

### 3. Church Fellowship and Telling the Good News about Jesus

As kids growing up in California, we learned very early that you could do *almost* anything with anybody. Some of our best friends in school and in the neighborhood were Asian and Hispanic. Our family dentist was African-American. Tante and Onkel Goldberg were like another set of grandparents. You got together with all kinds of folks for all kinds of things. For those few things you *didn't* do with everybody, you knew there was a reason far more important than age or color or accent.

As a young professional in Washington, D.C., I attended an ecumenical Reformation service one year at the National Cathedral. We got together with a whole lot of folks, and it was a magnificent event—huge organ, a thousand voices, vestments I'd never seen before. But somehow, it wasn't Reformation—and not just because we sang “A Mighty Fortress” using the “wrong” translation.

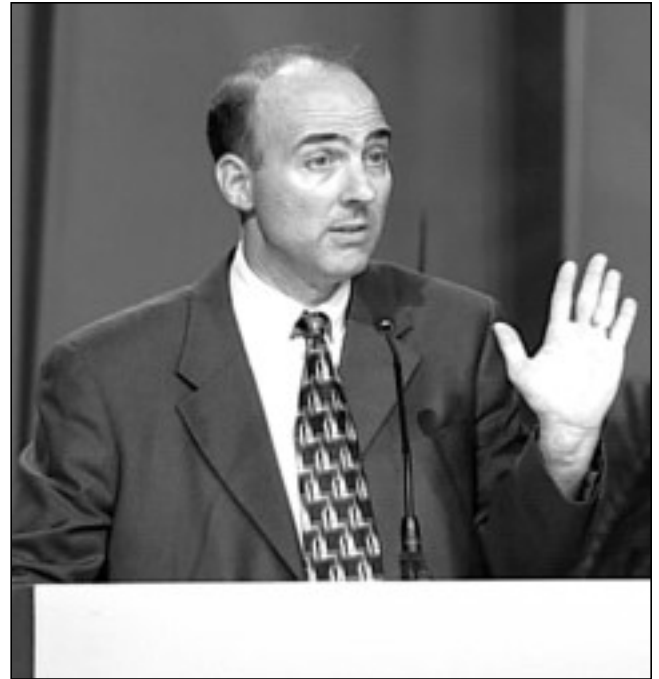
As a green, new pastor in Michigan, I was speaking with a visitor before the service. He was from the ALC congregation in town, but he was a former Missouri Synod member, and he was beginning to recognize the differences between the Synods. This sounded to me like one of those “extraordinary circumstances” requiring “responsible pastoral care,” “by their nature, relatively rare.”<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, after his communing and my calling on him, he told me his friendships on the softball team were pretty strong, and he'd decided to stay where he was.

Later, as a pastor in Texas, I had a little better visit one evening when a lapsed and unchurched Baptist told me, no, he wasn't offended that he couldn't come to Communion; he really appreciated finding a church where “everything you people believe is laid right out.” After adult instruction, he and his wife, their grown son and daughter, and their families became some of our strongest members, and he and his wife were out with me making evangelism calls.

For our time this evening, I'd like to continue Dr. Gibbs's and Dr. MacKenzie's discussion of church fellowship, but for this session, let's talk specifically about how our Synod's fellowship practices impact our doing evangelism, “Telling the Good News about Jesus.” Could it be that our understanding of fellowship is a straitjacket, that you simply can't do evangelism within our church's guidelines of closed Communion and against unionism? Let me answer that question by asking and at least beginning to answer quite the opposite question: “Why is our practice of fellowship *vital* to fulfilling the Great Commission?”

#### I.

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19). We all know very well what Jesus has commissioned us to do, don't we. In fact, you know it well enough to quote the part of the Great Commission I left off: “teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you” (28:20a). “Make disciples of all nations, ... baptizing them” and “teaching them to ob-



*serve all things.*” That's an essential part of the Great Commission, isn't it—not just an afterthought.

I remember, back when I was a brand-new Sem I student, first year at the seminary, really naive, talking to another first-year student, an equally reliable theologian, about various evangelism methods. Kennedy was big back then.<sup>2</sup> My friend's words of wisdom were, “You just give it to 'em down and dirty at first, then you clean up the theology later.” I nodded in agreement.

Boy, was I dumb! “Teaching them to observe all things” is not an afterthought; it's the Great Commission; it's cutting-edge evangelism. In the Greek text, “baptizing” and “teaching” are parallel participles, just as they are in English. Both—equally—describe means by which we make disciples. Baptizing and the preaching and teaching of the Word create and sustain disciples. It's not as if you do evangelism to make a disciple, then teach doctrine to fix a disciple. Baptizing and teaching, together and as a lifelong process, are evangelism, and, obviously, both are to be done right the first time.

I've always been bothered a bit by the distinction between mission and maintenance ministry. The suggestion seems to be that some of the work we do in teaching and preaching isn't mission, it isn't evangelism. It made me wonder what I was doing as a pastor. I was making non-member visits every Monday night and training others to do them; I was continually leading adult instruction classes; I was baptizing and confirming new members. And I was making shut-in visits—some of which were adult instruction classes; I was preaching to my regulars every Sunday; I was baptizing babies and confirming eighth graders. So what was I doing? Mission or maintenance?

This was evangelism—that is, proclaiming the “evangel,” the Gospel; all of it was. It was all evangelism, making disciples by baptizing *and* teaching them to observe all things whatsoever Christ commanded. To appreciate why our Synod’s fellowship practices are so vital to fulfilling the Great Commission, it’s first crucial to appreciate that teaching all things is an essential part of the Great Commission.

Why does Christ give teaching all things such priority? If everybody who believes in Jesus goes to heaven, why doesn’t Jesus just say “give it to ’em down and dirty at first, and, if you’ve got time, clean up the theology later”? Because, quite simply, Jesus knew that clean theology is what gets people to heaven. “Teaching them to observe all things” is essential to the salvation of souls. Let’s say that again: “Teaching them to observe all things” is essential to the salvation of souls. “Down and dirty” results in souls spending eternity in hell.

Now don’t get me wrong. It’s not a person’s orthodoxy on every point that earns him salvation. Certainly countless people who hold theological errors will be in heaven, because there are countless such people who still hold simple faith in Jesus’ death and resurrection for the forgiveness of their sins, and everyone who believes that *will* be in heaven.

But it is also only Baptism and orthodox teaching that gets them there. No one ever comes to faith in Christ by anything false he’s been taught. Only the truth creates and sustains faith. Now, a person may have heard the truth in a heterodox church; she may have heard the Gospel mixed with lots of error and still become a believer. But it was not the error that brought her to faith. Jesus says, “You shall know the truth, and *the truth* shall make you free” (John 8:32). Paul writes, “You were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation” (Ephesians 1:13a). James agrees, “He chose to give us birth through the word of truth” (James 1:18).

It was not when a revival preacher falsely invited the audience to come forward and accept Christ that people became believers; it was when, earlier in his sermon, he proclaimed the cross that the Holy Spirit created faith in their hearts. It was not by the faith of the parents that a baby baptized in a Presbyterian church was saved; it was by the washing of regeneration in the child’s heart, even though the congregation denies it. We sincerely rejoice with the angels in heaven when a sinner comes to repentance at the preaching of an ELCA pastor, but that new faith was in no way enhanced by the fact that the pastor was a woman. It’s the truth, not errors intermingled with the truth, that fulfills the Great Commission.

We probably all agree with that. It’s obvious enough. But what about the flip side? Only truth fulfills the Great Commission, but is error really so bad? Does a little false teaching really hurt? Can’t you do evangelism well enough, as long as most of what you’re saying is true? Are *all things* that Christ commanded really necessary to doing evangelism? Aren’t some teachings pretty peripheral? Two ways we might get at the answers.

First, let’s ask ourselves why God gave the truth as He did. Why 66 books? Why a doctrine of Baptism? Why Christ’s real presence in the Lord’s Supper? For that matter, why would God forbid a little thing like coveting, and,

for the Old Testament people, why not boil a kid in its mother’s milk (Exodus 23:19a)? Well, if we believe that “all Scripture is inspired by God and profitable” (1 Timothy 3:16a), then, as Paul says in Romans, “everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope” (Romans 15:4). And that hope which does not disappoint us is this: “Having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (5:1). That is to say, as John does about his Gospel, “These things”—all these things—“are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name” (John 20:31). That’s evangelism. That’s “Telling the Good News about Jesus.” Every word, every doctrine, of Scripture, God gave for one purpose: the salvation of souls. Let’s say *that* again: Every word, every doctrine, of Scripture, God gave for one purpose: the salvation of souls. We don’t always understand fully, but nothing is expendable. God didn’t give a single word, a single doctrine, for *His* good. Somehow every teaching leads us to Christ. In other words, replacing *any* truth with any error takes away some of what God intended us to use in doing evangelism. Regardless of what our reason, our observation, may suggest, you cannot do evangelism as well without all of God’s truth. “Teaching them to observe all things” is essential to the salvation of souls.

A second answer to the question about error: How much harm to evangelism can a little bit of false teaching really do? We each have dear Christian brothers and sisters in erring churches who are “on fire for the Lord,” who are out there doing evangelism like we wish we were. And we give thanks that God is using them to bring people to saving faith. They’re doing evangelism. Why should we be concerned about their errors?

For starters, can there be any doubt that souls are spending eternity in hell because our dear, sincere Baptist friends didn’t baptize thousands and thousands of babies? Haven’t some been lost? Or have you ever counseled with one of your college students who was now questioning his salvation because of what friends at school said? His friends believe that revival preacher and told your young man he wasn’t really saved unless he made a decision for Christ. Can there be any doubt that a false teaching of conversion has caused someone along the line to lose the security of his salvation, to despair and spend eternity in hell? And what about the woman pastor? She defends her claim to the office by alleging that clear passages of Scripture on the order of creation and the role of the sexes were time-bound and no longer relevant. Do we doubt for a minute that that has caused someone else, somewhere, to disregard other passages of Scripture, perhaps on sexual morality, and fall into impenitent sin . . . and spend an eternity in hell? When truth is compromised for error, ultimately other truth will be lost. As Paul says in Galatians, “A little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough” (Galatians 5:9).

That’s a hard reality, isn’t it. Maybe this is why all of us at times struggle with our practice of fellowship. Because we each have dear friends in other churches, because by everything we see we’re confident of their sincere personal faith,

maybe sometimes in our heart of hearts we just don't believe anymore that false teaching can really be so dangerous.

But when truth is lost, souls are lost.<sup>3</sup> Any error, even among our sincere brothers and sisters in Christ, works against fulfilling the Great Commission. The Great Commission, "Telling the Good News about Jesus," requires "teaching them to observe all things."

## II.

That is precisely what our Synod's fellowship practice is designed to do. Our fellowship practice is vital to fulfilling the Great Commission because it serves—and in fact is necessary—to "teach all things." Let's talk first about how that's true for the unbeliever we hope to evangelize. Then we'll see how it's also true for our own members doing the evangelizing.

At first blush, this may not seem true at all. We all want to be out there, sharing Christ, seizing every opportunity to proclaim the Gospel to as wide an audience as possible. You get an invitation to preach at a high school baccalaureate; you want to do it. The community has a Thanksgiving service; you want to participate. A son of your congregation is getting married in his fiancée's church; you want to get the young couple off on the right foot with God's Word and, even more, preach Christ crucified to their friends who may not be in church another day in their lives. Your own church is packed on Friendship Sunday or Confirmation Day, and you don't really want to burst the bubble by having to say no about the Communion table. These are all opportunities, it would seem, to do precisely what we need to do, "teach them." But there's that troublesome fellowship practice of ours getting in the way.

The truth is, it doesn't always get in the way as much as we think. Our understanding of unionism is caricatured when people suggest we can't do *any* of the things I just mentioned. Not only should we always be eager to cooperate with others in externals, activities in which the sacred, God's Word and Sacraments, are not involved.<sup>4</sup> But, what's more, there are many sacred activities outside our church walls in which, for example, an LCMS pastor as the sole functionary can freely proclaim the Gospel without compromise.

A couple of months ago, we had a terrible tragedy in our seminary family. The teenage son of one of our students was killed in an automobile accident while picking up his sister—right out in front of her middle school, as dozens of her friends watched. I welcomed the invitation to preach for the memorial service in chapel at the sem, but I was tremendously surprised and even more pleased to be invited by the young man's public high school to preach for a memorial service there the same afternoon. I asked some questions, was assured there would be no clergy of other denominations involved, and went for it. A fabulous opportunity to declare to a thousand-plus young people the faith in which this young saint had died! Afterward, the principal said to me, "You never thought you'd be able to do *that* in a public school, did you?" Then he whispered in my ear, "It'll just be our little secret." Oops. I guess it's out.

Not only, though, is our fellowship practice not the hindrance we may think. More importantly, our understand-

ing of fellowship, properly practiced, actually enhances our teaching all things. Yes, it's even necessary.

Perhaps you'd agree: for me as a pastor, evangelism was not primarily Friendship Sundays and flashy ads and hot programs that got people in the door. For the most part, it wasn't even those special settings for proclamation. An awful lot of evangelism was sitting down in the homes, talking, asking and answering questions. Teaching—adult instruction class two hours a week for nearly four months, teaching about the Trinity and creation, the Ten Commandments, the redeeming work of the Son, the Holy Spirit, the sacraments, prayer, liturgy. Then there was Baptism or confirmation. That was evangelism. Teaching them to observe all things.

As many times as I did that, like 32 classes in 15 years, I would often have loved to shorten the process. But I wanted my adult converts to take very seriously the Third Commandment and justification and their prayer life. I was trying to convey that this mattered. It wasn't optional. Remember, I believed all of this was important to the salvation of their souls. You didn't teach the Third Commandment and then say, "But, of course, worship isn't really that big a deal. You can still get to heaven without it."

Now, then, a new visitor comes to worship and presents himself for Communion. He's Baptist or Methodist or ELCA. If, knowingly, I let him commune, how will I answer my adult class members this week when they ask, "What do Baptists or Methodists or ELCA Lutherans believe? Does infant Baptism really matter? How about the real presence? Is homosexuality still wrong? Oh, and how about the Third Commandment and justification and prayer?"

This is just one example. But in your church, like mine, it's an example that comes up week after week after week. The same could be said if I stand with pastors of those other denominations for a joint wedding or funeral or Reformation festival. In order to teach all things to the unbelievers we hope to evangelize, it's necessary that we continue and follow our Synod's practice of fellowship.

By the way, you notice that I said "unbelievers." The waters become very muddied if we forget we're trying to win *unbelievers* for Christ. See, we're often afraid that our fellowship practices will offend people. But whom would we offend? And with whom might we commune and lead worship? Very few among us would consider communing or leading worship with open unbelievers. The issue is whether we admit *other Christians* to our altars and pulpits. They're the ones some might bend the policy to avoid offending. But what we've just said is that they're already Christians. They're not the souls we're hoping to win for Christ. We don't want to confuse LCMS evangelism with simply increasing our numbers at the expense of another Christian church's. Of course, we always welcome Christians who come to us from other denominations, but for only one reason. Not for numbers, but that they may now share in the *pure* preaching of the Gospel and administration of the sacraments, "all things Christ commanded." That is, if we believe we have the pure preaching and sacraments, and if we believe false teaching matters. And if we do, then we surely cannot give those inquirers from other

Christian churches less by any fellowship practices which compromise that doctrine.

I said before that for me as a pastor, an awful lot of evangelism was all that visiting and teaching I did with prospects. The other thing that “doing evangelism” meant for me as a pastor was this: educating and motivating my own members to “Tell the Good News about Jesus” every day at work, at school, wherever God put them. Here, too, for our own members, our fellowship practices not only enhance but are necessary to “teach all things.”

A few years ago, in one of the more famous case studies in marketing research, an ad agency for Curtis Mathis televisions made an interesting discovery. Curtis Mathis was at that time offering a full line of TVs, from small black-and-white portables to huge color consoles. Their researchers found that their market share and profitability were very strong with the big, jazzy models, while all their other products were mediocre or worse. So even though it would cost them total sales, they recommended dropping everything else and pushing one kind of TV. Their advertising slogan became—maybe you remember—“Curtis Mathis: the most expensive name in television and darn well worth it.” Their profits soared.

Now, we in the Missouri Synod are not going for snob appeal, and we’re certainly not expensive. But we do have something on which we are very strong, and we should be aware of it and feature it. It’s our doctrine. In order to do evangelism with full commitment and enthusiasm, our own members need to know that they, we, have something very unique to share with the world, something that saves souls for eternity: pure doctrine. Not everything else we’ve got is so good—at least not uniquely so. Even if we did admit everybody to our altars, we might or might not be the friendliest church in town. Even if our pastor is visible at every community worship event, he might not out hustle the non-denominational minister down the street. But we have what we believe, teach, and confess only the true Evangelical Lutheran Church has: “all things whatsoever Christ commanded.” If our folks think their job is to market “friendly,” “great programs,” “inspiring worship,” then their motivation is purely human. If they realize that they are sharing the pure Word of God, a Word that alone can save souls, a Word the friendly church around the corner doesn’t have quite purely, then their motivation is from God Himself.

I’m not sure our own members know what a unique treasure from God we have in our doctrine. But I am sure they will never know if we do anything that suggests differences in doctrine don’t matter.<sup>5</sup> Our Synod’s fellowship practices, properly carried out, help to make this clear.

I happen to believe that our own failure to appreciate our unique treasure of doctrine is the greatest hindrance to evangelism that we are struggling to overcome today. Conversely, really appreciating our doctrine again may be the key to becoming powerful tools for God. Years ago, at a time of phenomenal growth in our Synod, an official publication of another Lutheran body, one not in fellowship with us, wrote this about our church:

It may be out of place to enter minutely upon the history of the Missouri Synod, the greatest and most important of the Lutheran Synods of our country; but there is one fact that I do not like to pass over in si-

lence— . . . I see before me no more striking instance of the blessing which God bestows on men’s faithfulness than this very Missouri Synod. If it had not with such iron tenacity held to its confession of pure doctrine; if it . . . had not fought against each and every deviation from . . . the only true way; if it had adapted itself in ever so small a measure to the views of our rather impressionable age, it would not have achieved the results it may now claim. . . . [T]hat attitude of hers the Lord has rewarded. In the view of the earliest and the present members of the Missouri Synod, the glory of God and the unalloyed truth of His Word . . . is to be esteemed more highly than the favor of men. . . . If the Lord God had not taken pity upon the Lutheran Church in America by placing the Missouri Synod in its midst, we would today be an insignificant band.<sup>6</sup>

Today, in a totally new era, we still desire to be a blessing to those around us by “Telling the Good News about Jesus.” We want everyone to hear of the Savior so that someday we can do everything with everybody. In the meantime, for those few things we can’t do together, let’s understand that it’s for a vitally important reason. It’s because God has called us to continue that confession of pure doctrine, “teaching them to observe all things,” those things that alone can save their souls.

Outline:

#### WHY IS OUR PRACTICE OF FELLOWSHIP VITAL TO FULFILLING THE GREAT COMMISSION?

- I. Because the Great Commission requires “teaching them to observe all things” that Christ has commanded.
  - A. Christ’s command to “teach all things” is an essential part of the Great Commission—not just an afterthought.
  - B. “Teaching all things” is essential to the salvation of souls.
- II. Because our fellowship practice is necessary to “teach all things.”
  - A. For the unbeliever to be evangelized
  - B. For our own members to do evangelism

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#### Notes

1. The Synod affirmed in 1986 Res. 3-08, and reaffirmed in 1995 Res. 3-08, ‘that the pastors and congregations of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod continue to abide by the practice of close Communion, which includes the necessity of exercising responsible pastoral care in extraordinary situations and circumstances,’ and beseeched the Synod in love to remember that ‘situations of emergency, and special cases of pastoral care, or extraordinary circumstances’ are, by their nature, relatively rare.” 1998 Resolution 3-05, “To Reaffirm Our Practice of Admission to the Lord’s Supper,” *Convention Proceedings*, 115.
2. That is, the evangelism method offered in D. James Kennedy, *Evangelism Explosion*, with a foreword by Billy Graham (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1977).

3. Formula of Concord, Epitome XII, 30: "All these and similar articles, together with their erroneous implications and conclusions, we reject and condemn as wrong, false, heretical, and contrary to the Word of God, the three Creeds, the Augsburg Confession, the Apology, the Smalcald Articles, and the Catechisms of Luther. *All pious Christians, of high degree and low, must guard against these if they dearly love their soul's eternal welfare and salvation* (emphasis added)." Theodore G. Tappert, trans., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 500.
4. Examples of ways in which our Synod has historically cooperated with other church bodies in externals are given in Commission on Theology and Church Relations, *Inter-Christian Relationships: An Instrument for Study* (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, February 1991), 29. See also CTCR, *Theology of Fellowship* (n.d.), 28, and CTCR, *A Lutheran Stance Toward Ecumenism* (November 1974), 14, 16.
5. Ironically, some LCMS members may actually be *em-*  
*barrassed* about our doctrine on this very matter, fellowship, believing that it is unfriendly or unloving and thus a detriment to evangelism. They might be surprised to read the following from the catechism of another denomination often admired for its evangelistic activity: "8. *Why ought not Baptists to commune with believers of other denominations?* Not because we think we are better Christians than they, but because we believe that they have not been baptized or that they are not walking orderly in their relation to the church." W. E. Davidson, *A Catechism of Bible Doctrine* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, n.d.), 24. It is especially noteworthy that "the Catechism came to America out of the mission field." *Ibid.*, 2. The reality is that the great majority of the world's Christians practice close(d) Communion.
6. *Pilger durch Welt und Kirche* (a publication of the General Council), 5:370; quoted in W. H. T. Dau, "At the Milestone," in *Ebenezer 1847-1922: Reviews of the Work of the Missouri Synod during Three Quarters of a Century*, ed. W. H. T. Dau (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1922), 530-31.