



# The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod

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OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT

## Church Fellowship

With 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 are dealing 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 calls, gathers, enlightens and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith. Therefore, these marks of the church, these means of grace, 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 sustains 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.

## CHURCH FELLOWSHIP

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 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 that 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 creates and sustains faith, that is, keeps us with Jesus Christ in the one, true faith, as we confess in our Small Catechism. 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.

President A. L. Barry  
Jude 24-25  
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