

For the

# LIFE of the WORLD

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**A Study on God's Word and Our Lutheran Confessions**

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P R E S S



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## For the **LIFE** of the **WORLD**

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By the Rev. Dr. William C. Weinrich, Academic Dean and Professor of Historical Theology, Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Ind; Third Vice President of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod

Strictly speaking, the church has “fellowship” only in one place, and that is in the Lord’s Supper. The fellowship that exists in the eucharistic participation is so tight and intimate that, in that fellowship, we may no longer regard ourselves as individual persons who “have fellowship” with other persons. We are all defined by Christ because we have become one, not with Him, but *in* Him.

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By the Rev. Prof. Kurt Marquart, Associate Professor of Systematic Theology, Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Ind.

In English, the word “fellowship” suggests sociability, camaraderie, perhaps a friendly romp with balloons and doughnuts in the parish “fellowship hall.” The Greek, “*koinoonia*” (fellowship, communion) means sharing, participating in common treasures, culminating in *the* communion of the Lord’s Body and Blood.

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# A Study on God's Word and our Lutheran Confessions concerning Church Fellowship

By the Rev. Dr. Alvin Barry



**W**ith so many different Christian denominations in the world today it is possible to forget that there is in fact one, holy, universal Christian church. This unseen reality embraces all who trust that Jesus Christ, God's Son, is the Savior. Such trust is a gift from God that bestows all the blessings of salvation won by Christ our Lord. Because this faith in the heart is unseen, when we speak of visible church fellowship we need to deal with what is seen and known objectively.

Visible expression of church fellowship is fellowship in the objective, external "marks" of the church, the preaching of God's Word and the administration of His Sacraments. For it is through these means that God the Holy Spirit is working to create and sustain saving faith. These means of grace are all important for the church. Therefore, they are decisive in matters of church fellowship.

Because the Word and Sacraments are all decisive, we refer to church fellowship as "pulpit and altar" fellowship, since what goes on in the pulpit and at the altar is precisely that which sus-



tains us and keeps us in the true faith, and therefore united to one another in the visible reality of our gathering around these marks of the church. The church's ministers are called stewards of these mysteries of God (1 Cor. 4:1). They bear a particularly significant responsibility for faithfulness in regard to maintaining and preserving unity in the true faith.

The first Christians were united around the marks of the church. They regularly participated together in the means of grace, the marks of the church: Word and Sacrament (Acts 2:42). God's Word, given through the Apostle Paul, makes it clear that God desires His people to agree with one another, "I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought" (1 Cor. 1:10). The Apostle Peter adds, "If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words

of God" (1 Peter 4:11). And in the case of those times when there is not agreement in doctrine, the Scriptures speak clearly that we are not able to enjoy visible fellowship (Romans 16:17).

It is important to offer a response to a frequent misunderstanding of the Bible's teaching concerning church fellowship. Sometimes when people hear our Synod express the Bible's teaching about church fellowship they ask, "Are you saying that only Missouri Synod Lutherans are Christians?" Some even misrepresent the Synod's position and try to accuse us of saying that the Missouri Synod is the only Christian church in which there are believers in Christ.

We are careful always to point out that anyone, anywhere, at any time, who believes that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is their Savior is a Christian. For we know that wherever, and to any extent, that the true Gospel is proclaimed there the Holy Spirit is at work (Isaiah 55:10-11). We Missouri Synod Lutherans have never believed or taught that Christians are only found in Lutheran congregations, or that the Missouri Synod alone is the only church in which a person may receive the blessings of eternal salvation. It is completely false to suggest, or to believe, otherwise. Sadly even some in our Synod, in order to advance their personal agendas, tend to distort and misrepresent our Synod's position on fellowship.

It is a great tragedy that false doctrine exists in certain Christian churches. We in the Missouri Synod are not claiming that

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we are a perfect church. By no means! We all know that mistakes are made and that people can, and do, fall into error. But when we talk about false doctrine in other churches we are not referring to such mistakes and unintended errors, rather, we are concerned with what is actually taught from the pulpits of these churches. We are talking about what pastors in other churches learn from their seminaries about God's Word.

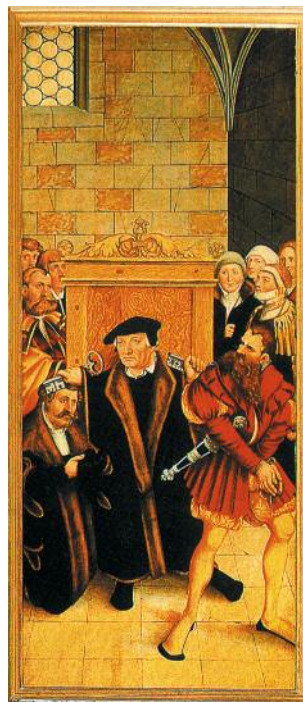
When a church through its actions and statements reveals that it embraces teachings contrary to God's Word, there we must recognize this and not ignore, minimize or overlook this reality. When a church distorts the public marks of the church, the Word and Sacraments, we can have no public, visible fellowship with this church.

We are very concerned when people belong to churches that mislead them when it comes to the wonderful comfort and truths of God's Word. Truths such as the teaching that we are saved by grace alone, apart from any works of the law. Or the wonderful truth about how God works in and through

Holy Baptism and Holy Communion. Our Synod continues to insist, as do our Lutheran Confessions, that the basis for visible unity in the church is agreement in doctrine *and in all its articles*. Unfortunately, sometimes we find individuals omitting these last five words of our Lutheran Confessions. This is not appropriate. Church fellowship consists in fellowship around the external, visible marks of the church. This is all important, for through these means the Holy Spirit is working to create and sustain faith. Any compromise or error in regard to these means of grace is a dangerous situation that God wants us to avoid. Therefore as a Synod we thank God for all who share with us that invisible bond of fellowship by faith in Christ. We are committed to working toward visible fellowship in the faith with our fellow Christians on the basis of unity in the teachings of God's Word in all its marvelous truths. We are also committed to avoiding schism and sectarianism and this we do precisely by maintaining a clear, consistent position on church fellowship, avoiding unionism, that is, fellowship without real unity.

May our good and gracious God be with and bless our Synod richly as we continue to study and reflect on what God's Word and our Lutheran Confessions set forth as the right understanding of the doctrine and practice of church fellowship.

*The Rev. Dr. Alvin Barry is President of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.*



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