

Walking Together: Unity and Fellowship

A Special Congregational Study

Pilgrim Lutheran Church, Kilgore, Texas
2024 February 04 – Rev. Dr. Jayson S. Galler

Invocation & Opening Prayer:

Merciful God, we humbly implore You to cast the bright beams of Your light upon Your Church that we, being instructed by the doctrine of the blessed apostles, may walk in the light of Your truth and finally attain to the light of everlasting life; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen. (*Lutheran Service Book* Collect #101, Pew Edition p.305.)

Introduction:

- + Thank you to everyone who made the lunch a blessing and to all who are here in-person or on-line.
- + Today's handout is available in hardcopy and online; we are Skyping live; and we will post audio and video later. (Due to equipment limitations, no PowerPoint.)
- + As "usual" the plan is first to proceed through the prepared material, asking you to jot down but largely hold your questions, then to take a break, and finally to have open discussion, trying to be done in no more than two hours. (Some questions may be asked immediately, but you might also find your questions to be answered as we go.)
- + As you probably know, today's Special Congregational Study follows both an August 14, 2022, Special Study titled "What does it mean to be a member of the Body of Christ?" (the handouts, audio, and video files for that study are linked on Pilgrim's website under Past Studies at <http://www.pilgrimlc.org/bible-studies>) and a January 29, 2023, Special Study titled "Walking Together", which two successive Special Studies led to the current series of what will likely be seven Special Studies: the first April 30, 2023, titled "Walking Together: Church Usages/Liturgy & Hymns"; the second July 30, 2023, titled "Walking Together: Law and Gospel"; and the third October 29, 2023, titled "Walking Together: The Sacrament of the Altar" (the handout, audio, and video files for the January, April, July, and October studies are linked on Pilgrim's website on their own page at <http://www.pilgrimlc.org/bible-studies/walking-together>).
- + Three other Special Congregational Studies in this same series are in various stages of planning. Please mark your calendars for the June 30 Study on "Ministry" and September 29 Study on "Public Condemnation of Public Sin". To be scheduled in 2025 is the Study on "Ecclesiastical Supervision/Dispute Resolution". (The handout from the April 30, 2023, Study in some cases listed some subtopics that likely will be included in those Studies, and your input is welcome on both the topics and subtopics.)

- + This series of Special Congregational Studies was in part prompted by Pilgrim’s Board of Elders’ and my together studying the Formula of Concord, one of the Lutheran Confessions, which Confession both speaks of the duty to confess and deals with division among the Lutherans then on the basis of Scripture and the Confessions. Our congregation as a whole—and so each of her members individually—accepts Holy Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions without reservation (see more about Scripture and the Confessions at <http://www.pilgrimlc.org/about/biblical-and-confessional>). Mindful of the Formula of Concord’s regard for both Holy Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions as the only “Rule and Norm” for judging teaching and deciding errors, and mindful of the Formula’s articles’ use of Scripture and the Confessions in its articles, this study proceeds by examining relevant passages of both Holy Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions before summarizing the teaching and applying it to the seeming errors that we in our day face in the Synod regarding Unity and Fellowship.

Holy Scripture:

Faithful teaching and practice regarding Unity and Fellowship is found, first and foremost, in Holy Scripture. The following passages and points drawn from them related to Unity and Fellowship are not meant to be comprehensive but representative.

- + Matthew 16:13-20: Christ Himself builds His Church on the confession of Who He is.
 - The true confession of Christ is distinguished from false confessions of Christ.
 - Christ’s identity as the Son of God is revealed by the Father, arguably through the Spirit.
 - The “rock” is not the person of St. Peter but the confession or the ministry making the confession (confer the Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope ¶25).
 - The gates of hell do not prevail against the Church but the Church prevails against hell (the Church is the embodiment of the Kingdom of Heaven/God in the Gospel accounts).
 - Relevant is the authority and language of “the keys”; confer John 20:21-23.
 - Confer also Matthew 18:15-20, especially two or three’s gathering in Christ’s Name and His presence with them (confer Matthew 1:23 and 28:19-20).
- + John 10:1-42: The Good Shepherd calls His sheep, who follow Him, and division results.
 - The Good Shepherd lays down His life for His sheep and then takes it back up again.
 - The Good Shepherd calls His sheep by name and leads them out, so they are saved, going in and out and finding pasture, having life abundantly in the one flock under one Shepherd.
 - The sheep hear and know their Shepherd’s voice; they may hear but do not know and will not follow but flee from strangers.
 - Jesus’s teaching about His identity and work resulted in a division (*schisma*; confer and compare 1 Corinthians 11:18-19 where some divisions [there *haireis*] are necessary to know who is genuine).
 - Today the under-shepherds call on the Good Shepherd’s behalf with the same results (confer 1 Peter 5:2-4; Hebrews 13:20).

- + John 15:1-17: Jesus, the true Vine, leads to His followers, the branches, bearing fruit.
 - Jesus' word again is a key means of both Jesus's initial cleansing (vv.3 and 15) and of His and our abiding (vv.7, 10, and 14; confer John 6:56 where Jesus says those who feed on His flesh and drink His blood abide in Him and He in them).
 - Those connected to Jesus bear fruit: treasuring His teaching and doing His Commandments.
 - Hebrews 13:15 describes the fruit of lips that confess God's Name as a sacrifice of praise.
 - The Father prunes dead branches arguably through the Church, pastors excommunicating with the congregation's "Amen".
- + John 17:6-26: Jesus prays for the organic unity of His disciples and those they would pastor.
 - Verses 6-19 pertain to the unity of the disciples gathered around Christ (especially v.11), and vv.20-26 pertain to unity of the apostles and those gathered around them as Church (especially vv.21 and 23).
 - Unity with Christ makes the Church one, holy, catholic/Christian (as whole or complete, universally extended in time and space, orthodox), and apostolic (on the foundation of the apostles, not necessarily traceably succeeding, and itself sent in some sense).
 - Note that the apostles' "word" is not only the means of belief but arguably also the basis for unity (not structure or administration).
 - The "word" connected with bread and wine in the Sacrament of the Altar that are the Body and Blood of Christ in some sense both effects and reflects the unity of the Body of Christ that is the Church (the participation in the holy things is related to the communion of saints).
- + Romans 2:28-29: There are both outward and inward aspects to both Christians and the Church.
 - Outward and inward do not exclude but entail the other (confer Romans 10:10-11).
 - What is true of Jews and circumcision is true of Christians and baptism (confer Romans 4:11; Colossians 2:11-12, 17) and arguably also of absolution and the Supper.
 - *Where* the Church is located is revealed by its visible, exterior, objective marks; *who* the Church consists of is hidden in individuals' invisible, interior, subjective faith (confer Luke 17:20-21; Colossians 3:3; such hiddenness is part of the theology of the cross).
 - Identifiable congregations exist in various places, but not all of the people there are necessarily part of the true Church (for example, 1 John 2:19 "from us" versus "of us").
 - We generally speak of the "Means of Grace" (or the "Means of Salvation"), those are God's Word and Sacraments (the Word in all of its forms), as the "marks" or "signs/miracles" of the Church (which both mark and effect or give what they signify), especially the *purely preached* Word and *rightly administered* Sacraments.
 - Balanced is tension between externalizing and internalizing/spiritualizing.

- + Ephesians 4:1-16: One Lord, working through one ministry, gives and maintains oneness.
 - Note especially the “oneness” or “unity” in vv.2 and 13, its being given and attained.
 - Such oneness can be “unicity” (one in quantity) and “unity” (one in quality).
 - “One” in vv.4-6 has the sense of “one true”, for certainly there are “many false”, though even all of that numerical variation can be considered one false church or sacrament.
 - In v.11, there is one Office of the Holy Ministry, including “teaching pastors”.
 - In v.12, there are three purposes/results: to equip the saints, for the work of ministry, for building up the Body of Christ (confer the comma in, for example, the KJV and ASV, and confer the Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope ¶67).
 - In vv.13-16, the ultimate goal is doctrinal unity in the Body of Christ.
 - Noting the “one baptism”, we can also see Ephesians 5:25-33 and 1 John 5:6-12, noting especially the latter’s connection also to John 19:28-37, and understanding the Spirit to be active in preaching and absolution, as well as the water of Holy Baptism and the Blood of the Holy Supper.
- + 1 John 1:1-4: Vertical fellowship leads to horizontal fellowship.
 - Our fellowship is with the Triune God and with one another.
 - Fellowship is brought about by first the Father’s revealing and later those He send’s preaching and applying the Gospel in tangible ways.
 - Doctrinal unity and fellowship go together (see, for examples, Acts 1:14; 2:42-47; 15:25; Romans 15:6).
 - Church fellowship is pulpit, baptismal, “confessional”, and altar fellowship, distinguished from churches cooperating in externals and individuals doing such things as praying, though even in those matters confession of faith can be at stake. (Pastors and congregations’ officially joining in worship with other “Christians” with whom we do not agree in doctrine is called “unionism” and with those who are not “Christians” is called “syncretism”.)
- + 1 Timothy 5:22: We are not to take part in the sin of others by fellowship with them.
 - The verb for “taking part” (*koinoneo*) is in the same word group as the usual word for fellowship, having something in common, participating in, communing with (for example, in 1 Corinthians 10:16 with reference to the bread that is the Body of Christ and to the cup that is the blood of Christ).
 - Positively, we share in Christ’s suffering (1 Peter 4:13).
 - St. Paul uses the verb to refer to “partnership” through giving and receiving offerings (Philippians 4:15).
 - An example of such wrongful “taking part” is 2 John 11, where greeting a false teacher is taking part in his or her wicked works, which would include teaching and practice.
 - We might be tempted to think of individuals apart from their churches, but individuals should belong to churches, specifically, to churches that confess the truth and so with whom we would be in fellowship (the Marks of the Church attach not to individuals but to churches; believers can exist in heterodox churches as hypocrites can be in orthodox ones).
 - As members who do not share our confession or are unrepentant are excommunicated, so we should not be in fellowship with those of a different confession or who are unrepentant (see 1 Corinthians 5:1-13; 10:1-22; 11:17-34; Romans 16:17 discussed previously, among other passages, though note that refusing fellowship *is not* excommunication).

Lutheran Confessions:

Solidly based on and correctly expounding Holy Scripture, both some of the passages just considered and others, the Lutheran Confessions in a number of confessional documents and articles, over about a fifty-year period of time, addressed the matters of Unity and Fellowship, sometimes on that topic, and other times while addressing other topics. Again, what follows is not meant to be exhaustive but representative.

- + The Apostolic Creed's Third Article confesses faith in the Church, and so not surprisingly the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther treats of the Church in the Small and Large Catechism's parts dealing with the Third Article. As many know by heart, the Small Catechism confesses, in part, that the Holy Spirit "calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith" and that "In this Christian Church He daily and richly forgives all my sins and the sins of all believers" (Small Catechism II:6). The Large Catechism elaborates that the Holy Spirit makes us holy in part "through the Christian Church", which Luther refers to as "the mother that begets and bears every Christian through the Word of God" (Large Catechism II:41, 42). Luther further explains that, while "church" may be taken first as a building, the word more properly refers to the holy assembly that gives the building that name (Large Catechism II:48). And, Luther paraphrases the Creeds' Article as follows, "I believe that there is on earth a little holy flock or community of pure saints under one head, Christ. It is called together by the Holy Spirit in one faith, mind, and understanding. It possesses a variety of gifts, yet is united in love without sect or schism. Of this community I also am a part and member, a participant and co-partner in all the blessings it possesses. I was brought to it by the Holy Spirit and incorporated into it through the fact that I have heard and still hear God's Word, which is the first step in entering it" (Large Catechism II:51-52).
- + In Augsburg Confession VII, Philip Melancthon defines the Church as the assembly of believers/saints among whom/in which the Gospel is preached/taught purely and the holy Sacraments are administered according to the Gospel/rightly (Augsburg Confession VII:1). Melancthon says that the Gospel's being unanimously preached in conformity with a pure understanding of it and the Sacraments' being administered in accordance with the Divine Word are sufficient for the true unity of the Church (Augsburg Confession VII:2). With reference to Ephesians 4, Melancthon says further that rites and ceremonies instituted by men do not have to be observed uniformly in all places for the true unity of the Church (Augsburg Confession VII:3-4). In Augsburg Confession VIII, Melancthon distinguishes the Church in the "proper" sense as the assembly of all true believers and saints, but he also acknowledges that in this life many false Christians, hypocrites, and even open sinners are mingled with believers (especially if they have not been excommunicated, the Apology later explained, and referred to as the "larger" sense), and so he says the sacraments remain efficacious when and may be used if the priests who administer them are wicked (Augsburg Confession VIII:1-3; confer Apology VII/VIII:28). After the Roman Catholics in their response took issue with Augsburg Confession Article VII as if Article VIII were not there, Melancthon, in his Apology (or Defense) of the Augsburg Confession, treated Article VII and VIII together. In the Apology's Article VII/VIII, Melancthon speaks explicitly about the Church's outward marks—the pure teaching of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments in harmony with the Gospel of Christ—and inward faith, with reference to passages such as Ephesians 5 (Apology VII/VIII:1-6, 20).

- + In Smalcald Articles part III, article xii on the Church, Luther denied the Roman Catholics' claim that they were the Church; thanked God that seven-year-old children, who presumably have learned the Creed, know that the Church is "holy believers and sheep who hear the voice of their Shepherd"; and said the Church's holiness does not consist of human ceremonies over and above Scripture but of the Word of God and faith.
- + Although the nature of the Church was not *per se* an inter-Lutheran issue later, the matter of human ceremonies continued to be (as we discussed in the Special Study on "Church Usages/Liturgy & Hymns). For our purposes regarding Unity and Fellowship, worth noting is the Formula of Concord's expressed understanding of Augsburg Confession VII:2, specifically that the number of ceremonies does not matter "as long as there is mutual agreement in doctrine and in all its articles as well as in the right use of the holy Sacraments" (Epitome X:7; confer Solid Declaration X:31). The contrast is between human ceremonies and God's Word, the pure preaching of the Gospel in all of its constituent articles, in harmony with all of its articles, with the Gospel and its teaching seen as one organic whole, not many doctrines but many articles or parts of one doctrine, so that agreement is not quantitative but qualitative.

Summary of Teaching:

As Holy Scripture teaches about Unity and Fellowship, so the Lutheran Confessions also believe, teach, and confess about Unity and Fellowship, and so all those who subscribe to Scripture and the Confessions, including us, will believe, teach, and confess, in both word and deed (doctrine and practice), the same Scriptural and Confessional truths and reject the contrary errors about Unity and Fellowship.

- + The Triune God calls together and unifies His Church by His Word in all of its forms—including the Sacraments of Holy Baptism, Holy Absolution, and the Holy Supper—and, despite division in the world (some division is necessary to know who is genuine), His Church prevails over all.
- + God's purely-preached Word and rightly-administered Sacraments also mark where the true Church is, though, even there, those who inwardly do not truly believe might outwardly appear to be part of the Church. God's Word gives not many but one teaching (or "doctrine"), which may be considered as many articles or parts, but form a whole that together is believed or rejected.
- + True believers abide in God and He in them, so that they bear fruits of repentance and faith, including confessing His Name in its broadest sense, in part by Church membership. Congregations of the Church similarly strive to preserve God-given unity, including using acceptable rites and ceremonies and other practices in common to help effect and reflect that unity.
- + As true believers are in fellowship with God and with their brothers and sisters in Christ, their congregations of the Church are in fellowship with other congregations or larger entities of the Church, but only when those congregations or larger entities of the Church are also faithful, for the faithful do not want to share in the unfaithful's sin.

Application to Error:

In view of the foregoing Scriptural and Confessional truths related to Unity and Fellowship, we reject and condemn both the following errors contrary to those truths and those people who hold or tolerate the following errors.

1. Minimizing the basis for fellowship from agreement in the Gospel and all its articles, including the right use of the holy Sacraments, to something that can be printed on a small pew card, in a brief paragraph of a bulletin, or in bullets on a PowerPoint slide.
(This condemnation is duplicated from the previous Study on “The Sacrament of the Altar”.)
2. Using or not-using rites and ceremonies, though not the ultimate basis for the Church’s unity, with the result that the Church unnecessarily appears to be divided, or suggesting that generic “faith” or “belief” in general, apart from the object of that faith or the content of that belief, is the basis for the Church’s unity, so as to ignore disunity that ultimately is damaging to salvation.
3. Considering the true unity of the Church to be unity of administration and structure—even of mutually agreed upon constitutions, bylaws, and Commission on Constitutional Matters (CCM) rulings—making the basis of the, in that case, “so-called” unity of the Church words of people and not the Word of God in all of its forms.
4. Not keeping vows subscribing unconditionally to the Lutheran Confessions based on Holy Scripture as a norm of teaching and practice (for example, saying that we only have to agree on what the Confessions say, not on what the Confessions mean, or otherwise limiting subscription), or not keeping commitments to the Circuit for regular attendance at Circuit Meetings to study Scripture and the Confessions and at least talk with brother pastors.
5. Affirming orthodox teaching and practice in words only but not doctrinally disciplining and so tolerating those who teach or practice in a heterodox fashion—including failing to condemn and doctrinally discipline those involved in especially high-profile cases of unionism and syncretism of every description, such as taking part in the services and sacramental rites of heterodox congregations or of congregations of mixed confessions (confer Article VI of the Constitution of the LCMS)—and/or, in some cases, oneself teaching and practicing in a heterodox fashion, such as the Texas District and Missouri Synod arguably do, for example, with open communion.
6. Falsely imagining that heterodoxy can exist alongside orthodoxy, perhaps giving equal rights to heterodoxy, pointing the faithful to others who might appear to be a faithful remnant, or even promoting heterodoxy, such as when the Texas District promotes errorists and the Missouri Synod nevertheless continues in fellowship with the Texas District despite the Texas District’s heterodoxy.
7. Ignoring the implications of existing declarations of fellowship, whether sharing in the sin of those with whom there is direct fellowship, or ignoring what might be called indirect fellowship, when a first entity’s fellowship with a second entity and that second entity’s fellowship with a third entity entails the first entity’s fellowship with the third entity, as when the LCMS says it is not in fellowship with the Lutheran Church of Australia and New Zealand (LCANZ) but is in fellowship with Lutheran Church Canada (LCC), which LCC is in fellowship with the LCANZ, which LCANZ is expected to ordain women during its 2024-2027 triennium.

As we have noted before, our congregation is committed to holding membership in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) as long as the Synod “remains true in doctrine and practice” to Scripture and the Confessions. As we have asked before in terms of other matters, is the Synod, District, and Circuit remaining true to Scripture and the Confessions in regards to Unity and Fellowship, both abstractly and concretely, in both teaching and practice? Does evidence suggest that there is a “casual intrusion” of error (for example, *Brief Statement*, paragraph 29)? Are the false teachings and false teachers clearly renounced and abandoned? Or, are the errors and errorists harbored and acknowledged as legitimate, making the church body heterodox (of a different glory, praise, or worship) instead of orthodox (of right glory, praise, or worship)? Is heterodoxy given equal standing with orthodoxy, or does heterodoxy reign over orthodoxy? (Confer the Rev. Kurt E. Marquart, *Confessional Lutheran Dogmatics* IX:27, 59-61.)

Break:

- + Help yourself to more food and/or beverage.
- + Remember there are multi-person men’s and women’s “accessible” bathrooms in the Parish Hall and single-person “unisex” bathrooms (one with a change-table) in the Office Area.

Open Discussion:

- + Your Questions and Comments:
- + My Questions and Comments:
 - What was to you *more-clear* or *less-clear*?
 - What was to you *surprising* or *new*?
 - What was to you *particularly important*?
 - In view of our discussion, what, if anything, should we do in the short and long terms?
 - Others?

Summary/Conclusions/Where we go from here:

As noted earlier today, the next Special Congregational Study will be June 30, 2024, and the next topic on the list is “Ministry”.

As noted previously, at our April 11, 2023, Meeting, the consensus of the Board of Elders and myself was both to wait until the series of studies was completed before replying to the District President’s letter to us regarding the concerns we expressed to him, and, should the congregation at that point decide to leave the Synod and District, then to recommend that Pilgrim follow the Synod’s dissension process and so faithfully confess the truth of Holy Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions, rather than just quietly leaving the Synod.

Closing Prayer, Benediction, & Hymn:

Almighty and everlasting God, You knit together Your faithful people of all times and places into one holy communion, the mystical body of Your Son, Jesus Christ. Grant us so to follow Your blessed saints in all virtuous and godly living that, together with them, we may come to the unspeakable joys You have prepared for those who love You; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.** (*Lutheran Service Book* Collect #F34, *LSB: Propers of the Day*, pp.432-433.)

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1 For all the saints who from their la - bors rest,
 2 Thou wast their rock, their for - tress, and their might;
 3 Oh, may Thy sol - diers, faith - ful, true, and bold,
 4 Oh, blest com - mu - nion, fel - low - ship di - vine!



Who Thee by faith be - fore the world con - fessed, Thy
 Thou, Lord, their cap - tain in the well - fought fight;
 Fight as the saints who no - bly fought of old And
 We fee - bly strug - gle, they in glo - ry shine; Yet



name, O Je - sus, be for - ev - er blest.
 Thou, in the dark - ness drear, their one true light.
 win with them the vic - tor's crown of gold!
 all are one in Thee, for all are Thine.



Al - le - lu - ia! Al - le - lu - ia!
 Al - le - lu - ia! Al - le - lu - ia!
 Al - le - lu - ia! Al - le - lu - ia!
 Al - le - lu - ia! Al - le - lu - ia!

5 And when the fight is fierce, the warfare long,
 Steals on the ear the distant triumph song,
 And hearts are brave again, and arms are strong.
 Alleluia! Alleluia!

6 The golden evening brightens in the west;
 Soon, soon to faithful warriors cometh rest;
 Sweet is the calm of paradise the blest.
 Alleluia! Alleluia!

7 But, lo, there breaks a yet more glorious day:
 The saints triumphant rise in bright array;
 The King of Glory passes on His way.
 Alleluia! Alleluia!

△ 8 From earth's wide bounds, from ocean's farthest coast,
 Through gates of pearl streams in the countless host,
 Singing to Father, Son, and Holy Ghost:
 Alleluia! Alleluia!

Text and tune: Public domain