



## This Blessed Fellowship of Saints

Presented July 11-12, 2014 LCR Convention, 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary

Mighty Fortress Evangelical Lutheran Church, Westminster, Colorado

Pastor Tobin Pederson, Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Corcoran, Minnesota

“Sing unto the LORD, O ye saints of his, and give thanks at the remembrance of his holiness.... O love the LORD, all ye his saints: *for* the LORD preserveth the faithful, and plentifully rewardeth the proud doer” Psalm 30:4 & 31:23. It is hard to put into words, the gift of mercy our Lord has given us these 50 years in this blessed fellowship of saints, the Lutheran Churches of the Reformation. We are just a handful of congregations, small in numbers, yet we cannot deny the Lord has blessed us beyond all measure. While we share with all the other saints on earth the same spiritual blessings of justification, sanctification, the Means of Grace, life everlasting, etc., what our fellowship enjoys is something no other fellowship (to our knowledge) presently has, the pure Word of God. This pure Gospel Word was handed down to us from heaven above, through our spiritual forefathers. The Church (HCC) “is the mother that begets and bears every Christian through the Word of God, which He reveals and preaches, [and through which] He illumines and enkindles hearts, that they understand, accept it, cling to it, and persevere in it” (Luther’s Large Catechism, Third Article). Loving Christ their Savior who loved them first, they preached the Gospel to us and so patiently taught us the words of eternal life. “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings, that publisheth peace; that bringeth good tidings of good, that publisheth salvation; that saith unto Zion, Thy God reigneth!” Is. 52:7 To God’s glory, almost all those pastors and people who assembled together fifty years ago, have passed away and entered into their eternal reward. “Jerusalem which is above is free, which is the mother of us all” Gal. 4:26. So the Apostle John writes, “Blessed *are* the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth: Yea, saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labours; and their works do follow them” Rev. 14:13.

In this world we are then “children of promise”, for the Holy Spirit called us by the Gospel promise and enlightened us with His gifts. God’s first promise created our faith and brought forth our returning promise to Him, to be faithful unto death. Having, holding, and maintaining the true doctrine in our fellowship is God’s holy will and commandment, hence a matter of great importance, because where there is faith there is love for the truth, and Christ is the Truth who has set us free from sin’s dominion. We do not hide His Gospel light under a bushel, nor do we put it in a secret place.....”but on a candlestick, that they which come in may see the light” Lk. 11:33. The truth shines brightly and it does not flicker in uncertainty. “For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to *give* the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” 2 Cor. 4:6. This faith which God gave us does not say “What is truth?”, but it continually points to Christ saying, “Behold the Lamb of God which taketh away the sins of the world!” Jn. 1:29. Such a faith in Christ governs and rules our hearts, so that we know and firmly believe, “Christ *is* the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth” Rom. 10:4. “By him all that believe are justified from all things, from which ye could not be justified by the law of Moses” Acts 13:39.

As for the title of our essay, *This Blessed Fellowship of Saints*, we mean only that God in His mercy has created and blessed a spiritual fellowship among us, a church fellowship, so that we enjoy unity of doctrine, one Lord, one faith, one Baptism. We are of one accord as our monthly publication

states. And we do not take this truth lightly, nor dare we boast with any arrogance, for we believe what Christ has taught, that it is “not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost; Which he shed on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Saviour; That being justified by his grace, we should be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life.” Titus 3:5-7 Who could add to these words? Who would dare to subtract? But people do. People have. And people will. “And such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God” I Cor. 6:11.

Speaking now particularly of our various members and pastors of our congregations, certainly some among us have asked the question, “Are we right?” .....or “Do we really have the right doctrine?” .....or “What are the odds that I was born into a church which teaches the true Word of God?” These are reasonable questions and there are many different ways to answer, but in my opinion there are two main places we go. We either conclude that it is such a long shot and the odds are so great it can’t possibly be true, *or being convinced by the power of the Word we understand our salvation and the gift of the pure Word has nothing to do with odds, but everything to do with grace. God has been so gracious and merciful to me, a sinner, that He has indeed through the pure mercies of Christ, placed and planted me here, in a true Evangelical Lutheran fellowship which has the pure Word of God.* It is also worth noting we were not all born into this fellowship, and in my opinion those who were drawn here from without have a definite advantage. They had to work hard, fight, and wrestle with false teachers and teachings. They had to by necessity “read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest the Scriptures”, to discover or conclude this little fellowship has *by the Lord’s great mercies* the true Word of God. In some ways we are much like the Jews and Gentiles of the New Testament. By the power of the Gospel God has not only brought us together into one confession, one visible fellowship, but we have “One Lord, one faith, one baptism, One God and Father of all, who *is* above all, and through all, and in you all.” Eph. 4:5-6

There is then a distinct danger in our fellowship, having reached the mark of 50 years. The danger is that we take the Gospel truth for granted, despise it, and lose it. Consider our predecessors before us who had to fight for the truth in an erring fellowship, then mark and avoid, and finally gather together into a new fellowship. They made true sacrifices. But that generation has largely passed away. And now what of us? Many of us didn’t have to fight for what we have, but it was passed on to us by those that fought. Will we treasure the Gospel, the Means of Grace, the true doctrine of Church and Ministry, Christian Liberty, the autonomy of the local congregation, etc., or will we covet other treasures? If we look with the eyes of the flesh the True Visible Church is much like a wallflower. She isn’t the prettiest thing to look at and few desire to be with her. There are also many other churches which outwardly are bigger and better, more shapely, pleasing to the eye, and certainly more popular. Why bother with our little congregations whose pastors are not that eloquent, popular, handsome or gifted? We are here however, because none of these outward things matter, but we are drawn by something higher, something better, a voice whose power cannot be denied. “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me: And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any *man* pluck them out of my hand.” John 10:27-28

Our theme therefore for our 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary is “Hitherto hath the Lord helped us” I Sam. 7:12. And hitherto (we might add) His promise will help. To those who understand that the beauty of God’s Word is the very beauty of Christ, this fellowship is extremely precious because it has the pure Gospel, a Gospel we never want to change, not one jot or tittle. And though we are small in number, homely, and daily on the verge of extinction living in Sodom and Gomorrah, Christ is by our side upon the plain, and His Word is our sword and shield. This same word has also created among us brotherly love. Every convention when we gather today, we experience the meaning of that hymn *Blest be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love, the fellowship of kindred minds, is like to that above.* Therefore “Not unto us, O

LORD, not unto us, but unto thy name give glory, for thy mercy, *and* for thy truth's sake" Ps. 115:1. It is for His truth's sake this blessed fellowship of saints is here, and may we never let His truth go, for "the mountains shall depart, and the hills be removed; but my kindness shall not depart from thee, neither shall the covenant of my peace be removed, saith the LORD that hath mercy on thee" Is. 54:10.

Keeping with the above thoughts, our outline for this essay is as follows: 1) The Invisible Church and the Means of Grace. 2) The Visible and True Visible Church. 3) Confessional Fellowship, Church Fellowship, and why we mark and avoid.

### **I. The Invisible Church and the Means of Grace**

The first main doctrine we will cover in this essay is that of the Holy Christian Church, also called the Invisible Church or True Church. Our catechism asks and answers the question, "What is the holy Christian Church? The holy Christian Church is the communion of saints, that is, the whole number of believers in Christ; for all believers, and only believers, are members of this Church." (Luther's Small Catechism, 1965, CPH, pg131). Only genuine believers are members of this *Invisible Church* and naturally this believer's faith is in Christ alone for their salvation and not works. Believers in this Invisible Church confess Christ not only with their mouth, but also inwardly trust Him with their heart, for "if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation." Rom. 10:9-10 All such believers know they are not holy by works, but their holiness is of Christ, namely we are counted as holy through His name. Since God charged or imputed our sins to Christ on the cross, God will not charge or impute our sins against us. "To wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation" II Cor. 5:19. This Word of Reconciliation is the Gospel Word, whereby the Holy Spirit gives spiritual birth to His Church, regeneration, conversion, faith, salvation, forgiveness of sins, even life everlasting. "Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever. For all flesh *is* as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass. The grass withereth, and the flower thereof falleth away: But the word of the Lord endureth for ever. And this is the word which by the gospel is preached unto you." I Peter 1:23-25. The Holy Ghost has thus implanted a true and spiritual power in the Words of God, whether it comes to us through Gospel preaching, teaching, Holy Baptism, or the Lord's Supper.

Still another name for this Invisible Church, is the Biblical name, Zion. Zion was the name of a fortress, a castle set on a hill in the city of Jebus [yeb-ooos'], which was later called Jerusalem. David made this fortress his residence when he became king, and Jerusalem came to be known as the "City of David." The Holy Spirit therefore chose this name Zion because those who place their faith in Christ truly live in a fortress or castle, where neither the devil nor world can harm us. His blood-bought justification of our souls protects and defends us from all spiritual enemies who assault us. Christ is our Rock which cannot be moved, the cornerstone of this fortress, Zion. He is the Rock upon which Zion is built against which no enemy can prevail. The Psalms hammer this point home. Just read a few passages concerning Christ your Rock and you can almost feel within the growing confidence of your salvation. Psalm 18:2 The LORD *is* my rock, and my fortress, and my deliverer; my God, my strength, in whom I will trust; my buckler, and the horn of my salvation, *and* my high tower. Psalm 18:31 For who *is* God save the LORD? or who *is* a rock save our God? Psalm 31:3 For thou *art* my rock and my fortress; therefore for thy name's sake lead me, and guide me. Psalm 61:2 From the end of the earth will I cry unto thee, when my heart is overwhelmed: lead me to the rock *that* is higher than I. Psalm 62:6 He only *is* my rock and my salvation: *he is* my defence; I shall not be moved. Psalm 62:7 In God *is* my salvation and my glory: the rock of my strength, *and* my refuge, *is* in God. Psalm 95:1 O come, let us sing unto the LORD: let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation.

## Justification by Faith Alone

Once we have become members of this Invisible Kingdom by faith in Christ, we are as our catechism teaches to “take heed to be and remain members of the Invisible Church by sincere faith in the Redeemer” (Luther’s Small Catechism, CPH, 1965, Q. 186). Our faith, what we believe, must have the right foundation at all times, and His name is Jesus Christ. “Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved” Acts 4:12. This justification by faith alone, is not faith that we are saved because we are sorry for our sins. “For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: *it is* the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast.” Eph. 2:8-9 Nor are we saved by our work of going to baptism, or by the character of the pastor who baptized us, for it is “Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration” Titus 3:5. Nor are we saved by confessing our sins. For “when we were yet without strength, Christ died for the ungodly” Rom. 5:6. Our confession is the fruit of the Gospel, and His Spirit is the one who moves us to confess. For “I create the fruit of the lips; Peace, peace to *him that is* far off, and to *him that is* near, saith the LORD; and I will heal him.” Is. 57:19. Nor are we saved by regular church attendance, or being lifelong members of a Lutheran church, nor are we saved by being members of an LCR congregation, for “we daily sin much and indeed deserve nothing but punishment.” Nor are we saved by the work of choosing God or accepting God into our heart, as if prior to faith we have some inward goodness or free will. John writes we were “born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God” Jn. 1:13. Paul writes, “So then *it is* not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that sheweth mercy” Rom. 9:16. Jesus said, “No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him: and I will raise him up at the last day” Jn. 6:44.

The salvation which we therefore enjoy in this *Invisible Church*, is salvation by grace alone, and we use that word “alone” to weed out any works which our flesh might insert into the equation. Regarding this grace alone, Franz Pieper writes, the term *grace* “denotes God’s gracious disposition, which for Christ’s sake He cherishes in Himself toward sinful mankind and by which He in His heart, ‘before His inner forum,’ does not charge men with their sins, but forgives them. This gracious disposition of God is declared and certified unto men in the Gospel, with the intent that they should believe it.” (Christian Dogmatics, Vol. II, pg. 7) Similarly Luther, “Grace, in the proper sense of the term, denotes God’s favor and good will toward us which He cherishes in Himself”. This good will or grace existed even before the foundation of the world, when the Father and Son and Spirit existed together as One God, throughout all eternity. *What was God doing before He made the world?.....we answer,* “He was happy being God. The three divine Persons, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost were not lonely or bored, but loved each other endlessly and were very content. Jesus says in Proverbs 8, “Then I was by him, as one brought up with him; and I was daily His delight, rejoicing always before him.” Then He goes on, “Rejoicing in the habitable part of his earth, and my delights were with the sons of men.” In other words, the Triune God rejoiced in planning the creation of men and in saving them. The Son of God looked forward to becoming man and offering Himself to redeem sinners, then rising again to give them everlasting life in heaven.” (Kenneth Miller, Bible History Explained and Applied, 1996, Creation I).

When the Gospel of Jesus Christ is thus preached, that God for the sake of Christ’s sacrifice on the cross is reconciled with all men, thus He forgives the sins of the whole world, and also justifies the whole world declaring it righteous for His Son’s sake, this message of universal justification is what causes the hearts of men to “believe on the Lord Jesus Christ”. That faith which justifies us is simply that faith which believes God, for Christ’s sake, has *justified me!* “Therefore *it is* of faith, that *it might be* by grace; to the end the promise might be sure to all the seed” Rom. 4:16. Hence, “To him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness” Rom. 4:5. Let us then

sum up this doctrine of justification by faith alone, with one of the confessional documents of the LCR, The Brief Statement of 1932.

### **Of Faith in Christ**

9. Since God has reconciled the whole world unto Himself through the vicarious life and death of His Son and has commanded that the reconciliation effected by Christ be proclaimed to men in the Gospel, to the end that they may believe it, II Corinthians 5:18-19; Romans 1:5, therefore faith in Christ is the only way for men to obtain personal reconciliation with God, that is, forgiveness of sins, as both the Old and the New Testament Scriptures testify, Acts 10:43; John 3:16-18, 36. By this faith in Christ, through which men obtain the forgiveness of sins, is not meant any human effort to fulfill the Law of God after the example of Christ, but faith in the Gospel, that is, in the forgiveness of sins, or justification, which was fully earned for us by Christ and is offered by the Gospel. This faith justifies, not inasmuch as it is a work of man, but inasmuch as it lays hold of the grace offered, the forgiveness of sins, Romans 4:16.

### **Spiritual Membership in the Invisible Church and Congregational Membership**

While sincere believers who are member of the Invisible Church seek to be members of a congregation where the true Word is taught, congregational membership is not the same as spiritual membership in the Invisible Church. When discouraged Elijah thought he was the last believer because he no longer saw any faithful believers who worshipped the God of Israel, our Lord answered, "Yet I have left *me* seven thousand in Israel, all the knees which have not bowed unto Baal, and every mouth which hath not kissed him." I Kgs. 19:18. Let us then be careful not to confuse the Invisible Church with congregational membership. At times for example, a congregation may excommunicate a true believer for unscriptural reasons, so that one has experienced an unjust excommunication. This true believer however is yet by faith a member of the Invisible Church. This was the very case of the man born blind in John chapter nine. Jesus healed him and the Pharisees "cast him out", excommunicating him from their visible congregation. But "Jesus heard that they had cast him out; and when he had found him, he said unto him, Dost thou believe on the Son of God? He answered and said, Who is he, Lord, that I might believe on him? And Jesus said unto him, Thou hast both seen him, and it is he that talketh with thee. And he said, Lord, I believe. And he worshipped him." John 9:35-38 Before and after excommunication this man was a member of the Invisible Church. He believed in and was waiting for the Messiah. But Christ blessed him more. By the words of Christ he was now able to identify by physical sight Jesus of Nazareth, and understand like Peter, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the Living God" Mt. 16:16. What he saw with his eyes matched what he inwardly had always believed in his heart.

Likewise there may have been times in history where there were no visible churches which faithfully taught the Word of God, yet the Invisible Church still existed and was preserved by the power of the Gospel. In our modern day there are surely many cursed Muslim or Communist regions where this Invisible Church is severely persecuted so no Christian congregation is allowed (by the powers that be) to exist, but the Gospel Word is still taught there from house to house and "The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit" Jn. 3:8. Also in various heterodox denominations there are true believers in spite of the false doctrine taught, for wherever the Means of Grace are in use, there the Holy Spirit is working to create and sustain His Church. Finally there are also bound to be faithful Lutherans who have studied the Word, becoming aware of the false doctrine in the LCMS, WELS, etc., and they have marked and avoided as our Lord commands, but where do they go? They then belong to no visible congregation but would like to, and yet by faith they have maintained their membership in the Invisible Church. Who knows how many are searching and have not found our little fellowship? But if they

continue steadfast in the Gospel, God's promises will surely preserve them. "If ye continue in the faith grounded and settled, and *be* not moved away from the hope of the gospel, which ye have heard." Col. 1:23

### **Stay Close to the Means of Grace**

How then do true believers *take heed to be and remain members of the Invisible Church by sincere faith*? In a wonderful essay entitled "A Blessed Death" Pastor Miller answers, "If you want to have a blessed death, you need to A. Live in constant repentance and faith. B. Stay close to the Means of Grace. C. Keep a clear conscience. D. Make peace with your neighbor." His words on repentance and faith are simply too good to pass up. He writes:

To live by faith means simply to trust Him. Trust that He loves you, is gracious to you, and takes pity on you. Trust that He has redeemed you by His blood and rendered all righteousness by His obedience. Trust His promises of help, of forgiveness, and of eternal life. Trust the holy Gospel.

Saving faith, the faith whose end is the salvation of your souls, believes specifically in Christ and His vicarious satisfaction. There are other things you believe, such as that God will help you in trouble, provide for your needs, and guide you, but all those benefits are based on the merits of Jesus Christ. Why should God be good to a sinner like you? Only because He has redeemed you.

Saving faith always begins with repentance, with the knowledge, awareness, and confession of sin. Repentance is available to all, whatever their sins, and the invitation is addressed to every sinner. Ezekiel writes, 18:31-32, *Cast away from you all your transgressions, whereby ye have transgressed; and make you a new heart and a new spirit: for why will ye die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of him that dieth, saith the Lord GOD: wherefore turn yourselves, and live ye.* 18:31-32

In order to remain true Christians, there needs to be a constant awareness of sin and repentance thereof, but also a constant healing, the living waters of Christ. Those whom the law makes thirsty, need to drink the living waters of Christ. Because He is merciful, gracious, slow to anger and plenteous in mercy, God has therefore given to His Church His Means of Grace to support and preserve our faith. That is why Pastor Miller writes, *Stay close to the Means of Grace*. "Faith believes in Christ, but faith only finds Christ in the Gospel, in the preaching and teaching of it and in the two Sacraments of Baptism and the holy Supper. The Gospel is the life's blood of saving faith. The Lord's Supper has been called, on that account, the "medicine of immortality." To stay close to the Gospel is to stay close to home, to your heavenly home. If you get away from it, by virtue of distance or by neglect, your faith begins to dry up and wither away, and soon you are not ready for death. You forget or neglect to review your sin and to repent; your prayer life becomes spotty and infrequent; and you lose touch with Christ. By all means, then, stay as close as you can to a sound church, keep your Bible in use, get the Lord's Supper often, and baptize your children." (Kenneth Miller, *A Blessed Death*).

### **Where is this Holy Christian Church to be found? (The marks of the Church)**

After defining and discussing the Invisible Church, let us ask, "Where is this holy Christian Church to be found? This holy Christian Church is to be found *wherever the Gospel is in use*; for according to God's promise His Word shall not be preached in vain." (Luther's Small Catechism, CPH, 1965, pg. 134) God has thus placed spiritual power in the Word of God itself....the power to save and convert and sustain. Isaiah 55:10-11 says, "For as the rain cometh down, and the snow from heaven, and returneth not thither, but watereth the earth, and maketh it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower, and bread to the eater: So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper *in the thing* whereto I sent

it.” Since the Holy Spirit works through the means of the Gospel, and without the Gospel there can be no faith, we can only expect to find this Invisible Church wherever the Gospel is in use. Thus if you want to find the True or Invisible Church, namely your fellow believers, *look for the marks of the Church*, for wherever the Gospel is in use, whether it is preached from the pulpit, or administered through the Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, there the True Church will be. The Brief Statement makes the connection between the Invisible Church, and its presence through the visible Means of Grace.

25.....In our day some Lutherans speak of two sides of the Church, taking the means of grace to be its "visible side." It is true, the means of grace are necessarily related to the Church, seeing that the Church is created and preserved through them. But the means of grace are not for that reason a part of the Church; for the Church, in the proper sense of the word, consists only of believers, Ephesians 2:19-20; Acts 5:14. Lest we abet the notion that the Christian Church in the proper sense of the term is an external institution, we shall continue to call the means of grace the "marks" of the Church. Just as wheat is to be found only where it has been sown, so the Church can be found only where the Word of God is in use.

Again, this is why Pastor Kenneth Miller wrote that precious phrase “Stay close to the Means of Grace”, for by the Means of Grace the Holy Spirit creates, builds, strengthens and preserves each believer in the one true faith “unto life everlasting.” ”For neither you nor I could ever know anything of Christ, or believe on Him, and obtain Him for our Lord, unless it were offered to us and granted to our hearts by the Holy Ghost through the preaching of the Gospel. The work is done and accomplished; for Christ has acquired and gained the treasure for us by His suffering, death, resurrection, etc. But if the work remained concealed so that no one knew of it, then it would be in vain and lost. That this treasure, therefore, might not lie buried, but be appropriated and enjoyed, God has caused the Word to go forth and be proclaimed, in which He gives the Holy Ghost to bring this treasure home and appropriate it to us.” (Luther, Large Catechism, Third Article).

## **II. The Visible and True Visible Church**

This brings us to the discussion of what is called the Visible Church (as opposed to the Invisible Church). When we speak of the Visible Church, we are speaking of visible congregations who regularly gather and assemble around the Word of God and Sacraments. Walther defines the Visible Church this way, “In an improper sense Scripture calls also those visible communion “churches” which, though consisting not only of believers or such as are sanctified by faith, but having also hypocrites and wicked persons, nevertheless teach the Gospel in its purity and administer the holy sacraments according to the Gospel.” (The True Visible Church, C. F. W. Walther, pg. 12). Thus wherever the Gospel and Sacraments are in use, there is the Visible Church which contains both believers and unbelievers (hypocrites). Outwardly there is no difference between the two, but inwardly by faith (or lack thereof) there is.

Luther explains similar, “In order that this article [of the holy Christian Church] might be understood more clearly, the reader must be reminded that Scripture speaks of the church in a twofold way. On the one hand, it calls ‘church’ all those who publicly confess the same doctrine and use the same sacraments, with whom, however, there are mixed many hypocrites and wicked persons, as Christ teaches (Matt. 12:11ff.; 13:24ff.; 20:16; 22:11-14; Mark 16:16).....Nevertheless in this promiscuous assembly there are always some elect, that is, such as accept the Word in true faith and receive the Holy Spirit; for the ministry of the Word is never wanting in fruit. This true part Scripture also calls ‘church,’ and to it the designation ‘holy’ properly belongs.” (The True Visible Church, C. F. W. Walther, pg. 14). Johann Gerhard (who lived 1582-1667) likewise writes, “Of the church of the Ephesians and any other particular

church it may be said that it is a house of God on account of the true believers and elect who are in it and in whom God dwells with His grace; here, by way of a synecdoche, there is ascribed to the whole particular church, or the entire assembly of the called, what belongs only to some who are in it.” (The True Visible Church, C. F. W. Walther, pg. 14).

Even when a congregation or fellowship no longer teaches the Word of God in all its purity, but out of *weakness or ignorance* deviates from the pure Word, the Scriptures still retain the word “churches”. Gerhard writes, “It must be noted that there are certain degrees of that purity, because God’s Word at times is preached more purely in the church and at times again less purely; nor does it cease to be a church if even in certain chief articles of religion it does not teach purely. The more purely and soundly the Word of God is preached in the church, the closer the preaching and teaching comes to the norm of Holy Scripture, the purer and sounder the church will be; but the farther it recedes from the rule of the Word, the more impure and corrupt will be the state of the church.” “Nevertheless it does not cease, by whatever the corruption may be, to be a church because, as we have shown before, God also then begets Himself a holy seed or spiritual children when the public ministry of the visible church is corrupted. Hence the visible church, so far as its outward form, or, what is the same, its public ministry is considered, is either in a pure or uncorrupt state or in one that is impure or partly corrupt.” (The True Visible Church, C. F. W. Walther, pg. 18).

Thus we include heterodox congregations and fellowships in this term *Visible Church*, for the sake of the believers who are there in spite of the errors, but we do not give any false doctrine therein our blessing. In his Thesis V, Walther also makes a distinction between heterodox congregations who are so out of *weakness or ignorance*, AS OPPOSED TO the heterodox which err *stubbornly or obstinately*. In his Thesis VI, Walther also identifies certain heterodox congregations which are legalistic. His Thesis VI states, “Communions that disrupt the unity of the church through errors not destroying the foundation of the faith, or because of persons, ceremonies, or matters of life, are, according to God’s Word, sects (schisms) or separatistic bodies.” (The True Visible Church, C. F. W. Walther, pg. 29).

### **The True Visible Church**

All this leads into what is called the doctrine of the True Visible Church. While many say the True Visible Church is a myth, much like bigfoot or the tooth fairy, *this blessed fellowship of saints* maintain because God is rich in mercy, and He has by the means of His Spirit filled Word given our fellowship the pure Word, We preach Christ crucified and the full truth of His Word. Is this arrogance? Is this wrong? It could be in the hearts of any one of us, if inwardly we believe by our own power we have created, maintained, or preserved this pure Word. We are not the sacred and holy guardians of the truth, for we have no power to keep ourselves in the truth even one day. Rather we are unworthy servants, receptacles, to whom the truth has been given. God’s Spirit through the Word has convinced us of the same, and who are we to deny the omnipotent Word of God? Our fellowship actually possesses a small tract on this subject entitled *Are We Really Right.....Or Just Arrogant?* (reprints available at Beautiful Savior Evangelical Lutheran Church, Decatur Indiana) The opening paragraph asks and answers the question, “You think you are the only ones who are right?”

Indeed we do! We would not take the trouble to establish orthodox Lutheran churches at great cost and with great sacrifice if we did not. If we thought someone else held the pure truth, we would join them in a minute. But most of those we talk with tell us it is arrogant to think we alone are right. When they say that, we can see that they are not sure they are right themselves; and if they aren’t sure, why should anyone want to follow them? They are blind guides. Who can have respect for them or for their religion if they are not sure of it? Should we think it does not matter whether they are right or not? If it doesn’t matter, why bother at all?



Who would ever hire a math teacher if he said it is arrogant to insist that  $2 \times 2 = 4$ ? Or if he were not sure that the square of the hypotenuse is equal to the sum of the squares of the other two sides? Or if he said we must keep an open mind about the multiplication table? God's Word is forever settled in heaven, it is not open for discussion nor a matter of opinion.

We do not say that only we are right and everyone else is altogether wrong. We do recognize that many other churches teach some of God's truth: some 50%, some 90%, some 99%. But even 99% is not enough, for God commanded to teach 100%. "All things whatsoever I have commanded you" Mt. 28:19. If calculations for a space flight are 99% perfect, the mission is a failure. We must have the whole truth. We are confident we do have it and we treasure it. If we should join with those who change something, then the one item where they err may very well be the one our souls are in need of to gain eternal life. Our immortal souls are too important to us to take the gamble.

The Bible is the only Book in the world that is without error; hence its teaching, or doctrine, is also without error. As long as we accurately and faithfully present its teachings, our doctrine is – also without error – but only if we are teaching the Bible's own teachings.

Regarding the doctrine of the True Visible Church, Walther states (Thesis VIII), "While ecclesiastical writers at times call those communions true or real churches that retain God's Word essentially, in contradistinction to those that are not churches, nevertheless, *a true visible church* is in the real strict sense of the term, in opposition to heterodox churches or sects, *is only that in which God's Word is proclaimed in its purity and the sacraments are administered according to the Gospel*" (The True Visible Church, C. F. W. Walther, pg. 35). Only those churches then who teach the Word and administer the Sacraments in their purity are the True Visible Church, because wherever the Gospel is preached, not only is love for God created in our hearts, but also love for His pure Word. Hence "My sheep hear *my voice*, and I know them, and they follow me: And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any *man* pluck them out of my hand." John 10:27-28. Likewise, "When he putteth forth his own sheep, he goeth before them, and the sheep follow him: *for they know his voice*. And a stranger will they not follow, but will flee from him: *for they know not the voice of strangers*." Jn 10:4-5. Loving the Good Shepherd and His Word, true believers do not knowingly follow the voice of a stranger. If the pastor teaches false doctrine, love for the Good Shepherd will turn that believer away from the stranger's voice. Though it may take some time and study they will conclude, "This is not the dear voice of my Good Shepherd, but this is a stranger's voice." "Now since the church is the sum total of Christ's disciples, or the flock of His sheep, the true church, in the strict sense of the term, that is, the church as it should be, is only that which continues in His Word, hears His voice, follows only Him, and avoids a stranger who propounds another doctrine." (The True Visible Church, C. F. W. Walther, pg. 35).

A wonderful passage which supports this doctrine and really embodies the desire of our LCR congregations, is Ephesians 4:1-6. St. Paul admonishes us to "walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called, with all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love; endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. *There is* one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; One Lord, one faith, one baptism, One God and Father of all, who *is* above all, and through all, and in you all." Note the unity of the Church in these words, *and also the hard work involved*, for we must endeavor and forbear, "with all lowliness and meekness"....." to keep "the unity of Spirit in the bond of peace." No pastor, no man, no congregation, no congregational member can ever fulfill these words in the holy perfection God requires of us, yet we do not say "Oh well" or "Why bother?" It is written, "Every word of God is pure" (Prov. 30:5), precious to us, like a gem we dare not tarnish. Where there is love in the heart (faith) for Christ our Beautiful Savior, which

believer can say “this doctrine of Christ is not important nor must we be united here in what Jesus said.” Is that the love of Christ which lives in our heart? How is it that David spoke of God’s Word and loving God’s Word? Psalm 119:97, “O how love I thy law! It is my meditation all the day.” Psalm 119:159, “Consider how I love thy precepts: quicken me, O LORD, according to thy lovingkindness.”

“God *is* faithful, by whom ye were called unto the fellowship of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord. Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and *that* there be no divisions among you; but *that* ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment” I Cor. 1:9-10. Observe, God’s faithfulness is the springboard from which Paul commands what every believer is to do “by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” We are to speak the same thing, have no divisions, and be perfectly joined together in the same mind and judgment – unity in doctrine and practice. Thus it behooves all, not only pastors but every member in every flock in our fellowship, to be sure only the truth is taught in our midst, without error. It is not just the pastor’s job to teach the true doctrine, but every believer must be sure the true doctrine *alone* is being taught. While it is evident our growth in the understanding of the Word is lifelong, love for the Word will always work hard not to deny any part of the Word. May God keep His Word pure among us!

But can’t we tolerate error, at least a little? Luther addresses this point. “But here someone who is good-natured (as people say) may reply: What harm would it do if we would adhere to God’s Word but would retain all these things (papistic abuses and errors) or also some others that are tolerable? I reply: Such persons may be called good-natured, but they are wrong-hearted and susceptible to seducement; for, as you hear, the church must not teach anything else than God’s Word, serve anyone else than God, place another light beside the [true] Light placed by God in the darkness. It is indeed a will-o’-the-wisp and error even though it were only a single untruth, for the church should not and cannot teach any lies or error, not even a single one. If it teaches a single lie, it is already altogether wrong, as Christ declares in Luke 11:35-36: ‘Take heed therefore that the light which is in thee be not darkness. If thy whole body therefore be full of light, having no part dark, the whole shall be full of light.’ That means the whole must be light and no part must be dark. And how could it be otherwise since God’s mouth is that of the church. Again, God cannot lie and therefore neither can the church....The church must teach only God’s Word and must be sure of it, for on this account it is called the pillar and ground of the truth (I Tim. 3:15), built upon a rock, holy and without blemish.” (The True Visible Church, C. F. W. Walther, pg. 36-37).

Likewise Johann Gerhard, “As the preaching of the Word and the administration of the sacraments are the marks of the church in an absolute and strict sense, so the pure preaching of the divine Word and the legitimate administration of the sacraments are the marks of the pure and uncorrupt church. As the church distinguishes itself from secular communions, which are outside of the church, by the preaching of the Word and the administration of the sacraments, so it distinguishes itself from the heterodox communion, which are within the church, by the pure Word and legitimate administration of the sacraments” (The True Visible Church, C. F. W. Walther, pg. 37). Regarding true and false teachers Gerhard continues, “If a heretical doctrine is preached in a church, we regard it as heretical and call it so. The true teacher of a church distinguishes himself from a false prophet by pure, unperverted doctrine; so also the true church distinguishes itself from the false by pure and unperverted doctrine.” (The True Visible Church, C. F. W. Walther, pg. 38).

While there is and always will be on earth the True INVISIBLE Church, it appears there have been points in history where there was no TRUE VISIBLE Church. Before the Reformation, the Invisible Church was hidden within the heterodox Catholic Church, as well as other places, but we don’t know of any True Visible Church at that time. Also there were times in the Old Testament (especially just before Christ’s first coming) where it appears there was no True Visible Church. “The invisible Christian church never ceases and never loses its inward glory in the sight of God. But the particular or visible churches may cease in this way and sense that there may not be found a communion that is public, known and

visible to all men, and in which the pure Word is proclaimed publicly and freely and the sacraments are administered rightly. On the contrary, godly confessors at times are expelled, scattered, and forced to hide in caves so that the public, uncorrupt ministry, because of the increasing persecutions and corruptions of the doctrine, may no longer be found in the visible church....”(The True Visible Church, C. F. W. Walther, pg. 41).

This doctrine of the True Visible Church is not often confessed in our day and age. This is nothing new however. During the age of Pietism (1690-1750), orthodoxy and Biblical doctrine was downplayed, and pietism (a holy life) was emphasized. Pietism emphasized deeds, not doctrine. God then raised a champion who evangelically rebuked the spirit of pietism, Valentin Ernst Loescher. He wrote “The Complete Timotheus Verinus”. The first volume systematically exposed the doctrinal errors of pietism. His chapter ten of Volume I begins this way, “As often as men have, even with good imaginations and supposed holy intention, given room to the swindling spirit; so often has experience shown that the despising and suppressing of the support of religion – the helps which God has ordained or given for our good – has gained the upper hand among them. I call those things supports which certainly do not approach the high dignity and power of the means of grace, but were still ordained by God for the spiritual good of men....” (The Complete Timotheus Verinus, Vol. I, Loescher, pg. 183) The God-ordained helps Loescher speaks of here are the two divine institutes of the visible congregation and the holy ministry. Both are God’s good creation for the benefit of every Christian’s faith, not to be despised. Speaking of the *True Visible Church* he then writes,

“The church is not, as happens in the papacy, to be absolutely venerated and blindly heard, nor is it to be made into the basis of faith. Nevertheless it is certainly to be venerated and heard in the proper measure and order. Where this is omitted, and the true, although modest, benefit is trampled under foot (that God has given and left to the dying a visible church in which his word is taught purely and openly, and the sacraments are preserved according to Christ’s institution) there one soon also loses the greater benefits. Thus the following false doctrines, often spread under the appearance of piety, belong here:

- 1) There is to be no true visible church at all; that is not God’s will and intention.
- 2) No church is visible in which there are not the openly pious.
- 3) At the present moment there is no visible church at all.
- 4) Pure doctrine and the proper distribution of the sacraments are not signs of the true church, but only piety.

From the above it is evident.... once the truth of God’s Word is questioned, the door is wide open for “There is no true visible church at all”.

What it would be like to be in a church which does not uphold the doctrine of the True Visible Church? Denying that the full truth can be discovered from Scripture, their honest confession might then be, “We do not preach Christ crucified nor do we teach the full truth of His Word.” Or perhaps they would say “We preach Christ crucified, but we cannot be sure about the rest”. Or perhaps “The truth is somewhere out there, but who can tell?” Or “the Bible is a dark book which is just too deep, therefore we will not be proud and arrogant and say we know anything for certain at all.” Now while we are not aware of any congregation which openly confesses such folly, that is their doctrine when they deny the existence of the True Visible Church. A church not built upon the certainty of the Word cannot be certain about anything. And if the Word is uncertain, how then can they be certain about their salvation?

Since it is written, “Every word of God *is* PURE” (Prov. 30:5) and Jesus taught “Thy Word is TRUTH” (Jn. 17:17), it is certainly possible to have the pure doctrine of His Word. Moreover when the pure Word is confessed and taught in a congregation, believers who knowingly have the truth will not (or

should not) refrain from saying they are (by God's grace) the True Visible Church. It is the nature of the truth to confess the truth when the truth is taught, and it is in the nature of the truth not to tolerate any falsehood which opposes the truth. And even if a believer is unsure of this or that doctrine, they are not from this point going to jump off the diving board and say "Since I am unsure of this or that doctrine, I conclude the truth cannot be known, and it is not possible for the Word to be pure!" Such a faith or thought is rather insulting to the Holy Spirit who "moved the holy men to write, and put into their minds, the very thoughts which they expressed and the very words which they wrote." If God created our mind, isn't it reasonable to reason in our mind God knows how to write words in a Bible so He can speak to our mind? "For the LORD searcheth all hearts, and understandeth all the imaginations of the thoughts: if thou seek him, he will be found of thee; but if thou forsake him, he will cast thee off forever" I Chron. 28:9

### **Is This Blessed Fellowship of Saints the True Visible Church?**

Having established the doctrine of the True Visible Church (and returning to Walther), his Thesis XII states "If the Evangelical [Lutheran] Church has the marks that it preaches the Gospel in its purity and administers the sacraments according to the Gospel, it is also the true visible church of God on earth." We note Walther's first word is IF, for no Christian is to blindly join any congregation or fellowship which claims itself to be the True Visible Church, but every Christian before joining any congregation or fellowship *is to examine for themselves the doctrine this visible church teaches*. IF the congregation or fellowship *faithfully* teaches the pure Word and rightly administers the sacraments, THEN such a Christian is duty bound to confess this truth and recognize his brethren who share one mind and faith.

This begs the question, is *this blessed fellowship of saints*, the Lutheran Churches of the Reformation, the True Visible Church? Dare we make such a bold claim? The answer is YES, INsofar as our congregations hold fast to the pure Word and rightly administer the Sacraments, the Gospel prevailing. We will also confess that in our 50 years of history, we have had plenty of unfaithfulness according to the flesh and also many doctrinal struggles. We endeavored "to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." Therefore in that bold yet true statement that by the grace of God *we have the full truth of His Word*, there are many parentheses or side statements which will benefit our understanding. One example would be Walther, who didn't use the term "Missouri Synod" in his book, "The True Visible Church", but he used the term *Evangelical Lutheran Church*. He was at that time in the fellowship of the Missouri Synod, but he continually used the term *Evangelical Lutheran Church*. This is only conjecture, but the reason might have been if the Missouri Synod went astray, no one could say "But Walther said the Missouri Synod is the True Visible Church therefore I must stay in Missouri!" Thus if our LCR fellowship doctrinally goes astray, breaking free from the anchor of Christ, the full truth of His blessed Word, and if she after sincere admonitions stubbornly remains in doctrinal error, let us not follow the voice of that stranger, for Jesus said "My sheep hear my voice and I know them and they follow Me....And a stranger will they not follow, but will flee from him: for they know not the voice of strangers" Jn. 10. In like manner let us not blindly follow our pastors or blindly follow *LCR doctrine*. Follow only the voice of Christ who said, "My doctrine is not mine, but His that sent Me." Jn. 7:16

It is also crucial we dare not identify our visible congregations (LCR) with the Holy Christian Church so that we say "outside these LCR walls there is no salvation!" God forbid such arrogance and deception! In "The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel" Walther wrote, "The Word of God is not rightly divided when a person's salvation is made to depend *on his association with the visible orthodox Church*, and when salvation is denied to every person who errs in any article of faith." The true visible Lutheran Church then IS NOT THE CHURCH outside of which there is no salvation. That was and still is the error of the Catholic Church. They teach THE CHURCH outside of which there is no salvation, is their own visible fellowship, even the good and the bad who are led by the Roman pope (see

Comparative Symbolics, Dau, pg. 116). Lest we go the way of Rome, let us be careful not to confuse the Invisible Church with the Visible. If we confound or confuse this doctrine, our fellowship will quickly become filled with *popish pastors* who covet power and authority over the souls of men, rather than remaining servants of the Word whose greatest joy is in Christ's salvation.

Beware of the authority of men! When pastors claim authority beyond the Word, the souls under their care suffer. Listen to Luther who was once a papist under the delusion of *manmade authority*. "To this day the papists seek to keep the people with their Church by telling them: 'You know that we are the true Church. No matter what the Church teaches, if you want to be a true disciple of Christ, you must hear the Church. If the Pope decrees that he is infallible, or that Mary was conceived without sin, or that the saints must be adored, you must accept these dogmas. You may not consult your reason. The true Church has set up these dogmas, and it cannot err. If you fall away from the Roman Catholic Church, you fall away from the true Church.' This is the bait with which they hook the people". Luther continues, "When I had disproved all the arguments against me with Scriptures and thus overcome them, I scarcely succeeded, by the grace of Christ, in overcoming with great anxiety, trouble, and labor, this one final argument, that I must hear the Church." (Law and Gospel, Walther, pgs. 341, 342) These are truly the words of a man who was plucked from the fire, by the mighty hand of Jesus Christ. Likewise Walther warns all pastors, "May God keep you from becoming entangled with the false teaching concerning the Church, viz., that the Lutheran Church is the true visible Church of Jesus Christ in the sense that one can be saved only in this Church! The Lutheran Church is indeed the true visible Church; however, only in this sense, that it has the pure, unadulterated truth. As soon as you add the qualification "alone saving" to the Lutheran Church, you detract from the doctrine of justification by grace through faith in Jesus Christ and confound Law and Gospel. May God keep you from this error for the sake of your own soul and those that will be entrusted to your care!" (Law and Gospel, Walther, pg. 343).

Therefore let all men and women and children of our congregations remember to give the proper respect to the pastor God has given you via the call of the congregation, and when he speaks the Word as an "oracle of God" be sure you listen and heed. If you listen to the Word your pastor teaches you are listening to Christ. But don't place your pastor too high either. He is not on a higher plane as the Catholic Church teaches of their priests. Your pastor is not an infallible pope, but God's Word is infallible, without error. Like you, your pastor is below the Logos, the Word, and Christ alone is the Head of the Church. "He is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all *things* he might have the preeminence" Col. 1:18. Again our Brief Statement:

32. Although the office of the ministry is a divine ordinance, it possesses no other power than the power of the Word of God, I Peter 4:11; that is to say, it is the duty of Christians to yield unconditional obedience to the office of the ministry whenever, and as long as, the minister proclaims to them the Word of God, Hebrews 13:17, Luke 10:16. If, however, the minister, in his teachings and injunctions, were to go beyond the Word of God, it would be the duty of Christians not to obey, but to disobey him, so as to remain faithful to Christ, Matthew 23:8. Accordingly, we reject the false doctrine ascribing to the office of the ministry the right to demand obedience and submission in matters which Christ has not commanded."

Whenever pastors or layman feel within that lust for power, let us remember the actions and words of Christ who washed the lowly feet of His disciples. "Know ye what I have done to you? Ye call me Master and Lord: and ye say well; for *so* I am. If I then, *your* Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you. Verily, verily, I say unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord; neither he that is sent greater than he that sent him. If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them." John 13

### **The Creation and Existence of This Blessed Fellowship of Saints.**

This brings us to the creation and existence of this blessed fellowship of saints. Who are we? Where did we come from? Why are we here joyfully celebrating our 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary? FIRST and foremost we are Christians, sinners counted as saints, righteous through the blood of Christ, “Giving thanks unto the Father, which hath made us meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light” Col. 1:12. SECOND, the fruit of our justification is love for God’s Word, hence this blessed fellowship of churches was formed and created by confessing Christians of one mind, one accord, “One Lord, one faith, one baptism, One God and Father of all, who *is* above all, and through all, and in you all.” Eph 4:5-6. THIRD, we joyfully celebrate our 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, “for we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard!” Acts 4:20. We thank God our Lord by the Gospel light has drawn and gathered us together into this little blessed fellowship where our confession is united and not divided. While it is fascinating to learn the background and the different paths various Christians in our fellowship took to come here, it is the love of Christ which holds and binds us together. Likewise we don’t deserve the truth of His Word, but we are not going to deny we have it. We agree with Jacob who said, “I am not worthy of the least of all the mercies, and of all the truth, which thou hast shewed unto thy servant.” Gen. 32:10

We are here in this particular fellowship because as our catechism says, “We use the doctrine of the Church properly....B. When we adhere to the Visible church which teaches the Word of God in all its purity” (Luther’s Small Catechism, Q 186). This love for God which He has planted within, causes us to want to attend only a church which is faithful to God’s Word. The history of our visible fellowship (LCR) traces back to the Missouri Synod in the 1940’s and 1950’s. In 1945 the LCMS issued their “Statement of the 44” (because it was signed by 44 men/pastors and 214 later) which contained doctrinal error. Certain LCMS pastors such as P.E. Kretzmann, W. McLaughlin, and others did not agree with the doctrine in this confession. In this confession and other places there were problems with prayer and altar fellowship (unionism), betrothal not tantamount to marriage, the Antichrist, doctrine not divisive of fellowship, and synodical polity placed above God’s Word in dealing with individuals and congregations (reference Pastor Tim Pederson’s, *LCR Beginnings*). Pastors Kretzmann, McLaughlin and others left the LCMS in 1951 and eventually organized the Orthodox Lutheran Conference, 1953. In 1961 this OLC split, “with one group forming the CLC (Concordia Lutheran Conference) while the rest remained independent and in fellowship until 1964” (reference Pastor Tim Pederson’s, *LCR Beginnings*). The Lutheran Churches of the Reformation was officially formed April 28-29, 1964, with the following congregations and pastors.

#### Charter Congregations & their Pastors

St. Matthew; Huntington Beach, California	Robert Godfrey
Emmaus; Chicago, Illinois	Carl Rusch
Our Redeemer; Grant Park, Illinois	Reimar A. Frick
Trinity; Oak Park, Illinois	Harold W. Romoser
St. Matthew; Detroit, Michigan	Cameron A. MacKenzie
St. Paul; Moose Lake, Minnesota	Erick E. Erickson
Trinity; Bridgeton, Missouri	William H. Bischoff
Redeemer; Lyons, Nebraska	Tobias Pederson
Gethsemane; North Sioux City, South Dakota	Tobias Pederson

#### Noteworthy additions later in the year

Good Shepherd; Golden Valley, Minnesota	Wallace H. McLaughlin
St. Stephen; Indianapolis, Indiana	Kenneth K. Miller (installed 1965)

Why did our forefathers choose the name Lutheran Churches of the Reformation? We believe and confess the Biblical doctrine of the Reformation (God via Luther) to be right and true. We agree with the doctrine written and collected in the Book of Concord. In the LCR title we also draw attention to the plural aspect of “churches”, for each congregation is a divine institution of God, autonomous, with no one above her, but God and His Word. This distinguishes us from the hierarchical nature of Lutheran Synods, and the papacy. We do not want to become “many masters” for One is our Master. Today in most Lutheran fellowships, there is a structure above the congregation which claims or assumes or practices power over a congregation. They usurp authority God has not given. Moreover when a pastor or congregation does not get in line, sometimes the synods protrudes into congregational matters “becoming busybodies”, and so forth. There is even a practice today among some, where the pastor no longer writes his own sermon, but receives it “from above” namely from the synod, and simply regurgitates it verbatim. While it is the Lord’s command that each congregation and her pastor teach the true Word of God, and we are likewise commanded to recognize fellow brethren who confess the same doctrine, God has not created any structure or authority with power above the local congregation. By the words of Christ, “tell it unto the church” (Mt. 18) and “be not many masters for one is your Lord” (Jms 3:1), we have no pope, cardinal, or bishop above us, with any authority over our soul or conscience. Christ is our Prophet, Priest, and King. Likewise concerning all pastors in our fellowship, we strive and are careful (God help us) to “preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord; and ourselves your servants for Jesus' sake” 2 Cor. 4:5. “Brethren, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may have *free* course, and be glorified, even as *it is* with you.” 2 Thess. 3:1

Though we are sinners who naturally strive, the Gospel is the glue which holds us together in this one fellowship with one confession, for His one Spirit by the same Gospel has set our hearts free from sin’s dominion. Since God has commanded us to be of one mind, faith, and confession, we seek and desire to keep His Word pure among us, whether this Word is taught from our pulpits, printed in our publications, or practiced in our churches. Purity of His Word is important to us, for how could it be otherwise (?) when Christ said, “If any man speak, *let him speak* as the oracles of God; if any man minister, *let him do it* as of the ability which God giveth: that God in all things may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom be praise and dominion for ever and ever.” I Pet. 4:11 We have a command to teach and “observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you.” Mt. 28:20 We find no doctrinal wiggle room in the word “oracles” or “all things”, for the *eternal Logos* also said, “Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled.” Mt. 5:18.

### **III. Confessional Fellowship, Church Fellowship, and Why We Mark and Avoid.**

To keep and retain the pure Word among us is not a matter where we are free, but bound by the precious Word of God which gives us life. Both Apostles, Paul and Peter command, “Finally, brethren, farewell. Be perfect, be of good comfort, be of one mind, live in peace; and the God of love and peace shall be with you” 2 Cor. 13:11. “Let your conversation be as it becometh the gospel of Christ: that whether I come and see you, or else be absent, I may hear of your affairs, that ye stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel” Phi. 1:27. “Fulfil ye my joy, that ye be likeminded, having the same love, *being* of one accord, of one mind” Phil. 2:2. “Finally, *be ye* all of one mind, having compassion one of another, love as brethren...” I Pet. 3:8. When the founders of our fellowship confessed the true Word of God to one another, they recognized doctrinal unity and agreement. Church fellowship was discovered, recognized. Regarding these two terms, confessional fellowship and church fellowship, one of our pastoral forefathers, Rev. Wallace McLaughlin wrote, “Church fellowship cannot, like confessional fellowship, exist without being known or exercised, but is a conscious practice of those who go to the same altar, exchange pulpits, or join each other in prayer. Those who are actually

doing these things are in church fellowship with one another. The doctrine of church fellowship is the teaching of God's Word which governs such practice of fellowship, telling us with whom God requires us to practice fellowship (e.g., I Cor. 1:10; Eh. 4:3) and with whom He forbids us to practice fellowship (e.g., Matt. 7:15; Rom. 16:17)." (The Faithful Word, Spring 1999, Vol. 36, #1, pg. 26) Again our excellent Brief Statement:

29. The orthodox character of a church is established not by its mere name nor by its outward acceptance of, and subscription to, an orthodox creed, but by the doctrine which is actually taught in its pulpits, in its theological seminaries, and in its publications. On the other hand, a church does not forfeit its orthodox character through the casual intrusion of errors, provided these are combated and eventually removed by means of doctrinal discipline, Acts 20:30; I Timothy 1:3.

### **Controversy; Bane or Blessing?**

At this point it seems logical to discuss what we call "doctrinal controversy", both the necessity and the proper spirit whereby such should take place, when it takes place. Regarding the necessity of doctrinal controversy we do not here mean every once in a while we must put on our boxing gloves and start a doctrinal argument with the brethren, but rather God from time to time purposefully allows such controversies to befall us, "For THERE MUST BE also heresies among you, that they which are approved may be made manifest among you." I Cor. 11:19. Jesus taught the same to His disciples, "Woe unto the world because of offences! for IT MUST NEEDS BE that offences come; but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh!" Mt. 18:7. And certainly we must quote Acts 20:30-31, "Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them. THEREFORE WATCH..." You could say God would rather have us watch and pay attention, than fall asleep and let our Bibles get dusty. He therefore allows a controversy to arise, and thereby knocks us on the head to wake us out of sleep. Consider the "awakening" of the disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane when Judas, the soldiers, and Satan drew near. Though Christ had warned them many times, they were caught off guard.

When our fellowship was only 18 years old, Pastor Sheldon Twenge presented an essay to the 1982 convention entitled "Controversy: Bane or Blessing?" Right away in the opening paragraph he doesn't mince words, "During its eighteen years of history the Lutheran Churches of the Reformation has been decimated by controversy. This church body, as well as its component congregations, has suffered huge losses because of controversy. Is the LCR therefore, to be construed as a hot-bed of controversy? Are the pastors of the LCR (for it is a truism that from the ranks of the clergy most controversies arise) to be deemed controversy prone?" Pastor Twenge then answers all these questions with a YES, and then discusses the bane or blessing of controversy. Naturally he identifies the roots of all controversy with Satan, original sin and the Old Adam, and the opposition of the world to the truth. There is a good quote from Luther which should be repeated (Large Catechism, Eighth Commandment), "For wherever there are godly preachers and Christians, they must bear the sentence before the world that they are called heretics, apostates, yea, seditious and desperately wicked miscreants. Besides, the Word of God must suffer in the most shameful and malicious manner, being persecuted, blasphemed, contradicted, perverted, and falsely cited and interpreted. But let this pass; for it is the way of the blind world that she condemns and persecutes the truth and the children of God, and yet esteems it no sin".

While God's ways are higher than our own, and His ways past finding out, these 50 years have taught us God's allowance of controversy is God's good work given for the benefit of our faith. This is how God purifies the Church, so the truth is not lost but treasured and confessed. "Each generation must become acquainted with the details of Scripture doctrine. God knows, far better than any man.....how lazy and complacent is the human heart." (Controversy: Bane or Blessing? Twenge, pg. 17-18). What happens when God allows false doctrine to intrude a little or a lot into a fellowship? Sincere believers



who treasure the gift of His Word are forced out of necessity to study the Word more, dig deeper, and search the Scriptures daily as the Bereans. Doctrinal controversy is actually one of the ways whereby God keeps and preserves us in the true faith, for it causes us to cling more tightly to Christ by clinging most tightly to His every sacred and inspired word *alone*. Confidence thus in men and self is broken. Moreover, after you have been through a controversy or two, you also see the great cost to your sins, your lack of diligence, your lack of study, your lack of brotherly love. You see your pride. Souls go astray. Families are divided. Sheep become bitter, others entirely lost. Who among us is without sin in such matters? Only Christ can cleanse us from our darkness. Therefore “watch and pray that ye enter not into temptation” Mt. 26:41. “Woe unto the world because of offences! for IT MUST NEEDS BE that offences come; but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh!” Mt. 18:7 “My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth” I Jn. 3:18.

### **Godly and Ungodly Controversy**

When controversies arise, there is God-pleasing way to stand up and fight for the truth in love, and also an ungodly way to fight according to the flesh. There is also a time when a very sharp rebuke is necessary “to the face”, and other times when error can be corrected privately on the side. Pastors are especially instructed, “The servant of the Lord must not strive; but be gentle unto all *men*, apt to teach, patient, In meekness instructing those that oppose themselves; if God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth; And *that* they may recover themselves out of the snare of the devil, who are taken captive by him at his will” II Tim. 2:24-25. A good example of brotherly correction is told us in Acts 18. When Apollos who was “mighty in the Scriptures” publicly preached with some ignorance concerning Christ, Aquila and Priscilla did not publicly correct him. For the sake of souls who might be injured, this husband and wife took him aside “and expounded unto him the way of God more perfectly.” In like manner (no doubt), some of our elder pastors who have now reached their eternal reward witnessed various weaknesses and errors in our younger pastors, and rather than continually thumping them on the head with the Law, they charitably covered a multitude of sins, and patiently instructed by the Word and their example for a time until these ignorant pastors saw the light. Which pastor among us now doesn’t appreciate the great patience of those honorable pastors before us? Don’t we see Christ and His patient dealing with His disciples? Can’t we hear Christ praying even now, “I pray for them: I pray not for the world, but for them which thou hast given me; for they are thine.....I pray not that thou shouldest take them out of the world, but that thou shouldest keep them from the evil. They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth.” Jn. 17.

Of course it is a different matter if that erring brother is trumpeting their error quite loudly and publicly. “Them that sin rebuke before all, that others also may fear” I Tim. 5:20. Sometimes souls are on the line and in immediate danger. Thus Paul said once of erring Peter, “I withstood him to the face, because he was to be blamed” Gal. 2:11. Likewise with our patient and merciful Christ, there were times where sharp rebuke was necessary. To His own Peter Jesus said, “Get thee behind me, Satan: thou art an offence unto me: for thou savourest not the things that be of God, but those that be of men” Mt. 16:23. But our Lord’s strongest rebukes were for the Pharisees who denied the very Gospel which gave life. “Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead *men’s* bones, and of all uncleanness. Even so ye also outwardly appear righteous unto men, but within ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity” Mt. 23:27-28. Let us then never forget this same hypocrisy and iniquity still lives in our own heart, and when we fight our doctrinal battles, may the New Man overcome the Old and prevail for the glory of Christ and God’s Kingdom.

In our 50 year of history, there has been no lack of doctrinal controversy, and we need not look too back into history to find the truth of Paul's words, "Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them. Therefore watch, and remember, that by the space of three years I ceased not to warn every one night and day with tears." Acts 20:30-31. We know these tears for we have shed them. We also dare not claim any higher ground, as if we have only been godly in our controversies and never ungodly. While we should have no problem with marking and avoiding over the truth of doctrine, we must be careful we are not guilty of sinful or unnecessary schism. Speaking now of the struggle in controversy, and the wisdom we ought to exercise in the struggle, we return again to that most evangelical pastor who battled against pietism, Valentine Loescher. Speaking of pastors he writes:

No one but a spiritually deranged person would deny that it is the ministry and duty of a teacher, who sees and knows a danger, to restrain that danger according to the ability God gives. On the one hand, teachers are placed as watchmen, not only so that they may point out the danger to this or that soul entrusted to their care, but also so that they may warn the whole congregation of Jesus Christ which they are to feed. On the other hand, teachers are to preserve (to speak in a worldly way) the church, whether in season or out of season. If such a watchman can do no more, he at least ought to blow the trumpet and warn his people when danger comes. (Ezek. 33:6) If watchmen don't do this, they are blind and mute dogs, as Scripture says. (Isa. 56:10) Therefore teachers in the NT are called..... overseers. Such a ministerial name is given to them because they are to be on their guard if men "arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them"; therefore they are especially to be on their guard. (Ac 20:30-31) They are to hold onto the word, which is certain, and to "refute those who oppose it" (Tit 1:9).....

Although the danger to the church from false teachers and from pernicious practices is at times great and obvious, at other times it is not so great; it may be a hidden danger. Therefore, we must distinguish the level of danger if we want to carry out our ministry of refutation at all times according to the counsel of God and for the salvation of the church. One has to cry out against a wolf who wants to slaughter the flock. One must cry out more strongly against the wolf than against a small fox who corrupts the vineyard of Christ. Yet even the fox is not allowed to carry out his evil design, for the heavenly Bridegroom commanded: "Catch the foxes, the little foxes" (SS 2:15). An obvious heretic must be attacked more strongly than a suspected false teacher; but even the suspected false teacher must be openly opposed, when the matter requires it. In such circumstances, faith in Christ allows no respect of persons.

A Christian teacher must have patience with his fellow servants when they do not take the same steps he does in the ministry of refutation, and do not attack the matter with equal earnestness and eagerness. If they are otherwise correct in doctrine, then one is to remember that the danger cannot be recognized by everyone so quickly or so fully. Similarly, no one has to immediately straighten out his brother in the ministry, or frighten him away, if he does not himself straighten out his moderation in rebuking. Both sides must be considered so that when it comes to steps of discipline, both sides of the cases are judged according to the law and testimony. Men may have different perceptions about how great or obvious a matter it is. For all that, it may even be a foible that God overlooks in his messengers, if they regard a matter as smaller or larger than it ought to be. We must often patiently endure such foibles among men. Nevertheless, we must allow the work of the Holy Spirit to predominate. "If we are out of our mind, it is for the sake of God" (2 Cor. 5:13) [The Complete Timotheus Verinus, Valentin Ernst Loescher, Northwestern Publishing House, 1998, pgs. 5-6]

## Why We Mark and Avoid

While division in churches and congregations is unavoidable because of the sinful flesh, consider the phrase “we are divided because of doctrine”. This is a true statement and we are rightly divided from various heterodox congregations for that reason. But there is another way to look at it. Properly speaking God’s doctrine never divides Christians but only unites them, and so there is no such thing as “doctrinal division” in that sense, but what divides Christians is false doctrine *and the refusal to condemn false doctrine and separate from it*. Moreover when a Christian forsakes one of the true doctrines and holds to the false, they might no longer be Christian. If they know God’s Word says one thing, but they stubbornly refuse to accept it, impenitence in one sin destroys faith in the forgiveness of all sins. The Holy Spirit departs. But if they hold to the error in weakness and ignorance, still trusting in salvation by grace alone, faith still exists. And so while God’s true doctrine does divide and separate believers from the world, true doctrine never really divides believers from one another, but false doctrine surely does.

For example, while we hold and maintain the LCMS years ago was once faithful to God’s Word, doctrinal errors entered that once faithful fellowship. While certain pastors and layman fought these errors, some accepted and defended error. Given such a situation, when efforts are made out of love to correct but error is not forsaken, God’s Word commands, “Now I beseech you, brethren, *mark them* which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and *avoid them*. For they that are such serve not our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly; and by good words and fair speeches deceive the hearts of the simple.” Rom. 16:17-18. God does not mince words. We find no half-heartedness in God. But with all His heart for our own spiritual good, even our salvation and that of our neighbor, God commands us to “mark and avoid”. This does not mean we paint a scarlet letter upon the erring and if we find them walking toward us on a sidewalk we circumvent their path, but this means we do not practice church fellowship with them, neither prayer, pulpit, or altar. Even if we are in 99% doctrinal agreement, we cannot bless that 1% of error they refuse to forsake.

Consider the nature of marriage and faithfulness. If a man is married roughly three years to his new bride, let us say a thousand nights, and though she spends 990 nights with her husband she intermingles ten of those nights with another man, has she been faithful? And once the unfaithfulness is recognized and discovered, will the husband join himself to her anymore? If she returns to her husband and says “Hey, it was only ten nights out of a thousand....what’s the big deal?”, must the husband accept her? Even if it was only one night out of ten thousand, adultery is still adultery, unfaithfulness is unfaithfulness, just as evil is evil. Will the marriage be the same? It is one matter if the adulterer repents, but if there is no repentance the marriage is over. To continue in such a marriage without repentance is no marriage at all, but a joke, a con, a deception by both parties. It is to live a lie. “Can two walk together except they be agreed?” Amos 3:3. Can the *union* of their marriage continue if there is no repentance? There is a difference between forgiving adultery and living in it.

In the Holy Christian Church, the reason we love Christ so much is because by the cross He has put away all our adultery. Though He could well have put us away, by casting us into hell for our adultery, God chose instead to divorce Himself from Himself. Bearing our sins, Christ was forsaken by God. You can hear the pain of this divorce taking place when Christ cries out in agony upon the cross, “My God My God why hast Thou forsaken Me?” Mk. 15:34. This is the price of our sin, the sufferings of our dear Christ. God the Father turned His back on God the Son. Even so Christ “loved the Church, and gave himself for it.....That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish” Eph. 5:25-27. When any soul is bound and married to Christ by faith, so that the Church is called the Bride and Christ the Bridegroom, we do not help anyone by tolerating or refusing to condemn adultery (false doctrine). Nor does praying with the erring help them to stop committing adultery. False doctrine is not like a few harmless helium-filled balloons which float up aimlessly into the sky, but every false doctrine is a dagger pointed directly at our

heart, and Satan wants to push it through. It is also a dagger pointed at our neighbor's heart, and we pray it hasn't pierced through nor do we want the same to pierce us. But we do our neighbor no favor by pretending the dagger isn't there, nor can we pray the dagger out by praying with them. It is written "What fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? And what communion hath light with darkness?" II Cor. 6:14.

Whether we or our neighbor are deceived by false doctrine, no one is helped by ignoring Satan's arrows. False doctrine offends God and angers him, for "Behold, I am against the prophets, saith the LORD, that use their tongues, and say, He saith." Jer. 23:31. Likewise, "Behold, I am against the prophets, saith the LORD, that steal my words every one from his neighbour" Jer. 23:30. A false prophet is a thief, who by false doctrine is stealing God's Word out of the heart. A man can be robbed of his money or possessions, his pride and honor, his good reputation, and yet survive and not be destroyed. But if a man is robbed of his faith in Christ and dies in that desperate state, he really does lose everything, even his eternal salvation which Christ purchased for him "not with gold or silver". Will we thus say of *any false doctrine*, "What difference does it make?" Will we be indifferent to evil lies which destroy our neighbor's faith? Life is not a game, and the death of Christ was no joke. There is no middle ground concerning Christ, for "He that is not with Me is against Me" and "he that believeth and is baptized shall be saved, but he that believeth not shall be damned" (Mt. 12:30, Mk. 16:16)

Our position then on church fellowship, namely who we worship with and who we don't, is briefly stated in paragraph 28 of the Brief Statement (1932):

28. On Church-Fellowship -- Since God ordained that His Word only, without the admixture of human doctrine, be taught and believed in the Christian Church, I Peter 4:11; John 8:31-32; I Timothy. 6:3-4, all Christians are required by God to discriminate between orthodox and heterodox church-bodies, Matthew 7:15, to have church-fellowship only with orthodox church-bodies, and, in case they have strayed into heterodox church-bodies, to leave them, Romans 16:17. We repudiate unionism, that is, church-fellowship with the adherents of false doctrine, as disobedience to God's command, as causing divisions in the Church, Romans 16:17; II John 9-10, and involving the constant danger of losing the Word of God entirely, II Timothy 2:17-21.

In the practical sense, this means when we go to a heterodox church for a relative's baptism, the death of a friend, marriage, etc., we do not practice church fellowship with them because of their erring confession. We do not commune with them, pray with them, nor do our pastors swap pulpits. We cannot say "Amen" when they say "Amen" for we do not give our blessing to their false doctrine. While we recognize believers are there because God's Word is efficacious, we will not use one truth to overthrow another. The True Church is Invisible, but that does not mean we must now say regarding doctrine, "What difference does it make?" We warn the erring, we pray for the erring, but spiritually we mark and avoid the erring, for we want the erring to be delivered from that error which threatens their soul. This is not a loveless doctrine, but a doctrine filled with love for Christ, His Word, and love for neighbor. It is also God's love for us, for God is good when He doesn't want us to have fellowship with the erring, lest we adopt their errors. A little leaven leavens the whole lump.

We therefore condemn what is called the sin of *unionism*. What is unionism? The good answer given in Popular Symbolic states *Unionism* "asks the various denominations to form a union, or at least to maintain church-fellowship among themselves, despite their disagreement in doctrine-that allegedly being a matter of indifference-is a gross violation of the divine command. Furthermore, it does not serve the cause of unity, but perpetuates division, since it demands toleration of the original cause of division, false doctrine. It sins, further, against charity; instead of warning the errorist and the erring Christians, it

palliates error. It is immoral; it pretends a unity that does not exist and operates with dishonest, ambiguous formulas of union. Finally, it involves a denial of the truth, since he who consciously comprises with error, compromises and betrays the corresponding truth, Mat. 12:30, and since it springs from indifference and fosters indifference, it tends to bring on the loss of the entire truth.” (Popular Symbolics, pg 106). “Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness? And what concord hath Christ with Belial? or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel? And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? for ye are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in *them*; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean *thing*; and I will receive you, And will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty.” 2 Cor. 6:14-18

Perhaps one final point. It is this very doctrine of church fellowship and unionism, by which the Lord has partly preserved and protected this blessed fellowship for 50 years. Without this doctrine we would not have the pure Word today and we would be suffering from the various errors taught by the LCMS, WELS, and others. These errors include theistic evolution, the church growth movement, good work ministries, women ministers, papism, tyranny, legalism, lawlessness, and an overemphasis on sanctification over justification, deeds over doctrine. But by God’s mercies we are aware of these errors, teach against them, but above all things we want the Gospel to predominate in our preaching, the “one thing needful”. “Jesus, Thy blood and righteousness, my beauty are, my glorious dress; Midst flaming worlds in these arrayed, With joy shall I lift up my head” (The Lutheran Hymnal, 1941, Hymn #371).

### CONCLUSION

We have now reached the point where we can look back upon 50 years of history and see God’s mercy on every page. Who can count or number all the blessings God has showered upon us through His Word? “For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, *even* as many as the Lord our God shall call” Acts 2:39. Let not a one of us take this Word for granted but daily rejoice and “be ye thankful.” I believe the junction or place where our fellowship is today, is much like that junction or place where Elijah was taken to heaven, separated from Elisha. The Church who dies before us, ascending into heaven, leaves their mantle behind.

And it came to pass, as they still went on, and talked, that, behold, *there appeared* a chariot of fire, and horses of fire, and parted them both asunder; and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven. And Elisha saw *it*, and he cried, My father, my father, the chariot of Israel, and the horsemen thereof. And he saw him no more: and he took hold of his own clothes, and rent them in two pieces. He took up also the mantle of Elijah that fell from him, and went back, and stood by the bank of Jordan; And he took the mantle of Elijah that fell from him, and smote the waters, and said, Where *is* the LORD God of Elijah? and when he also had smitten the waters, they parted hither and thither: and Elisha went over. II Kings 2:11-14

That’s where we are right now. We are that Elisha left behind gazing up. The Church on earth continually dies and ascends into heaven. The more we love them, the deeper our grief. But for them sorrow has turned into joy. After the cross there is *only* glory. That first moment in heaven they hear a shout of triumph this world has never know. At long last their eyes rest upon the Lamb who was dead yet He lives. He lived in their hearts by faith while on earth, now they live with Him in heaven. Their hearts burst into songs only angels can sing. But as for us *Elishas* here below, it is still a battle, still a cross, and there are little ones who depend on us. God has called us to “Feed My Lambs” and “preach the Gospel to every creature.” We are that Elijah to the next Elisha. They grow up quickly. “Pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that he will send forth labourers into his harvest” Mt. 9:38. Pray His Spirit will move

a few young men to enter the Holy Ministry. Pray that God will keep us from error and by the power of the Gospel graciously preserve us in the one true faith. “Be not faithless but believing” Jn. 20:27. It is not by our reason or strength that we have the pure Word today, but God’s strength, God’s mercy. Pick up the mantle God has left behind, the coat, the covering of God’s Word, the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Pick it up by faith, put it on by faith, and cloak yourself with the righteousness of Christ by faith, and smite every obstacle before you. There is more power in God’s Word spoken than we could possibly imagine, for it is the power of His Spirit. “The words that I speak unto you, they are spirit and they are life” Jn. 6:63. As His Word gave you life and healing, share His life and healing with others, “Be strong and of a good courage; be not afraid, neither be thou dismayed: for the LORD thy God *is* with thee whithersoever thou goest..... he will not fail thee, nor forsake thee.....For the mountains shall depart, and the hills be removed; but my kindness shall not depart from thee, neither shall the covenant of my peace be removed, saith the LORD that hath mercy on thee.....These are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name” (Is. 54, Jn. 20, Jn. 20:31) This is our prayer. Amen.