tend to be doctrinal rocks, others a rich cream of love. Unity doesn't mean "variety is the spice of life" or "I'm okay, you're okay," but the doctrinal rocks steady the rich cream so they don't become "whipped cream." And the rich cream can soften the doctrinal rocks so they don't become hard, crushing and damaging rocks.

Some examples of this:

Peter and John

Luther and Melanchthon (What happened when Luther's strength was no longer there?)

Where there is sound doctrine, there are also enemies of the Word. The devil is always trying the patience and purity of the saints.

D. Our Fellowship in Persecution

We share the same persecution of the faithful throughout history. Elijah was declared an outlaw, ready to quit because of apostasy and apathy in Israel (1 Kings 19:1-2). Jeremiah was thrown into a cistern because he didn't reflect the opinions of the day (Jeremiah 37-38). Many left Jesus because he spoke the truth to them (John 6:60-66). Paul was beaten, ridiculed, rejected and condemned (2 Corinthians 6) when he preached *no other gospel*.

Facing some form of persecution for the Savior's sake is a form of celebrating unity among the pastors of our fellowship. *The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name (Acts 5:41)*. James 1:2-4 reminds us today, *"Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything."* Paul astounds his first time readers with the statement, *"We rejoice in our sufferings" (Romans 5:3)*.

Our reputation is no different than the apostles. *Up to this moment we have become the scum of the earth, the refuse of the world (1 Corinthians 4:13)*. Have you ever lost members because you pointed out the evil of couples living in sin? Are prospective members turned off because of your stand on woman suffrage? Have you been rejected because you insisted that lodge members choose between the triune God and the generic god of the lodge? Has anyone looked at you strangely when you have questioned the work-righteousness implications of scouting? Do relatives of members and even members themselves get angry when you hold to biblical principles in close Communion and other fellowship practices? If so, then we have reason to celebrate unity among the pastors of our fellowship.

The world will always opposed the truth. We cannot hold to the truth and still expect love from the world (1 John in numerous places). If we compromise, we would soon lose our focus of *sola Scriptura, sola fide* and *sola gratia*. We need each other's strength now and in the future. There aren't many around with our convictions. Let's do everything possible to remain strong, confessional pastors and church bodies.

III. Our Fellowship in the Future, by God's grace

Discussion

1. Add to the list of ways we can maintain doctrinal unity among us.

___ Faithfully reading the *Lutheran Synod Quarterly* and/or the *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*

___ Attending summer quarter at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary or Bethany

___ Setting high priority in attending conferences, winkles, and circuit meetings

___ Faithfully reading the Bible every day

___ Seeking out a brother wounded by persecution or doctrinal weakness and having lunch to discuss the matter.

___ Doing a thorough exegesis every time you preach

___ Attending the Annual Charlie Iles Memorial Day Picnic and other social fellowships

Rank the preceding methods for maintaining doctrinal unity.

Why are these personal efforts essential to our continuing fellowship.

3. To "keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace" is it better to "receive papers with thanks," "accept" them, or "adopt" them? Does it make a big difference?

4. What could we do on the synodical level to maintain strong synodical fellowship?

It seems to me, from the historic cobwebs of my mind, that fellowship was often cemented by a hearty chorus of the Doxology. We conclude our discussion of the paper with that hymn.