

Bible Studies for the 2008 Theological Convocation on  
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*The Relationship Between Theology and Polity*  
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**Bible Study 3: Ephesians 4:3-6**

The Scripture passage set before us for this third and final Bible study is Ephesians 4:3-6. This is by far the shortest of the three texts chosen by the planning committee, and I hope you can join me in saying “Hallelujah!” Finally, a text that doesn’t take five minutes just to read! In fact, I was so giddy about the brevity of this text that I went a little overboard and added verses 1 and 2 to the handout in your notebook. If you’ll open to that page now, let’s read this text together.

Now, you would think that the shortest text assigned to us would also be the simplest text. And in some ways, perhaps it is. In his classic commentary on St. Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, Dr. George Stoeckhardt points out that this passage of Scripture is a *locus classicus*, a foundational “proof text,” if you will, for the doctrine of the Church. And if Dr. Martin Luther were with us again this morning, he might remind us what he says about the church in the Smalcald Articles: “Praise God,” he says, “even a seven-year-old child knows what the church is,” namely, “holy believers and ‘little sheep’ who hear the voice of their Shepherd” (SA III, 12, 2). And yet there is no doctrine that has been more vigorously, sometimes contentiously, debated and discussed in the history of the LCMS than the doctrine of the church, especially in relationship to the doctrine of the ministry. (If only someone like C. F. W. Walther had written a book on this subject, maybe our problems would have been solved!)

Let me hasten to say that if there is a seven-year-old child somewhere in the room, a little sheep of the Good Shepherd, I will gladly exchange places and sit at his or her feet. And I am only half-joking when I say that, because I wholeheartedly agree with Luther when he says that even a seven-year-old child knows what the church is. According to the footnote in the Kolb-Wengert edition of the Book of Concord, by the age of seven in Luther’s day, most children had learned the Apostles’ Creed, which Luther sometimes called “the Children’s Creed” (see fn. 163 on page 324). And in the Creed little children confess with Christians of all times and ages and places that we believe in “one holy, catholic, and apostolic church.” Not two churches, not five churches, not a hundred churches, but *one* holy catholic and apostolic church, just as Paul says in Ephesians 4:4. I think that sometimes—*sometimes*—we can get ourselves into trouble by making the doctrine of the church more complicated than it really is. And if and when that happens we need to become like little children, not only so that we may enter the kingdom of heaven but also so that we can rightly understand the simplicity of Scripture’s doctrine of the church.

At the same time, I certainly don’t want to downplay the challenges and complexities presented to us by the doctrine of the church. Ironically, at least in my view, these challenges stem not from a lack of clarity in Scripture on this topic, but precisely because it is so clear. Maybe you noticed as we were reading this text: there is very clearly a very challenging tension in Ephesians 4 as Paul discusses the church and particularly the unity of the church.

Let me try to illustrate this tension by sharing a portion of a fascinating article I read a few years ago by Phillip Yancey called “Jesus’ Unanswered Prayers” (*Christianity Today* [February 9, 1998], 152). In this article Yancey discusses prayers prayed by Jesus himself that seemed to go unanswered. One of these prayers, says Yancey, is the prayer Jesus prays for the church in John 17. Jesus says (v. 20):

I do not pray for these [my disciples] only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word. I pray that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and have loved them even as you loved me. (vv. 20-23)

Despite this passionate plea from the depths of the heart of the Son of God himself, says Yancey, the fact is that “Disunity virtually defines the history of the church. Pick at random any year of history—pick today—and you will see how far short we fall of Jesus’ final request” that his church may be one.”

The question is, is Yancey right or wrong? Has this prayer of Jesus in John 17 been answered or not? Or, if you prefer, how has it been answered? With a yes, or with a no, or with a “wait a while?” Paul says in Ephesians 4:4: “There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism.” Unity in the church, says Paul, is already a present and perfect reality through the power of the Holy Spirit working through Word and Sacrament.

Before we rush to explain (and perhaps explain away) these words of Paul, let’s listen to a small portion of Stoeckhardt’s wonderful commentary on these verses. (Note: All quotations from Stoeckhardt below are taken from his *Commentary on St. Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians*, trans. By Martin S. Sommer [St. Louis: CPH, 1952], pages 178-186).

He begins by quoting Luther, who says: “In Ephesians 4, St. Paul declares and explains the nature of the true Christian church and how it is to be recognized, namely, that this church is one single church or people of God upon this earth, who have one and the same faith, baptism and confession of God the Father and of the Lord Jesus Christ, and who live together in peace and harmony among themselves.” This is not some dream Luther is talking about, not some idealistic hope or vision, this is a present reality here on earth, it really exists right here, right now, the undivided, perfectly united body of Christ.

Stoeckhardt says: “All believing Christians here on earth constitute the one, holy, Christian church...[These] believing Christians are truly and actually one body, they are truly united. Each one is united with all the others. The Spirit and faith unites them and holds them together....It is not true that Christians must, through their own efforts, consultation, and agreement bring about this union of the church. Remember, the church is not the work or creation of man, but the work and creation of God.”

“All Christians together, though scattered and separated far from one another, call upon the same God and Father, the same Lord, in the same spirit and faith, even though they do not know one another and do not see or feel this unity. Nevertheless, [they] present to God one united

congregation and communion....The one and same spirit, the one single mind, the one faith which all Christians have, by which they all fight the same battle of faith, enjoy the same hope, and walk toward the same goal, heavenly bliss and glory, *that* unites them *all* far more closely and intimately than any other tie which unites men, e.g. family, friendship, mutual sympathy, sameness of temporal interests and ambitions. This one and same faith which unites Christians is a strong tie which does not tear.”

And now I’m going to interject my opinion. And you are free to disagree with it. Maybe I’m wrong—it’s happened before. In my opinion, we don’t talk nearly enough in the LCMS about the marvelous, astounding, miraculous reality of this reality of the true unity of the Christian church, the unity that St. Paul describes so clearly and emphatically in Ephesians 4:4-6. Even though we confess it every Sunday in the Creed, we don’t emphasize it as it should be emphasized, we don’t teach it as emphatically as it should be taught, we don’t preach it from the pulpit with the frequency and the clarity with which it is proclaimed by the apostles and the prophets and by Christ himself. I think I understand why we don’t do that, but that’s not an excuse for not doing it.

Even as I share my opinion, I’m not judging anyone’s motivation. Because there is a very clear and challenging tension here, and it is not easy to keep things in proper tension, especially in today’s very challenging cultural and ecclesial context. Paul says that there is one body and one Spirit—but that sounds kind of odd, doesn’t it? Because he just got finished telling us in verse 3, in language that is even stronger in Greek than it appears to be in English, that we should be “eager to *maintain* the UNITY of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” I thought we already had this unity. I thought it was God’s finished and perfect work, not ours. Why should we strive to maintain something that God has already created and that he says can never be broken? How can we even do this, if (as Stoekhardt says) this unity is not something that has anything to do with our efforts or agreement or consultations?

Well, this question has been answered by none other than the “Blue Ribbon Task Force on Synodical Structure and Governance.” Maybe you can answer it better than they can, or help to supplement their answer. But I think they answer they have given is a very good and helpful one. If you will, please take your “Congregation—Synod—Church” booklet and open to page 10, and look at principle #8. It’s called “Unity of and in the church.” The task force says:

It is helpful [I would say, even necessary] to distinguish between the unity of the church (which all believers in Christ have with each other) and unity *in* the church (which believers seek to manifest and express in their lives and confession). Synodical theologians have frequently used the term *concordia* (concord) when referring to the latter, and *unitas* (unity) when speaking of the former. Both concepts underscore the importance of the church’s recognizing, manifesting, and confessing Jesus Christ and His Gospel as the center of its life and work. In His High Priestly Prayer, Jesus prayed that His disciples might be one just as He and the Father are one, so that the world might believe that He was sent by the Father (John 17:21-23). In the church, there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for all are one in Christ (Gal. 3:26-28). The church is the one Body of Christ, the Head, united to Him by faith, and thereby to every other Christian (1 Corinthians 12, Romans 12). There is one Body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all (Eph. 4:5-6). Christians are exhorted to speak the same thing, to avoid divisions, and to be

perfectly joined together in the same mind and judgment (1 Cor. 1:10-11). The importance that unity of faith and confession has for the polity of the Synod is seen in the first objective of its Constitution (Article III): “Conserve and promote the unity of the true faith (Eph. 4:3-6; 1 Cor. 1:10), work through its official structure toward fellowship with other Christian church bodies, and provide a united defense against schism, sectarianism (Rom. 16:17), and heresy.”

At this point I’d like you to go to your simple outline and fill in the blanks. After Eph. 4:3-6 write: “Unity both as a GIVEN/GIFT and as a GOSPEL-GIVEN GOAL.” That may seem like a contradiction, but it’s not—it’s just one of those crucial, challenging, sometimes mind-boggling Scriptural tensions. And it’s not just mind-boggling, it’s incredibly challenging. I’ve already given you my opinion, which is that we don’t emphasize nearly as much as we could and should the “Gift/Given” side of this tension, the perfect unity that already exists among all true Christians by the grace of God alone. But please don’t hear me saying that we don’t need to continue to emphasize and take very seriously the other side of this tension: the goal of working toward unity in doctrinal confession with other Christians with whom we have serious disagreements, disagreements which sometimes go to the heart of and even threaten the confession of the Gospel itself.

After describing so gloriously the perfect unity of the church that Paul confesses in Ephesians 4:4, Stoeckhardt goes on to say: “The Church of God at present is still a hidden thing. The faith and the operation of the Spirit of God in the hearts of men” are not visible to human eyes. And yet, he says, this church is not some kind of imaginary kingdom that exists only in our minds, or only in theory. “The true church of the living God actually exists on this earth.” Not only that, he says, but “we can also know with certainty whether this church exists in a certain place or not.” The church can be recognized, says Stoeckhardt, by its marks. There is one Lord, one faith, one *baptism*, says Paul. “Word and Sacrament, Gospel and Baptism, are the external marks of recognition which indicate positively whether at a certain place a true Christian church exists. Wherever the Gospel of Christ is proclaimed, wherever the Triune God is confessed and worshipped, wherever Baptism in the name of the Triune God is administered, there, we may be sure, true children of God are born and the true church, the communion of saints, has her place and has room to expand.

Stoeckhardt goes on to say something that we in the LCMS need to remember, for it is part of our doctrine and Scripture’s doctrine of the church. “Even in other [sectarian] church bodies” the true church “is to be found as long as the essentials of the Gospel which Paul mentions in this text continue to have a place there.” To be sure, he says, “every deviation from God’s Word and Sacraments” is harmful and dangerous, and “all human additions to these means of grace interfere with faith’s beginning and growth.” But wherever the essentials of the Gospel—the teaching of the Trinity, the deity of Christ, the vicarious atonement—continue to exist, there Christ’s church can be found.

Please turn for just one moment to page 19 of your “Synod—Congregation—Church” booklet. There are some discussion questions there on the “Unity of and in the Church” that I think are very helpful and would provoke some great discussion in a Bible class or circuit meeting or wherever. We don’t have time to discuss them now, but I hope you will make use of them as you continue to make use of this document in communicating the work of the task force to your constituencies.

You've all heard the catchy saying that the Ten Commandments are not the "Ten Suggestions." What Paul says in Eph. 4:3 is not a suggestion either. We are commanded by God for the sake of the Gospel to "strive to maintain the unity of the Spirit on the bond of peace" on the basis of God's holy and powerful and inerrant Word. Hopefully we see this not as something we "have to do," but as something we want to do and are privileged and empowered to do in response to the grace of God in Jesus Christ. Because of this grace, we are committed as a Synod, just as our forefathers were, to "Conserve and Promote the Unity of the true faith by working through our official structure toward fellowship with other Christian church bodies and by providing a united defense against schism, sectarianism, and heresy."

Fifty years ago Martin Franzmann wrote an essay setting forth the LCMS view of "The Nature of the Unity We Seek" with other Christians. What "we desire," said Franzmann, is

...that men be united in a gladly resolute, radical, and total submission of faith to God as He has revealed himself in His Son, Jesus Christ.... This Word made flesh, this Son of God, in turn, is known to us only and can become ours only by the Apostolic word of those who witness to him, these words which the living, potent, and creative presence of the Paraclete had made to be the divinely valid witness to Christ.... We have Christ in this inerrantly loosing and binding Apostolic word, or we do not have him at all. We seek unity, then, as we seek it under God and in Christ, in a full and common obedience to Holy Scripture. (*Concordia Theological Monthly* [November 1957], 801-803)

This is not an easy task. And it becomes all the more difficult when we continue to struggle to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace within the LCMS. That's one of the reasons we are here, that's one of the purposes of these theological convocations. Just so we don't get too discouraged, I think maybe it helps to remember that this struggle for unity even within the LCMS is really nothing new, it's an ongoing struggle—and it's been going on for a long time.

One of the first resolutions adopted at the Anaheim convention in 1975 was a resolution called "To Seek Unity" (Res. 3-01, 1975 *Convention Proceedings*, 93-94). The second whereas of this resolution quotes Eph. 4:3, and I thought it might be appropriate to close by reading this resolution to you:

*Whereas*, There is a hunger and longing for peace and unity among all members of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod; and

*Whereas*, The Scriptures call upon us to be of one faith "eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:3-5); and

*Whereas*, One of the Synod's stated objectives is "the conservation and promotion of the unity of the true faith and a united defense against schism and sectarianism" (*Handbook, Constitution, Art. III, 1*); and

*Whereas*, The mission of the church can be pursued with added joy and effectiveness when members of the Synod share a sense of unity and purpose; and

*Whereas*, This unity must not be superficial, but rather a concord, and that the primary requirement for basic and permanent concord within the church is a summary formula

and pattern, unanimously approved, in which the summarized doctrine commonly confessed by the church of the pure Christian religion is drawn together out of the Word of God” (F.C., S.D., Summary Formulation, 1); and

*Whereas*, In carrying out these directives we must always remember St. Paul’s instructions to the Colossians when he told them to act in love, be willing to forgive one another, be patient, and to let the Word of Christ dwell in them richly (Col. 3:12-16); and

*Resolved*, That we recognize that we are all sinners in the eyes of God, and therefore as sinners should evaluate our own lives to see whether we have in some way contributed to the problems that beset our Synod, that as sinners we should bow humbly and in true repentance before our God, asking for His forgiveness and then be willing to forgive one another as Christ has taught us to do; and be it further

*Resolved*, That we call upon the members of the Synod honestly and forthrightly to express points of disagreement and openly confront differences and that this be done among ourselves rather than before the eyes of the world where it can be only an offense (1 Cor. 6:1-6); and be it further

*Resolved*, That the Synod resist efforts to cause division, but instead pray that the Holy Spirit, through the power of the Word, bring about concord; and be it further

*Resolved*, That we call upon all members of the Synod to walk together in wholehearted support of the objectives of the Synod and its worldwide mission of proclaiming Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord

Would you please join me in one of my favorite prayers for the church, from the *Minister’s Prayer Book* edited by John Doberstein:

“Almighty God, merciful Father, we give you most hearty thanks that in Jesus Christ you take living stones and build your holy church as your temple in this world, and have called us through the preaching of the Gospel to the community of believers. Keep our church upon that one foundation which is laid, Jesus Christ. Pour out your Holy Spirit upon our congregations, that we may faithfully use your gracious gifts, the Word and Sacraments, and not be among those who have the name of being alive and yet are dead. Raise up laborers after your own heart for the manifold ministry of your church. Give to pastors and teachers courage and joyful boldness to continue steadfast in prayer and the ministry of the Word in its purity. Equip them and all who labor in the service of mercy, the teaching of youth, and other works of the church, with power from on high, that the sleepers may be awakened, the erring converted, and the fainthearted and discouraged quickened by your comfort. Grant that all who have been called to your holy work may be one in love, that they and we may labor only for the honor of your name and seek with one accord to gather and further your church until the last great day. Cause your Gospel to conquer hearts wherever it is preached in our land, that all who bear the name of your Son may find their way to one another in the unity of the Spirit, that there may be one flock with one shepherd, Jesus Christ, to whom be praised forever ever and ever. Amen.” (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, n.d., pages 22-23)