

LCMS

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Bible Studies

Acts 15, Bible Study #1

Dr. Jeffrey Gibbs

The Mission of Proclaiming...WHAT Gospel?

Grace and peace to you from God the Father, and our Lord, Jesus Christ.

This morning, I have the privilege and the task of leading our group in a study of Acts 15, the first of two studies. You'll need your Bibles, to follow along and to inquire and to test what I say. Before getting into the text itself, I'd like to begin with some self-disclosure. I am an exegete, for better or for worse. It means I enjoy "C" words—clauses, constructions and, most of all context. Now all of us are exegetes—but I make my living at it. The danger here for me might be compared to the danger of viewing things through a microscope—one can become too narrowly focused, you can miss stuff that one's "theological peripheral vision" ought to pick up. As a friend said to me once, "You exegetes know what the Bible says. But we systematians know what it means." And there is truth in that—which is why I'm grateful for systematic theology.

But because I am an exegete, I have been thinking lately about a distinction, a difference in the Bible's role in the life of the church. It's the difference between *reading* the Bible, and *using* the Bible. Now, "using the Bible" is in no way an illegitimate task—not at all! Our lives and situations are very different, in very many different ways, from the lives and times of the apostolic generation, or any other generation during which Holy Scriptures were written. To "use the Bible" for truth and wisdom and insight in our present times is crucial. Sola Scripture, right? We need to and must apply Biblical truth to our own settings and issues and needs. We must "use" the Bible. But it's different from "reading the Bible."

At least as I am using the phrase now, "reading the Bible" means attending to the text of Scripture to learn the questions and the issues that are the prominent ones in the text of Scripture—and letting those be the questions and issues that are prominent for us, in some meaningful way. It means making sure that we are interested in, shaped by, rejoicing in, clinging to the specific priorities of the Bible, in this particular part of it or another. What a gift to be gathered as members of a Synod where a task like this is self-evidently important, and unanimously embraced as irreplaceable. Not all confessions or church bodies are like that—but we rejoice in "reading the Bible."

So, I have recently spent a significant amount of time trying to "read" Acts 15 in preparation for our two conference studies. The result of that exercise—at least for me, as I prepared to be here with you—is that the Bible studies are not going to be "about" the topic of the conference. Acts 15 is not about "essential vs. non-essential doctrines." Nor is it about the place of "adiaphora" in the life of the church. And it is not about the question of church fellowship. But I do believe, and I pray, that these studies will be a chance to rejoice in Holy Scripture, to embrace some very good news, indeed, and to hold fast to our primary focus as the people whom God made His own in order that we might proclaim His excellencies to those around us. For Acts 15 is about the mission of the church, and the gospel that we proclaim in that mission, and about the willingness to do whatever we can to more effectively present that gospel.

And so we come to Acts 15—which commentators routinely refer to as "The Center of the Book of Acts"—both literarily and theologically. Here the church and her leaders face a challenge of huge proportions and unbelievable theological complexity, a challenge created by two facts: (1) a whole

bunch of uncircumcised Gentiles are rejoicing as they walk through "the door of faith" that the God of Israel has opened for them through faith in His Son, Jesus (Acts 14:27); (2) God's Word said to Abraham, "But an uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant" (Gen 17:14 NASB)." The problem has to do with the interpretation of Holy Scripture. As we shall see, the problem is solved through the interpretation of Holy Scripture.

I. Setting the Stage and Forcing the Issue: the First Missionary Journey

You could see the issue emerging in the church at Antioch already in Acts 11:20-26. After Stephen's death, persecution scattered many believers out from Jerusalem and Judea. Some believers from Cyprus and Cyrene began "good newsing" Jesus in the great city of Antioch on the Orontes River, a metropolis of hundreds of thousands of people with tens of thousands of Jewish inhabitants. But they did not just proclaim Jesus to Jews—no, also to Gentiles, and a great number of them believed and were turned to the Lord in faith.

When the Jerusalem church heard of this work, they sent Barnabas, who saw the grace of God at work and rejoiced. He joined the work—but he knew that he needed help, and he knew just the guy. (It seems to work that way, doesn't it? Someone knows someone. You'd have thought they went to prep school together). So Barnabas traveled to Tarsus, a journey of at least 100 miles, and he fetched Saul and together for a year they taught the church in Antioch.

But the Spirit had bigger plans. Set aside for a new work, Barnabas and Saul were sent from the church in Antioch to Cyprus, and from there they traveled to Pisidia, and on then to the cities of what we know as the First Missionary Journey. Wherever they go, the pattern seems to remain the same. They proclaim Jesus, fulfillment of God's promises to Israel, in the synagogue. And some Jews believe in their own Messiah. But more Gentiles, god-fearers, uncircumcised god-fearers, accept the good news of Jesus. The good news, summarized from Acts 13's speech in the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch, is this: Although the rulers in Jerusalem collaborated with the Roman authorities and killed the Savior, God raised Him from the dead! Jesus is resurrected—He will never see corruption! Jesus is raised to eternal life, and He has the authority to forgive sins, and to justify and declare innocent all those who were not able to perfectly keep the Law of Moses. The good news is that you are free from that which you could not keep or perform. Everyone who believes in Him is righteous before God!

When the journey was done, Barnabas and Saul returned to the church in Antioch, and reported "as many things as God did with them, and how He opened to the Gentiles the door of faith" (Acts 14:27). And that's where Acts 15 picks up. And that's where the challenge to the mission comes when some people come from Jerusalem.

II. The Challenge to the Mission: What IS the Gospel?

The imperfect indicative at Acts 15:1 is interesting. "And certain people, coming down from Judea, began to teach? tried to teach? kept on teaching?—at any rate, they were teaching the brothers, "Unless you are circumcised because of the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." Pretty clear message. And it might seem to us, from our perspective, to be a pretty easy call to make. Why in the world would anyone think or proclaim this? I can suggest at least two reasons.

The first is the Bible itself—God's Word. Genesis 17:9-14, from NASB, reads as follows: "God said further to Abraham, "Now as for you, you shall keep My covenant, you and your descendants after

you throughout their generations. This is My covenant, which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: every male among you shall be circumcised. And you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin; and it shall be the sign of the covenant between Me and you. And every male among you who is eight days old shall be circumcised throughout your generations, a servant who is born in the house or who is bought with money from any foreigner, who is not of your descendants. A servant who is born in your house or who is bought with your money shall surely be circumcised; thus shall My covenant be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant. But an uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant." The Bible says so—you have to be circumcised to belong to God's covenant people. Those who challenged the mission preaching did so, we may confidently assume, on the basis of their interpretation of Scripture. That's the first reason.

The second reason is the "heritage" of Judaism, that lingered for a while in some of those who had believed and, not surprisingly, perhaps especially in those whom Luke identifies in 15:5 as "certain ones from the sect of the Pharisees who had believed." The heritage has to do with "doing my part." Recent decades have seen an immense study in the primary documents of early Judaism, and one of the results of that study has been that scholars across the board have abandoned the over-simplistic view that Judaism was a crassly legalistic religion. Nevertheless....nevertheless....there is a strong strain in the documents of early Judaism that downplays God's part, and emphasizes the role that human behavior plays in salvation. And when you combine this with a relatively optimistic anthropology that does not fully reckon with the depths to which sin has corrupted human nature....the resulting heritage freely reckons that the grace of Yahweh is absolutely necessary...but surely there is a part that we must play in our own salvation.

So those who challenged the mission had Bible verses on their side; and also on their side stood a long tradition in which virtually everyone present at the Jerusalem council had been reared! And they issued the challenge directly and openly: faith in Christ is not enough. "It is necessary to circumcise them and to charge them to keep the Law of Moses" (Acts 15:5). How would the church respond?

III. Response to the Challenge: What is the Good News?

We know the answer, of course. But St. Luke gives us two different kinds of responses from the leaders of the church. The first response is an argument from experience (perhaps a little strange to us, since we pride ourselves on not having any of those). Peter stood up, and reminded that assembly of apostles, elders, and the whole church that God had chosen through his mouth that the Gentiles should hear and believe the gospel—it happened in the house of Cornelius, and there God cleansed the hearts of the Gentiles by means of faith and God gave an audible manifestation of the Holy Spirit—the Gentile "Pentecost," if you will. Peter declared, "You cannot put God to the test by placing a yoke upon the necks of the disciples that none of us were able to bear. . . ." And then he says something truly remarkable. What we might expect is, "Look, the Gentiles are saved just the same way that we are!" Remarkably he says the opposite: "We believed that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus....just as they are." The way of salvation for the Gentiles in the pattern also for the Jews. And his argument is essentially—look what happened in the house of Cornelius.

Barnabas and Paul say the same kind of thing. Luke reports that "the whole crowd kept listening as Barnabas and Paul were relating how many signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them" (Acts 15:12). Again, it's an argument from experience—look at how the missionary endeavors have gone!

Then James the Just, the brother of Jesus, speaks. Both Josephus and later Eusebius tell us that James, martyred perhaps 14 years after this event, was highly honored and respected by the non-Christian Jewish population of Jerusalem because of his evident and traditional piety. This most traditionally Jewish of Christians begins by agreeing with Simon Peter's report, but he does so in a most remarkable turn of phrase. "Simeon related how God visited so as to take a people for His name from the Gentiles." (Acts 15:14) In the ears of some (if not most!) at the conference that day, this would have been a stunning contradiction in terms. That God had indeed chosen for himself a people they did believe. But Deut 14:12 related how God chose Israel to be a people apart from all the nations." But James declares that God, in these latter days, is now about the task of taking a people for His name precisely from among the Gentiles, as uncircumcised Gentiles.

But James goes on. It is not enough to hear of the experiences of Peter, Barnabas and Paul, and to agree with them. The issue must be settled by appeal to Scripture; theological arguments and issues in Judaism and in the early church must be settled on the basis of Holy Scriptures. And so James continues, "And the words of the prophets agree with this, as it is written. . . ."

And now we come to the "storm center" in the interpretation of Acts 15, seen by many scholars as something of an insoluble problem. The problem is usually summarily stated in these terms: (1) The citation from "the prophets" is from the Septuagint, rather than the Hebrew text, and scholars find it unusual or unlikely that James the Just would have so spoken at the Jerusalem Council; (2) The LXX of Amos 9 differs drastically in one place from the Hebrew text of Amos 9, and it is precisely at that place where the citation effectively proves James' point. The Hebrew of Amos 9:12a reads, "in order that they may take possession (or inherit) the remnant of Edom." The LXX reads in the same spot, "in order that the remnants of men may seek." Typically, students of Acts then assert that either this citation cannot possibly come from James of Jerusalem, or that the Scriptural proof here offered only works if you accept the LXX rather than the Hebrew text, and that raises other hermeneutical and theological issues. A full response to this problem would take us too far afield for our purposes here today. But I will offer a few observations, based especially upon the work of the British scholar Richard Bauckham.¹

First, it is not quite true to say that James quotes LXX of Amos 9:11-12. As indicated by his phrase, "the words of the prophets," the citation is a combination of references that probably allude in a secondary way to Hosea 3, Jeremiah 12, and Isaiah 45 as well as to Amos 9. Second, in five places where the LXX is a faithful translation of the Hebrew text, James' citation differs from both of them. This raises the question of OT text-criticism since we now know from the Dead Sea Scrolls that there was more than one Hebrew textual tradition in Palestine in the first century AD. Third, it is not quite true that the validity of this citation depends upon the precise wording of Amos 9:12a. Rather, it is verse 12b that contains the crucial and remarkable promise through the prophet Amos. In brief, there is a reasonable defense that may be offered to scholars who find the Acts account historically improbable. But that is an apologetic task, and we'll not tarry over it any longer. Rather, to a positive presentation of James' interpretation and hermeneutic we may now turn.

As I think most of us are aware, practically the only "gospel" in the prophet Amos comes at the very end, Amos 9:11-15. Here we find the promise of the day when Yahweh himself will act to rebuild the "fallen booth of David." What does this mean? Given the Scriptural connections between "booth" and "tabernacle," "David" and "temple," it is not surprising that in the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Qumran community interpreted Amos 9 as a reference to the "rise of the Qumran community and the restoration of the Torah to its rightful place" in the lives of God's covenant people.² They believed

that, in fulfillment of Amos 9:11, their community was the rising of the new "temple of God," promised in the latter days.

James the Just believes differently. It is the church of Jesus Christ, the community of those who by means of faith are justified and cleansed, that constitutes the "booth of David" that God is rebuilding. God dwells in their midst by his Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus Christ. James may be among the very first of the early church's teachers to articulate what becomes a commonplace in the writings of the New Testament and that no one says more plainly later than Simon Peter himself: "And you yourselves, as living stones, are being built as a spiritual house until a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 2:5). As Richard Bauckham further suggests, it is probably not an empty phrase when in Galatians Paul refers to the leaders of the Jerusalem church as "pillars" (Gal 2:9). Rather, Paul's language carries specific theological meaning; the leaders of the Jerusalem church are pillars in the temple of the living God. And in building His church, His temple, God is restoring the fallen booth of David, as Amos prophesied long ago.

James' citation goes on. But the truly remarkable part of the citation is not the Septuagintal rendering, "that the remnants of men may seek the Lord." No, the remarkable part is the next clause, "even all the nations/Gentiles upon whom my name is called upon them." Here James, LXX, and MT agree with literal exactness, the Greek repeated woodenly even the Hebrew resumptive pronoun. And here it becomes clear that James' citation from Amos is entirely to the point in settling the dispute in Jerusalem—do the Gentiles have to "become Jews" in order to be saved?

"Even all the Gentiles upon whom my name is called upon them." For "Yahweh's name to be called upon something" means that Yahweh owns that thing, and He treasures that thing. The phrase applies to the Ark of the Covenant (2x; 2 Sam 6:2; 1 Chron.13:6), the Temple in Jerusalem (8x; 1 K 8:43; 2 Chron.6:33; Jer.7:10, 11, 14, 30; 32:34; 34:15), Jerusalem itself (2x; Jer 25:29; Dan. 9:18), the prophet Jeremiah (1x; Jer.15:16), and—especially important for understanding the impact of Amos 9—the nation of Israel (4x; Deut 28:10; 2 Chron.7:14; Jer.14:9; Dan 9:19). Israel, chosen by God's grace and made a people at the foot of Mount Sinai, was God's own treasured possession, the people "upon whom His name was called upon them." We can see this perhaps most clearly when Isaiah speaks with the voice of apostate, exiled Israel and says, "We have become those over whom Thou hast never ruled, like those who were not called by Thy name" (Isa 63:19)—in exile, Israel had become like...the Gentiles.

But the time will come, Amos promised, when God would act, and God would rebuild a temple for His own dwelling place, and in that time, the name of Yahweh, the God of Israel, would be called upon the Gentiles—as Gentiles. Not as proselytes or converts to Judaism. As Gentiles. That time has now come, James declares. The Scripture has foretold it. The Gentiles do not need to be circumcised to be saved. God is doing the new thing that He had foretold, and He is doing it through the grace of the Lord Jesus, cleansing heart by means of faith.

So why does James the Just, famed for his traditional piety, cite from a textual tradition of Amos that is from LXX or very close to it? The answer may be a common sense one. It's because the problem has occurred in Antioch, and in Asia Minor, in the Diaspora—where Greek is spoken and the Greek translation of the Scriptures is the Scripture that they would know. And, to cite once again the words of Richard Bauckham, "Even the MT [of Amos 9] could easily have been understood by a Jewish Christian as predicting the extension of Israel's covenant status and privileges to the Gentile nations. The LXX merely makes this implication clearer." ^{3[3]}

In our study tomorrow, we will take up the question of "the four stipulations" of the Jerusalem Decree, and wrestle with the hermeneutics of that. But we may simply note here that with James' decisive speech, the issue is settled and, to speak a bit anachronistically, the Reformation principle of sola fidei is vindicated. God has opened the door of faith to all, including the Gentiles. And Jews and Gentiles are saved in the same way—through the pure, free, sufficient grace of the Lord, Jesus. The mission experience of Peter and Barnabas and Paul supports this claim. But most importantly of all, the Scripture foretold it. This is the mystery of Christ, which was not made known in other generations to the sons of men as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets in the spirit, namely, that the Gentiles are heirs together and body together and partakers together in the promise in Christ Jesus through the Gospel (Eph 3:5-6). This is the Good News; to proclaim this news and none other is the mission of the church.

Unity in This Gospel: A Cause for Joy and for Reflection

At this point in the study, I'd like to make an observation and I'd like to invite a bit of reflection. I served in the parish ministry for 10 years in the Northwest District (1979-89) and now I have lived in St. Louis for 10 years, teaching at our seminary there. My point is that I think that I am fairly aware of the fact that there are differences and disagreements in the Synod. There are a number of issues, about which people believe very strongly—the teaching and practice of church fellowship is one such issue and is really the general topic for this conference. If anyone were in doubt as to the presence of disagreements, the proliferation of emails and websites and electronic communication makes it instantly clear. (I have a plan to help the Synod: no pastor is allowed to send out an email until he has made one pastoral visitation, and you're not allowed to forward anything to anyone else until you make two calls on inactive members!). Our differences are widely known and widely discussed. And they are real.

But here's my observation. You see the problem that the church faced in Acts 15? It was the problem of "What is the Gospel?" It was the problem of "How can anyone be saved?" It was the problem of "What do we proclaim, in order to bring people into the family of God?" It was a huge problem, the biggest of all possible problems, and there was disagreement and disunity until unity was found. My observation is this: We do not, in any real, public way, have this problem. And we should remember that as a gift, and it should make us glad—because that makes us brothers.

Look at the disarray in the "churches" in America today. We all know about it—in some it's worse than others. Some are actually fighting over whether or not Jesus is the only Savior of the world, whether faith in HIM is even necessary for salvation. Dear friends—we have a gift, from God the Holy Ghost, and that gift is a unity in what we preach for the mission of the church. Now I know that anything is possible, but I would be stunned—completely taken aback—to learn that ANYONE in this room does not understand, believe, confess, and rejoice in the Good News that was reaffirmed and reestablished at the Jerusalem Council. And I'm not saying that we don't have our problems and that we need to work on them. But we don't have this problem. And we should look each other in the eye, and be glad.

Don't get me wrong. I'm pretty conservative guy, theologically—BIG fan of doctrine. I support closed communion, as traditionally practiced by our Synod. "Quia" is a very important word to me. I think that the liturgical tradition of the church should be honored and used. I administer doctrinal interviews to my student advisees, and I tell the students in class that someone who goes through the seminary via "cooperate and graduate" is a person beneath contempt who will have to answer for that deception on the Day of Judgment.

But sometimes I think that we need to step back, take a look, and get a grip. I did my graduate work at Union Theological Seminary in Virginia—try hanging out with PCUSA folks for while and see what their problems are! Brothers, in the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, we have a gift from God, a unity in the Gospel and in the mission of the church. And it really makes me glad. I pray it can make you glad as well.

That's my observation. God has preserved for us a real, substantial, almost unheard of unity in the Gospel of salvation through grace alone, by means of faith alone in Christ alone—prophesied and proclaimed in Scripture alone! Now comes my reflection. The reason why Acts 15 is so focused on "what is the gospel" and "how do people get in to this right and saving relationship with God" is that the church as we read about it was busy with that business—They had to decide "how" people get in because they were really focused on "people getting in."

I think that we—all of us together and each of us individually—could probably use some refocus here. I may be in the worse situation of all; I live on the campus of Concordia Seminary and unless I drive off campus (my wife sometimes lets me take the car), I hardly even see a non-LCMS person all day. How easy it is for me to be busy and devoted to other things, other godly things, other things pertaining to my vocation—and to lose all sense of urgency and focus on doing my part, through my vocation, for advancing the mission of the church to proclaim salvation to those who do not yet believe in Jesus.

Brothers—you are undershepherds of the sheep, and you know better than I how it can go, although I do remember. Too much to do, right? And not much of it is "unimportant." Perhaps it's just a matter of attending to people who are already there, closer at hand, as opposed to those who are not yet "there," not yet in the fold. Mission can be the hardest work of all, and it's easy to lose the balance, and to lose the focus.

Our culture, of course, doesn't help us. Oh, they don't actually mind if we believe what we want to believe. But don't tell them that they need to believe it! Nowadays you try to insist that faith in Jesus is the only way to be saved and you'll be compared to Osama bin Ladin.

I guess what I'm saying, and one of the things I'm now "using" Acts 15 for is this: in the midst of our important talks and working together, can we remember that it is all to be done in light of the Gospel and for the sake of the Gospel...and so therefore, for the sake of the mission. And if we really treasure the mission, can we be glad in the unity of our confession in that Gospel of salvation through the free grace of Jesus, by means of simple trust in Him? And as we promised in our ordination vows, may our behavior and our conversation be carried out in a way that adorns with holy lives and loving deeds the Gospel that God has loved us and saved us through the grace of the Lord, Jesus.

Discussion questions:

1. It's basic—but we live or die by the basics. Please reflect together on the marvelous grace of Jesus Christ, and speak together for a time about how good it is that we are saved, now and on the Day of Judgment, by trusting in what Another has done for us.
2. Do you agree or disagree with the claim that our Synod still possesses a remarkable unity in the confession that faith alone in Christ brings salvation, and that faith in Christ alone is the only way of salvation? What difference does this make in our discussion about other important matters?

3. Someone once said that the difference between a prejudice and a stereotype is that there is some evidence to support the latter. Two stereotypes in our Synod today are (1) Some people seem to care only about "pure doctrine" for its own sake and (2) Some people want to busy themselves with "mission outreach" without any real concern for the teaching of pure Lutheran doctrine.

Pick the stereotype to which you personally might be closer (your choice). Talk about how that stereotype, if it were true, betrays a profound misunderstanding of the relationship between the Church's mission and the pure proclamation and teaching of the doctrines of the faith.

4. Apparently some Jewish believers thought that Gentiles were somehow "less saveable" than Jews. When that's the case, then we are injecting something of ourselves into the equation of how God saves us. The shock in Acts 15 is that the GENTILES are the pattern for the JEWS' salvation. What about us? Do we regard certain kinds of people as sort of "less saveable"? How can we return to a more profound appreciation that we....and all people...are saved through the grace of Christ, and only through the grace of Christ?

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²Bruce, F. F., *The Acts of the Apostles: The Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary*, 3rd ed. (Eerdmans, 1990), 340.

³Bauckham, "James and the Jerusalem Church," 457.

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Acts 15, Bible Study #2

By Jeffrey Gibbs

When They Met Together for the Sake of the Gospel Mission . . .

May the peace of Christ be arbiter in our hearts this day (Col 3:15). Amen.

In our first study of Acts 15, we narrowed our focus to the crucial issue at hand, and at the Scripturally based unity in the Gospel that the early church achieved. In short, we focused on the "what" of the Jerusalem Council. In this second study, I'd like to return to the narrative of Acts 15 and to take a somewhat different tack at the text, namely, the fact that they were meeting and how that meeting proceeded, according to the summary account that St. Luke has given us. We will also try to understand one very important aspect of the Apostolic Decree that we passed over yesterday, namely, the meaning and the rationale for the "four disclaimers" that accompanied the Council's unified agreement that the Gentiles need not be circumcised or to keep the Law of Moses in order to be saved.

You might recall the distinction with which I began yesterday "reading" the Bible and "using" the Bible. To be frank, in this second study it seems to me more that I will be trying to "use" the Bible. But, I pray, this use will not violate or go beyond the sense of the text, nor claim too much authority for the observations that I'll offer. The structure of the study will be a sort of "sentence completion" exercise, and the sentence begins with the clause, "When they met together for the sake of the Gospel mission"

There was a huge debate

We all know how understatement can be an effective way of communicating. St. Luke is the only NT author to use a certain kind of understatement that we see in Acts 15:2, after certain people began to teach a false Gospel in Antioch: "And after there occurred *not a little* upheaval and debate with Paul and Barnabas against them" St. Luke does not shy away from the fact that there was a lot of disagreement and a lot of discussion. He is more straightforward later in the chapter, stating simply in verses six and seven, "Now the apostle and the elders gathered to see around this matter, and after much debating, Peter stood up and said to them"

Now, the point is not just that they had debate and disagreement, for the church moved on to agreement and unity in the Gospel and in the Gospel mission. But when they met together for the sake of the Gospel mission, there was a huge discussion. This question dawned on me one day recently as I was pondering the chapter; How long did this meeting last? Luke surely gives us a brief summary of "Peter spoke, Paul and Barnabas spoke, James spoke and that was that." Depending on how one views the isagogical questions of the relationship between the events in the Acts 15 and Galatians 2, it is possible that the conference lasted fifteen days! Luke does not downplay that fact that they had a lot of things to work through, and in my own opinion, I can't imagine that James discovered the sophisticated, hermeneutically subtle Scriptural answer of Amos 9:11-12 during a coffee break.

There's a balance here. On the one extreme would be the view that says, "Well, we should get together and discuss things, but we don't necessarily need agreement." Well, if it's a question on which God's word has spoken, then we do need to reach agreement. But on the other extreme is

the view that says, "It's bad that we don't agree but the answer is plain and all the other side needs to do is see the truth as I've been stating it." I call this "insisting that the Holy Spirit work quickly." I don't know how long it took them to reach agreement. But there was "not a little debate." Sometimes I think that we don't know how to have good debates. I think that we need to learn how. It is hard work to understand genuinely to understand the position of someone with whom I am currently disagreeing. It's a lot easier to just dismiss you, or to misrepresent your position, or demonize you.

And that brings up a minor point, and this one is really a shameless playing with words but I'll offer it anyway. There are two different but related Greek nouns for "debate" used in this chapter, zh,thma and zh,thsij. They're related to the verb zhte,w that means "to seek, to search." I became curious about the English word "debate." I looked it up, and it comes from a French verb that can mean "to fight." I am not for a moment pretending that the "real meaning" of these words is this or that. To use the phrase of Donald A. Carson, that would be a first-class "exegetical fallacy" and linguistic nonsense. But it did remind me of a question that I guess I thought it was fair to ask. When we are gathered together here, it is to seek after God's truth, or is it to fight? Just a question.

Let's lengthen out our sentence a bit. "When they met together for the sake of the Gospel mission there was a huge debate"

Between Brothers

Barnabas was from a priestly background, a Levite from Cyprus (Acts 4:36). The believers (note that this is what they are called!) who were advocating the necessity of Gentile circumcision were from the sect of the Pharisees. Paul is a very emphatic, very converted ex-Pharisee. Peter is a Galilean layman who witness the hostility against the Master at the hands of the Pharisees. But Peter stands up in verse 7 and says, "Men, **brothers**" And James stands up in verse 13 and says, "Men, **brothers**" And the apostolic letter sent to the church in Antioch begins in verse 23 with, "The apostles and the Elders, **brothers**, to the **brothers** in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia" Despite their debates and disagreements, they addressed one another as brothers in Christ.

We have all had time to receive and read and, I pray, ponder a godly essay on this topic by one of the leaders of our church. I'd like to add my two cents right now, and I'd like to do it in reference a fairly widespread misuse of the famous "Matthew 18" perhaps an example of using the Bible--poorly--rather than reading it. This has become a catch-phrase that is thrown around by various persons on various sides of various debates. It's wondrously flexible and useful, "You didn't follow Matthew 18." Brothers, if you read the obvious, *contextual* sense of Matthew 18:15-20, the Lord's words here refer to a situation precisely where you fear that sin has caused someone to **cease to be a brother at all** and such a one needs to be "gained," by you, by you and others, or by the action of the whole church. The proper use of this text applies to situations of excommunication. "Let him be to you as a tax collector and a Gentile!" It does not directly apply to situations where our relationship as brothers **in Christ** is not in peril. Again, let me remind us all of that wonderful gift. We are not in disagreement about the three "solas." We are, even if our disagreements remain and we cannot find unity, still brothers in Christ. And we can and we must speak with one another with this in our hearts and mouths.

"When they met together for the sake of the Gospel mission there was a huge debate between brothers"

Led By the Teachers of the Church

One of the interesting and not too clearly explained developments in the Book of Acts is where the "apostles" go, and who the "elders" are. We know that for a few years, the Twelve apparently did not travel from Jerusalem's environs very far or for very long. When the persecution arises after the death of Stephen, for instance, Luke tells us explicitly that "all were scattered through the regions of Judea and Samaria *except* the apostles" (Acts 8:1). Then, of course, we have the martyrdom of James the Elder in Acts 12 and Peter's departure from Jerusalem "to another place" (Acts 12:17). The "elders" first appear in 11:30 as the ones who received from Barnabas and Saul/Paul and the Antioch church the relief offering in the time of famine. And then, here in Acts 15, the pertinent references are as follows:

15:2 The delegation from Antioch goes up to the apostles and elders concerning the debate over the Gospel mission

15:4 The delegation from Antioch is received by the church and the apostles and the elders in Jerusalem

15:6 The apostles and elders gather to see about this matter

15:12 After Peter speaks, the whole crowd is silent and also is hearing the report of Barnabas and Paul concerning the first Missionary Journey.

15:22 After James' speech, it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to send men from among them back to Antioch, along with Paul and Barnabas

15:23 The Apostolic and Presbyteral letter is just that: "The apostles and the elders, brothers, to the brothers in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia"

At the Council, the whole church is there. But the leaders of the church, the apostles and the elders, are taking the lead, offering the speeches, giving the exegesis on the basis of which the leaders and the whole church can agree regarding the truth. It's not a voters assembly. It doesn't seem to be a democratic process, where everyone's opinion counts the same. It's unified. There is no division between the apostles and elders and whoever exactly constitutes "the whole crowd" and "the whole church" gathered there. But there are theological leaders who need to debate together as brothers, and lead the church. Smalcald Articles, Article IV, paragraph 10, rather than either forced or voluntary allegiance to someone like the pope, "the church cannot be better governed and maintained than by having all of us live under one head, Christ, and by having all the bishops equal in office (however they may differ in gifts) and diligently joined together in unity of doctrine, faith, sacraments, prayer, works of love, etc. So St. Jerome writes that the priests of Alexandria governed the churches together and in common." (Tappert, 300)

I guess that means that we have work to do. You have work to do. The hard work of searching the Scriptures, the hard work of true debate and seeking understanding, the hard work of treating as a brother someone that you disagree with and someone that you may have demonized and someone concerning whom I may have forgotten that water, when it's comprehended in God's command and connected with God's word, water is thicker than blood.

When they met together for the sake of the Gospel mission there was a huge debate, between brothers, led by the teachers of the church

And They Came To Agreement

Both sides of the debate in Acts 15 agreed, from the beginning, about this God had an opinion on this matter. Although only the Scriptural argument of James is explicit in the text, I think it safe to assume (as we do when we read St. Paul's arguments with his opponents) that the other side was saying, "No, *thus* saith the Lord." They did not seem to entertain the idea that where God had spoken, there could be disagreement. They sought agreement and not only for themselves, but for the church in Antioch, and Syria and Cilicia.

How long did it take them to reach agreement? We don't know. Luke gives no indication. How long did it take James the Just to realize the importance, meaning, and implications of Amos 9:11-12? I don't know. But I'll tell you what, it takes time and energy to study the Word of God, and sometimes I wonder if we have relegated theology to second class status because we already know all the answers.

What should be the goal of our speaking and discussing together. Agreement in what God's word says. We may not always come to exact agreement in how to implement what God's word says. But we need to agree in our theology.

"When they met together for the sake of the Gospel mission there was a huge debate, between brothers, led by the teachers of the church, they came to agreement."

And They Made Concessions For the Sake of the Mission

Now we come to what is in some ways the most puzzling and difficult aspect of the Jerusalem Council and its decree. The decision put forth by James is that "We *not* burden those from among the Gentiles who are turning unto God" (Acts 15:19); the epistle written by the apostles and elders says the same: "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to put on you no greater burden." But. The conjunction that Lutherans love to hate. You do not need to be circumcised....but. You do not need to keep the Law of Moses....but. Two questions (at least! arise from what follows: "to keep away from idols' pollutions and *porneia* (we'll return to that) and the strangled thing and blood." The two questions are (1) why these four items, and what do they mean?; and (2) to what purpose, toward what end, to promote what cause are the Gentile Christians in Antioch and Syria (and also in the churches of the first Missionary Journey! See Acts 16:4) directed to abstain from these four kinds of behavior?

There seems to be something of a scholarly consensus that the four stipulations serve as a summary of the issues that are prominent in Leviticus 17 and 18. Although there is not a little debate about any of the terms used, three of the four seem to be tolerably clear. "Pollutions of idols" in verse 20 is clarified later in verse 29 with the term "idol sacrifices," and we know from Paul's own correspondence (see 1 Cor 8-10) that this was a live issue in the new Christian communities in the Gentile world. "The strangled thing" seems to be another way of referring to the prohibition in Lev. 17:10-14 against eating blood, so that "to abstain from the strangled thing" and "to abstain from blood" are really two references to the same issue, namely, "You are not to eat the blood of any flesh, for the life of all flesh is its blood; whoever eats it shall be cut off" (Lev. 17:14).

The most controverted of the items is the term *porneia*, normally translated "fornication" or "sexual immorality." The problem presented by the normal meaning is obvious in a two-fold way. On the one hand, what is a clearly "moral" commandments doing in a list of "ceremonial" regulations? On the other hand, why does this need to be mentioned at all? Would not the Gentile Christians already have been taught to walk in the Spirit and to turn away from the "deeds of the flesh," the first of

which is *porneia* (Gal 5:19)? The attempts to solve this problem are legion, and I cannot pretend to have solved the issue definitively. But I would recommend the view put forward by J. Lightfoot in the 19th century and seconded by F. F. Bruce and most recently by Joseph Fitzmyer, that takes *porneia* as a direct reference to the prohibitions in Leviticus 18 against "forbidden degrees" of marriage and of sexual intercourse: "You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father's wife, or your sister/half-sister, your granddaughter, your aunt (paternal or maternal), your daughter-in-law, etc." In his Anchor Bible commentary, Fitzmyer offers evidence that at least makes this view credible, and if this is correct, then the four items match up well together. They are decrees from Leviticus 17-18, and the OT context applies these injunctions specifically and repeatedly to the "sojourner in your midst" that is, to Gentiles in close contact with Jews. James and the church in Jerusalem, with the agreement of Paul and Barnabas and the whole assembly, have selected several items from the Law of Moses, and written to the Gentile Christians asking them to abstain from these behaviors.

To what goal? That's the second question. The text of Acts 15 does give an explanation, but it is somewhat enigmatic. Why should the Gentile believers give heed to these Levitical admonitions? "For Moses, from ancient generations, in each city has those who proclaim him in the synagogues as he is read every Sabbath" (Acts 15:21). What does this mean?

I must here, with some humility, register my disagreement with the majority of scholarly sources that I consulted for these studies. Over and over again, skilled and reputable commentators declared that the reason why the Apostolic decree includes these Levitical restrictions is "to enable Jewish Christians to have contact with Gentile Christians."¹¹ The analysis put forward by the strong majority of those whose work I consulted proposed that the four Levitical restrictions were imposed in order to placate Jewish Christians and enable them to have full fellowship with Gentile Christians.

This strikes me as exactly wrong. This is the issue that causes Paul to confront Peter in Gal. 2:11ff, behavior that indicates that Gentile Christians must have obedience to the Law of Moses to their faith in Christ in order to have table fellowship with Jewish Christians. Nor is it the same as the issue of "weak and strong" in Romans 14-15, for there Paul calls upon both "weak" and "strong" to be aware of the other party, and for the "weak" not to judge the "strong," and for the "strong" not to look down upon the "weak." The door swings both ways, when it comes to observing adiaphora in the life of the church.

But the door only swings one way here in Acts 15. The Gentile Christians are asked to abstain from certain practices prohibited in the book of Leviticus. Why? Because in every synagogue Moses is read to those who preach him as he is being read. It's not so that Jewish Christians will be willing to have fellowship with Gentile Christians. Paul would no more have agreed to such an arrangement than he would have stood on his head and spit out wooden denarii. It's about the mission. The mission of the Gospel will continue to go out in the Hellenistic world, and the pattern will continue to be the same: "to the Jew first, and also to the Greek." For the sake of the mission, Gentile believers are asked to give heed to the Levitical admonitions regarding "the sojourner in your midst," to help dispel any *unnecessary* initial offense at or rejection of the Gospel. Only Robert Smith in the old "Concordia Commentary" volume on Acts seemed to offer this view when he wrote, "The way should be kept open for the Jews to enter the fellowship of the church" (my emphasis).² The proclamation will not be watered down at all. But in some specific ways, the Gentiles are asked, "when with the Jews, to become like Jews, in order that they might gain the Jews." Paul's own missionary, humble, servant-flexibility as articulated in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23. And it's for the sake of the mission. Because that's what the church meeting in Jerusalem is focused on. The mission of the church. And not the mission that is close by to them, or the mission that is going out to people who are culturally and socially similar to the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. They are interested in

the mission of the church "out there," "far away," in strange and confusing and challenging and new circumstances.

There's an obvious "use" for this feature of Acts 15. In what ways might our churches voluntarily refrain from certain behaviors purely for the sake of promoting the mission of the Gospel? Notice that it's not about "changing what you say," not even to speak of "adjusting the message." It's about concrete behaviors that Christians voluntarily adopt in order to gain a more ready initial hearing of the Gospel message. If your outreach takes place in an orthodox neighborhood in New York or Los Angeles, that might mean one thing. If you're in a Muslim community, it might mean something else. It would take wisdom and discernment, and the mutual conversation and advice and wisdom of the wider church. But when they met together for the sake of the Gospel mission there was a huge debate, between brothers, led by the teachers of the church, they came to agreement, and they made concessions for the sake of the mission.

The concessions are agreed to by all the parties involved, and when Paul and Silas began what we refer to as the second Missionary Journey, they shared the decrees of the apostles and elders in Jerusalem also among the churches founded on the first Missionary Journey, and asked them to keep those decrees (Acts 16:4). But they seem to have been strategic and temporary. Paul does not mention them in any of his letters, although the spirit of the decrees lived on and comes to light in the slogan of 1 Cor 9:22, "I have been all things to all, in order that by all means I might save some."

And the missionary spirit can live on in us, as God directs us outside of ourselves, to the mission of the church in the wider world and to the challenges offered there. Perhaps our next series of conferences, held around the Synod, might focus in every district on supporting one another in outreach, in planning, in brainstorming how better to reach others with the Good News of salvation by means of faith in the grace of the Lord Jesus? I could sure use your help and your encouragement and your prayers in that regard.

Discussion Questions:

1. What attitudes and behaviors would be necessary for genuine, honest theological debate to take place in the Synod concerning some of our Acontroverted@ issues? Have there been times when you have not exhibited those qualities in Circuit or District or other contexts? What can you do to create a climate for productive discussion and debate?
2. Do you agree or disagree that we at times have not spoken with one another as brothers in Christ should? Or are there other factors to this that have not been mentioned in the Bible studies so far?
3. Who are Athe apostles and elders@ of the church today? Do you agree or disagree that the Jerusalem Council was not a Ademocratic@ process where everyone's voice counted the same? Are there implications for how we deal with issues among ourselves today, and who should lead us in these matters?
4. A strong theme of the Bible studies= application has been the claim that we need a renewed focus on the mission of the church to preach the Gospel to the unsaved. Do you agree or disagree with that? How can we maintain a strong outward orientation toward mission, **while at the same time** devoting sufficient time and energy to the goal of unity on the theological questions that trouble us?

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¹Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Sacra Pagina 5 (Michael Glazier, 1992), 267; cf. Fitzmyer, 556-57; Conzelmann, 118; Bruce, 311; Talbert, 144.

²Smith, 235.

Discussions

Some Reflections on a Yankee Stadium Case of Discretion

by *Ralph A. Bohlmann*

Warm greetings to all of you in the Name of our Lord Jesus Christ!

If you or I were asked to speak a public prayer at an event like the September 23 event at Yankee Stadium, one of our first questions would surely be: What does the Holy Scripture say about the matter? May I say in all candor that the Holy Scriptures do not explicitly or directly address this kind of event. Attempts by critics to use one or more Bible passages as though they did are fraught with all kinds of hermeneutical and exegetical dangers. Instead, what the Scriptures give us are broad general principles, centered in the Gospel: We are His CHURCH, carrying out His MISSION, faithful to the TRUTH of the GOSPEL of Jesus Christ, mindful of the UNITY we have and promote with all other Christians, steadily showing LOVE to all in the Name of Christ. Those six major concepts summarize the heart and core of the Biblical witness and as such provide the matrix in which we consider and decide such questions as, “May I pray at Yankee Stadium?,” but without giving us a direct answer.

But when the Word of God leaves a particular question open, as it does in this issue, it remains open – and no one can close it, not even confessional documents, synodical conventions, church officials, or those whose loud voices threaten or intimidate. That’s why the CTCR and the last synodical convention, after a broad church-wide study of the fellowship issues on the basis of the Scriptures and Confessions, could issue documents, recommended by the convention itself for our use and guidance, that recognize that there are indeed “cases of discretion” that are matters of personal judgment and individual conscience. This recognition is nothing new in the life of the Synod; we’ve known and said and practiced that for years. In 1981, for example, in the last months of the Preus administration, the CTCR urged us to take a course of “responsible” freedom in the context of “responsible commitment.” It must also be recognized, the CTCR said, “that unusual and difficult situations can and do arise in this world”, and that “individuals equally committed to the Scriptural principles of fellowship may not always come to the same conclusions. . .in such exceptional situations” (Nature and Implications, p. 46). But what makes a situation a “case of discretion”, open to individual judgment and conscience, is not merely a CTCR document or a convention resolution, but the fact that the Scriptures themselves leave it open. And please note well: any attempt to require a specific viewpoint or action in such an open question or case of discretion would be not only a violation of our sola scriptura principle, but a restriction on the Christian freedom we enjoy under the Gospel, as well – and that would therefore be a church-divisive action of the first order.

But what actually transpired at Yankee Stadium that day? Critics tend to misunderstand and wrongly portray the event itself when they describe it as a joint service of worship, an act of fellowship, and one that wrongly implies that all gods there addressed in prayers are equal. On that assumption, they argue that participation was unionistic and syncretistic and therefore contrary to the conditions of membership set forth in the synodical Constitution, Article III. Such a view, I believe, is based on a mistaken understanding of the event itself, which I would describe as a “community or civic memorial event” (but not necessarily a “civic religious event”, as Adams defines that term) which included a wide variety of religious, patriotic, and social elements. Such a civic memorial event needs to be evaluated in terms of its sponsorship, its purpose, its content, and its participants -- not simply condemned out of hand as syncretistic (which it was not), nor simply legitimized because it

was civic (which it was), or because it pertained to a “once in a lifetime” event, which it certainly did. But this civic event was not sponsored or called by any religion or religious council, but by the City of New York through the Mayor’s office. Its purpose was not religious, but civic or community. It was called to give the hurting survivors of the 9-11 disaster and their grieving neighbors the comfort and human support of civil, religious, and social leaders and the groups they represented. Its content was a series of statements, prayers, and musical selections offered sequentially, not jointly, by a variety of people, appearing one after another, to say, without restrictions on their message what was on their hearts. In other words, this event had civic, not religious, sponsorship, purposes, and content, and its participants were there as a cross section of the community – not to imply in any way a syncretistic or unionistic blending of the religious beliefs of the leaders or participants. That’s why it matters that it was indeed a “civic memorial event”, and not a joint religious service.

Those terms, syncretism and unionism, from Article VI of our synodical Constitution are there used pretty much as synonyms, and their focus, historically speaking (extemporize summary of history), was on the blending or mixing (Mischerei) of diverse beliefs, chiefly Reformed and Lutheran, in the activities of local congregations. A contemporary secular dictionary doesn’t help very much to understand what concerned the founders of the LCMS when that clause was written and adopted in 1847, and may even obscure the condition of membership it addresses, namely, the compromise of our doctrinal position through such wrongful blending or obscuring of opposites.

Many individuals have described and defined this term over the years, often expanding its original meaning. But the only official definition of unionism in the LCMS is from the 1932 Brief Statement where it is defined simply as “church fellowship with the adherents of false doctrine”. No doubt false doctrine was expressed more than once in the Yankee Stadium event that day, but there was no church fellowship or mingling of diverse beliefs – and hence no unionism or syncretism in President Benke’s involvement, according to this official definition.

Moreover, even if you want to think of all inter-Christian involvements, including praying together, as an element of fellowship (as the Wisconsin Synod does with its so-called “unit concept”), I would underscore that the prayers at that event were not a “joint expression of fellowship” (to use Wisconsin Synod language). In fact, contrary to the statements of several critics, they were not joint prayers at all, but sequential or seriatim prayers without any implications whatsoever that all were equally valid. It is therefore impossible (at least without a valid exit poll of some kind), and probably unfair and inaccurate as well, to claim that those who witnessed the service at Yankee Stadium or on national television were given that false impression. I am extremely disappointed that so many critics among us have not only made this wrong assumption, but have then made strong accusations on the basis of that faulty assumption.

To be sure, even with such disclaimers, there would be some among us who would choose not to participate for what they consider valid reasons. We should respect that judgment and those who make it -- until and unless they accuse us of sin or false doctrine when we judge differently in this “case of discretion”. What the Synod did in adopting Resolution 3-07A and asking that the Cases of Discretion paragraphs guide the synod was to state that it is our corporate judgment as a Synod that the Scriptures and Confessions have not decided issues of this kind, but that pastors with the same confessional and scriptural commitment, acting in charity toward each other in dealing with an “open question”, may exercise their own discretion without penalty. If that’s the case, then, and I believe it is, the pending charges are inappropriate, both theologically and constitutionally, and should therefore be withdrawn at once. Why? Because the disagreement of the accusers is with the Synod, not with those who accepted the synod’s guidance and acted accordingly. If conscience keeps these brothers from withdrawing their charges, they should be invited to participate in the

fraternal, nonthreatening process established by the Synod for hearing and discussing dissent of this kind (cf.. Bylaw 2.39 c which advises discussion with peers, presentation of concerns to the CTCR, and then offering overtures to the next convention if the matter is not resolved before then). Moreover, it is inappropriate to consider their charges under Bylaw 2.27, as is now the case, because that bylaw applies only when the facts in a case can lead to the expulsion of a member, which cannot be the case--theologically--when you're dealing with a question left open by the Scriptures, or--ecclesiastically--with a synodically recognized case of discretion like this. And for the Synod as a whole, we must quickly get beyond this issue which has become what the confessions call a "needless and unprofitable contention" rather than a "necessary controversy". Please hear that passage from the Formula of Concord (FC, SD, Rule and Norm, 15, Tappert, 506-507):

"We shall at all times make a sharp distinction between needless and unprofitable contentions (which, since they destroy rather than edify, should never be allowed to disturb the church) and necessary controversy (dissension concerning articles of the Creed or the chief parts of our Christian doctrine, when the contrary error must be refuted in order to preserve the truth)."

In this new century, our church body – so richly blessed by our good and gracious God for so long – needs to become an even better instrument in our Savior's service. Our continued defensive and cautious preoccupation with narrow questions needs to be displaced by a broader, more evangelistic, more flexible Gospel faithfulness as we relate to each other and to Christians around the world. (E. g., missions in China and Europe; extemporize)).

Many of you are no doubt aware of the old doggerel that goes like this: "Living above with saints we love / that will be grace and glory; / but living below with saints we know / that is a different story." (cf. Christian Century, May 22-29, 2002, p. 5). How easy it is – and how very painful – to realize that our life together in the LCMS today appears to be a "different story," indeed. It is my fervent prayer, and I know it is yours, too, that the Holy Spirit will richly bless our words and work together these days to the end that we may truly help each other, and indeed our entire church body, to "maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph. 4: 3), so that our "living below with saints we know," in the LCMS and beyond, may always reflect the grace and glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.

7/31/02

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When Cases of Discretion Are Really Cases of Discretion?

By Robert T. Kuhn

As I thought about my assignment for today on my perspective from my experience of what the Scriptures and the Confessions teach regarding church fellowship with special attention to cases of discretion, my thoughts kept drifting back to Genesis 3 where it is recorded that the devil came to Adam and Eve in the garden and raised doubt by asking: "Did God really say...?" For over 150 years the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod has been committed to the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions for its doctrine and practice. After all those years it seems we are now having doubt raised by some asking the question: "Do the Scriptures (or Confessions) really say...?" Likewise, the Constitution of the LCMS, with very few changes, has stood the test of time. Now, in the new millennium, doubt is being raised by the question being asked: "What does it really mean...?" Thus, we come together to try to find ways to determine the real meaning of those simple words, do and do not.

About 90+ percent of the pastors in the LCMS had their pastoral equipping at one of two seminaries and thus given similar training on the subject of church fellowship. Therefore, I am choosing to not be redundant and speak on the meaning of the subject from a Lutheran point of view. We not only know this, but we also know the position of the LCMS on the subject as we were taught it. What we seem to be struggling with, then, is the matter of discretion in putting into practice what we have been taught. Therefore, my attention in this brief paper will be given to: "When Cases of Discretion Are Really Cases of Discretion."

My mother taught me as a child that when I was questioning whether or not to say something I should let the comment first pass through three gates. The gates are: 1. Is it true or correct? 2. Is it kind? 3. Is it helpful? If it passed all three gates, it was probably OK to say it. Mr. Webster defines discretion as: "the freedom or authority to make decisions and choices." To decide if an act is a matter of discretion for one serving in the pastoral office it seems to me there are some gates through which the act should pass.

The first gate is to ask what the Scriptures say about the subject. We know the passages our fathers chose as the basis for the objectives of the LCMS and thus the subject at hand. Ephesians 4:3-6 – strive to keep the unity of the Spirit. I Corinthians 1:10 – agree with one another to avoid divisions. Romans 16:17 – avoid worshiping with those who have or teach doctrine that is different than you have been taught. We have heard them, studied them, discussed them many times and further exegesis on them at this time is probably not helpful. Unless we now in the 21st century have some new revelation we are only raising the age-old question: "Did God really say?" If an act is neither commanded nor forbidden in the Word, for the Christian, there is room for the use of discretion. Perhaps Dr. Eugene Klug summarizes it well in his book, *Church and Ministry*. "Human opinions and preferences must not take precedence over God's Word under any circumstances. A person does not knowingly and willingly sin because he knows that there will be forgiveness for sin. By the same token he does not knowingly and willingly fellowship with the heterodox because he knows that membership in Christ's kingdom is by faith alone through the Spirit. A child of God seeks always to act in accord with God's command and promises. These supercede all human predilections" (p. 107). Pastoral discretion has a place only if or when the Word of God is silent.

The second gate is to ask what the Lutheran Confessions say about the act. Here we are referred especially for our purposes today to article VII of the Augsburg Confession and Article X (and others) of the Formula of Concord. These articles refer to fellowship with other Christians (the writers did not consider or include worship with the heathen). Are we at liberty to use our discretion if/when the Confessions speak? Perhaps a paragraph at the end of Article XI of the Solid Declaration makes it clear. "This will suffice concerning the controverted articles which have been disputed among theologians of the Augsburg Confession for many years and in which some have erred and serious religious contentions have arisen. From our exposition friends and foes may clearly understand that we have no intention (since we have no authority to do so) to yield anything of the eternal and unchangeable truth of God for the sake of temporal peace, tranquility, and outward harmony. Nor would such peace and harmony last, because it would be contrary to the truth and actually intended for its suppression. Still less by far are we minded to whitewash or cover up any falsification of true doctrine or any publicly condemned errors. We have a sincere delight in and deep love for true harmony and are cordially inclined and determined on our part to do everything in our power to further the same. We desire such harmony as will not violate God's honor, that will not detract anything from the divine truth of the holy Gospel, that will not give place to the smallest error but will lead the poor sinner to true and sincere repentance, raise him up through faith, strengthen him in his new obedience, and thus justify and save him forever through the sole merit of Christ, and so forth." The signers were not willing to yield for any reason on an article of faith or on any act or action pertaining to faith. Surely as Lutherans we can be no different today. If it is neither commanded nor forbidden in the Lutheran Confessions, for the Lutheran Christian there is room for the use of discretion.

The third gate is to ask what the Constitution and Bylaws of the LCMS say about the subject. Some say only men wrote these, and indeed that is true. But each of us pastors --- each of us pastors --- on the day we signed the Constitution of the synod gave our individual commitment to abide by and follow it. For our purposes at this time we refer to Article VI of the Constitution where we read that one of the conditions of membership is: "Renunciation of unionism and syncretism of every description." It is interesting that this is the only negative or something to be avoided in these conditions. All others are positive. Each pastor committed himself to do this. Therefore, if an act is neither commanded nor forbidden in the Constitution and Bylaws, for the LCMS Lutheran Christian there is room for the use of discretion. A fourth gate is to ask whether the act will be helpful or harmful to the church, that is beneficial or detrimental. The Apostle Paul wrote: "Everything is permissible – but not everything is beneficial. Everything is permissible – but not everything is constructive" (I Corinthians 10:23). While a specific act may lie in the area of adiaphora, it still may not be constructive or beneficial. If so, the wisdom of the use of discretion would have to be questioned.

Finally, a fifth gate is to ask if the act I want to do or be involved in is for any selfish reason. Personal advancement, self-aggrandizement, reception of exceptional attention, or selfish personal monetary gain would cause a child of God to do some hard soul-searching before concluding it is wise to proceed. While it may be easy to cover up or explain away, selfish motivation can be a real driving force, but the end results are usually questionable. The advancement of self at the expense or detriment of others cannot be tolerated in the sanctified life of a Christian. If selfish gain is the purpose, the use of discretion must be laid aside.

After passing through all five gates with nothing prohibiting the action, it would, in my opinion, then become a matter of discretion. It is then that one has the freedom or authority to make a decision or a choice, in keeping with the definition. Perhaps, just perhaps, after causing the action or activity

to pass through the five gates, the situations described as being “cases of discretion” may hardly exist or not be difficult to decide. If the activity or action in question is put through all five gates conclusions arrived at by separate individuals may not be so different as the situation in our church now seems to be. As or when individuals intentionally try to “strain the governor” or to do things just “outside the box” the unity in the church, or any organization, is jeopardized. One of the watch-phrases of our day is “be creative.” If being creative is intentionally functioning outside of an agreed-upon standard, being creative cannot be for the common good and may be more detrimental than beneficial.

In conclusion, it is not always easy to be an orthodox Lutheran. It may not make one popular or fulfill all personal wishes to let an act pass through the five gates before making the decision to do it. It is quite obvious today that there are many voices expressing radical difference or difference of opinion from or with the simplicity of the Scripture, the Confessions, and our synod’s Constitution. Instead of saying: “The Lord said it; I accept it; that’s the end of it,” the all-to-often-asked question seems to be: “Is that what God really said?” Instead of saying: “The signers of the Lutheran Confessions staked their lives on the truth of what they wrote; I subscribed to these writings before God and His people on the day of my ordination; I accept what they teach and declare;” it seems today some look for loop holes or a ways out. Instead of following what is in the love agreement (our Constitution and Bylaws) that each of us signed, some seem to be seeking consent to do their own thing. When the Word of God speaks and the Lutheran Confessions deal with it, that is what I believe and to what I have made a commitment. If I have any integrity I will strive to do what I swore and signed I would do.

To underscore this, I share three quotes from Herman Sasse in his book, *Here I Stand: The people refused to give up Luther’s teaching.* “Sire,” said Margrave George the Confessor, one of the signers of the Augsburg Confession, when Emperor Charles V demanded that the Protestant princes participate in the Corpus Christi procession at the Diet of Augsburg, “I would rather kneel down on this spot and have my head chopped off than give up the Word of God.” (p.6)

...As far as America is concerned, it would seem from the vantage point of Germany that the right of the Lutheran Church to existence will not be called into question by the state, but rather by the other Christian churches. The movement toward church union, which will probably make mighty strides of progress during the next generation, will oblige the Lutheran churches more and more to explain why they will not give up their independent confessional existence. How often, in the course of four centuries, has our church had to answer this question! How often has it been reproached for unbrotherliness, for having a sectarian spirit, for fostering uncharitable separatism! Whenever the occasion demands, may we be enabled to defend our position with the same courage of faith which distinguished our Fathers in the Reformation. If we stand up for the doctrine of the sinner’s justification, sola gratia, sola fide, it is not the dogmatic idiosyncrasy of a denomination which is at stake, but the article of which “nothing can be yielded or surrendered, even if heaven and earth and all things sink in ruin (SA, Part II).(p.17)

The hour will come when it will be necessary for the Lutherans of the whole world to have learned the full depth of the words sola gratia, sola fide. That hour will come when they are required to answer the question of the world, the question of the other communions, “What does it mean to be Lutheran?” (p.17)

The question we have been asked to consider and has been the focus of this short paper is: In cases of discretion can pastors equally committed to the Synod's fellowship principles come to different conclusions regarding participation in events that may (or may not) involve elements of worship? The response of this writer is: If they pass through the five above listed gates and are really cases of discretion, the answer is yes.

May the Lord of the Church guide us, help us, and strengthen us.

08/05/02

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Conflict, Confession and Unity

by Harold L. Senkbeil

Addressing Doctrinal Issues Faithfully and Fraternally For the Sake of Christ's Mission

In the Name of Jesus

Three Scripture passages supplied our forefathers with the rationale for the founding of the Synod: Ephesians 4, 1 Corinthians 1, and Romans 16. There we read about the exclusive truth claims of only one God, one Lord, one Faith, and one Baptism; of unanimity in doctrine and common confession of one scriptural truth; of a united front and common opposition to every falsehood and all false teachers. All of these things unfortunately sound hopelessly outdated and ridiculously quaint to modern ears, if not outright intolerant. The rule of reason and logic that has propped up the secular city ever since the Enlightenment has now collapsed like a house of cards, and so people in our time are left to maneuver their way around the wreckage and debris of the public square with only intuition and human feelings as their guide. Contemporary secularized society no longer deals with the categories of truth and error but only "whatever works." Therefore the original intent of the founding fathers of the Synod sounds to many in our time like a foreign language: "(to) conserve and promote the unity of the true faith, ...(to) provide a united defense against schism, sectarianism, and heresy." (Constitution of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, Article III, section 1)

But what seems to be a foreign language is actually our mother tongue, dear brothers and sisters in Christ. And the sooner we learn to be at home with our church's mother tongue and to live once more as Christ's people, thoroughly conversant with the language of truth and error so that we can distinguish reality from falsehood, the happier we will be to be about our Savior's mission in the dark and chaotic world in which we live. When we believe, teach, and confess all that the Lord Jesus has commanded for His church, then we will be all the more equipped and enlivened for His mission of going and making disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to observe all the things that He has given us to believe and live.

It's time and high time, then, that we declare a moratorium in our beloved Synod on the kind of unfortunate talk that would pit doctrine against mission, as though we can only do one but not the other since they are mutually exclusive. I submit that the mission of the church is nothing more and nothing less than the careful and consistent confession of Christian doctrine. In other words, doctrine and practice are two sides of one coin, two aspects of one reality: the divinely revealed truth of the Word of God for a world that is lost in sin and captive to death.

Today we Missouri Synod Lutherans find ourselves teetering on the edge of a precipice. All of us are painfully aware of the uglier symptoms of our distress: the bitterness, the namecalling, the mutual threats and counter-threats, some veiled and some overt. All of that simply has got to stop all around the church. Anger, wrath, malice, slander, and foul talk do not belong in the mouth of those who have been made new in Christ. (Colossians 3:8) Our experiment in brinkmanship just isn't working. In order for harmony and unity to be restored, we all have to start by stepping back from the edge of the cliff. This calls for a spirit of gentleness, humility, and self-control. No doubt a lot of humble pie will have to be eaten all around. But such a diet would do us all a lot of good given the present climate in the Synod. So that's the first step; to watch our mouths, all of us, and step back from the brink. But in a church like ours that takes God's Word seriously that doesn't mean that we simply agree to disagree. Remember, there is not only one God and one Lord, but one Faith as well.

It's essential, therefore, that we constantly strive to agree in that one Scriptural and Confessional faith, that there be a common confession of the gospel in all its articles among us. Therefore we must be bold enough to take the second step toward harmony, and that's to sit down calmly and fraternally in deliberate, earnest discussion of the doctrinal confusion that is the real source of our distress.

We need to take a long, hard look at what it means to be a Lutheran church in our time. Such essential issues as the nature and efficacy of the gospel, the purpose and authority of the Word of God, and the power of the Means of Grace would be excellent places to begin. In all of these areas, I'm afraid, our doctrinal base has been seriously eroded by the inroads of American cultural revivalism. In each instance the question is whether we will divide doctrine from practice, whether we will believe one thing and do another; in short, whether we will practice what we preach. When we treat divinely revealed truth as some kind of vague substance that can be expressed in an infinite variety of styles, I submit that we come dangerously close to denying the very Gospel we claim to profess. We are not Baptists or mega-church non-denominationalists, after all. We have a public confession rooted in the Scriptures, summarized by the ancient creeds of the Church catholic, and eloquently articulated in the Lutheran Confessions. We are Lutheran Christians, that's who we are and intend to be, without apology or compromise. So when we adopt practices that are foreign to our confession of the one Scriptural faith, then we undermine the very faith we claim to profess.

The challenge to us all in these early decades of the twenty-first century is to bring the exclusive truth claims of the Gospel of Christ to an aggressively pluralistic society. I am convinced that can be done winsomely, enthusiastically, and effectively. We have countless examples in the Bible itself. The mission of the church in this century isn't all that different from the first century, after all. Our own age daily resembles more and more that earlier age: advanced in technology and learning, but empty and impoverished in spirit; spiritually attuned, but pagan at heart.

But you and I have come to the kingdom for just such a time as this. We are not driven by nostalgia; we are not interested in merely recovering and reduplicating an earlier era. This is certainly not sixteenth-century Germany nor even nineteenth-century Missouri. We are no longer planting a religious colony on these shores, but we are building in this dying world an outpost of heaven itself, built squarely on the unchanging foundation of the apostles and prophets with Jesus Christ as the chief cornerstone. We are nothing less than ambassadors for Christ, for He Himself continues to make His appeal through us to rescue men and women of every language, people, and tongue who are by nature slaves to sin and under the sentence of death. We are emissaries of the eternal city of God in a world that is merely temporary and fast fading away. We have been given an eternal gospel to proclaim fearlessly and faithfully. We are called therefore simply to be the church in our time: to stand up and proclaim not only in word but in deed as well what we have been given to believe, to teach, and to confess. The mission in twenty-first century America is the same as the mission in the first century Roman world: to preach, teach, worship, evangelize, and carry on the church's mission in an antagonistic culture and pluralistic world in a manner that is faithful to Him who said: I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me. (John 14:6)

As it was then, so it is now. What was true for the church in the apostolic age remains true for the church in every age until Jesus Christ comes again in glory. To the degree that she remains faithful in both word and deed to the Lord who bought her with His blood, she will continue to live under Him in righteousness, innocence, and blessedness. The lesson of the early church is one we will do well to learn for the mission to our own godless world: despite external persecution and internal conflict and struggle, the church in the apostolic age grew dramatically under the blessing of the Holy Spirit. She grew not by imitating the culture or setting her sails to the prevailing winds of the day, but by

bringing to a dark and dying world a deliberately countercultural but nevertheless transcendent truth, resplendent and shining with God's own light and life, namely that God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself, not counting their trespasses against them. (2 Corinthians 5:19)

This conference (and, God willing, others like it) has been called by the President of Synod to address the theological issues that threaten the unity of the Synod. In consultation with the Commission on Theology and Church Relations and the Council of Presidents, the doctrine and practice of church fellowship was selected as the first topic to be discussed. For all the debate in the Missouri Synod about the section of the report to the 2001 convention entitled "cases of discretion," precious little discussion has taken place regarding the report itself, entitled "The Lutheran Understanding of Church Fellowship." I believe this is symptomatic of the unfortunate tendency in our midst to divide up sides and come out fighting Without carefully looking at the issues that lie at the heart of the matter. In this case, considerably more light and less heat would be generated if we spend time looking at the Report on Church Fellowship itself instead of focusing on the convention workbook report. You will perhaps recall that the report was intended as "a study of our church's confessional nature (why we are who we are) and our fellowship principles and practices (why we do what we do)." ("The Lutheran Understanding of Church Fellowship," CTCR Report, 2000, p. 29) As a member of the CTCR during the triennium that the report was prepared, I can report that we were ecstatic that the Commission was able to fulfill its mandate on such a controversial issue and adopt its report unanimously without one dissenting vote.

Time does not permit me, of course, to rehearse the contents of that report for you, but we would do well to recall a few of the salient Scriptural and Confessional principles on Church Fellowship highlighted there: (cf. CTCR Report, pp. 30-32)

1. Though the church's internal fellowship with God and with one another is constituted by faith in Christ and is a completed reality, external unity is not. Rather, external fellowship in the church is constituted by a common confession regarding the marks of the church: namely the pure preaching of the saving Gospel of Christ and the faithful administration of His holy Sacraments.
2. Faithfulness to apostolic doctrine sets both the basis and the boundary for church fellowship in the New Testament, for true teaching identifies orthodox churches and separates them from heterodox churches with their false teachings.
3. Therefore to distinguish between orthodox and heterodox churches is not to be mean-spirited or cantankerous but to be genuinely evangelical in word and deed. Since for us as Lutheran confessors a church lives by pure doctrine, false teachings simply must be clearly recognized and openly rejected.
4. To practice church fellowship only with orthodox church bodies therefore is not to be sectarian or separatistic but to be thoroughly and consistently faithful to the one Scriptural doctrine, especially, I might add, in an age that denies that there is such a thing as objective truth. To retain our practice regarding altar and pulpit fellowship is therefore our solemn obligation in our time, not merely out of faithfulness to our Lord, but out of concern for the souls He bought with His life-giving blood.

Finally, what should we say about cases of discretion? Let's not get the cart before the horse. Here again, I suggest we look at the central issues rather than debating endlessly over external matters, getting caught up in bureaucratic struggles over by-laws and subjective debates over the meaning of

this term or that term. The last thing this world of ours needs is the spectacle of a church body trying to clarify what the meaning of the word “is” is. What this world does need, however, is the pure and saving gospel of Jesus Christ, the Father’s one and only Son, who is therefore the only name given among men whereby we must be saved. In conferences like this and others, therefore, it is our duty as pastors, teachers, and laity in the church to clarify and assist one another in “recognizing, promoting, expressing, conserving, and defending (our) confessional unity in the true faith.” (LCMS Constitution, III.6) When we work toward that kind of doctrinal unity, cases of pastoral discretion will no longer be a bone of contention among us, for our pastors will find themselves more and more in harmony in practice to the very degree that they are united in doctrine.

In short, charity will prevail among us when we are united in a common confession of the one Scriptural faith. When we work at achieving a common confession, we will find unity in practice as well. So if we want less tension among us, it’s not enough to just agree to get along. Instead, we must speak the truth in love for the sake of both love and truth. We can’t afford to compromise either one; truth and love are partners in this enterprise. We dare never carelessly ignore truth for love’s sake on the one hand nor callously dispense with love for truth’s sake on the other. Charity demands the clear articulation of a common God-given doctrine, in other words. That’s where we have to begin. It may be a long, hard road, but it will be well worth it in the end. For this long, hard road just happens to be the road that leads us home; home to the doctrinal unity we all yearn for. And the results will be well worth the effort. Real doctrinal unity will erase the suspicion and fear that plagues us. Then there will be not an artificial lock-step conformity imposed from the outside, but rather joyful harmony in a practice that flows from and vigorously confesses our common confession of the one Scriptural faith.

In summary, doctrine determines practice and practice is nothing less than doctrine in action. This is the path to both genuine unity and faithful mission that by the Holy Spirit flows from and leads to the Father’s boundless love –His charity - in Jesus Christ His only Son, our Lord. May that God-given charity prevail among us now and always!

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Conflict, Confession and Unity

by Thomas R. Zehnder

Addressing Doctrinal Issues Faithfully and Fraternally For the Sake of Christ's Mission

During a temple service in eastern Europe, as the Great Shema prayer was intoned, half the congregants stood up, and half remained seated. The half that was seated started yelling at those standing to sit down, and the ones standing demanded that those sitting stand.

The newly appointed rabbi, learned as he was in the To rah, the Mishna, and the commentaries, didn't know what to do. The congregation leaders suggested that he consult a house-bound, 98 year old man who was one of the original founders of their temple. The rabbi agreed, hoping that this wise man would be able to tell him what the actual temple tradition was. So he went to the venerable man's nursing home, accompanied by a representative of each of the two factions.

The one whose followers stood during the "Sh'ma" asked, "Is it not the tradition to stand during this prayer?"

The old man answered, "No, that is not the tradition!"

The one whose followers sat asked, "Is it not then the tradition to sit during the "Sh'ma?"

The old man answered, "No, that is not the tradition!"

The rabbi said to the old man, "But the congregants fight all the time, yelling at each other about whether they should sit or stand."

The old man interrupted exclaiming, "THAT is the tradition."

Ours is similar, evidently ingrained in the warp and woof of the fabric of our Synod. We have always been opinionated, taking stands on issues, which once made, are difficult to change. Nonetheless, our church's history records that indeed we have changed our collective mind now and again over issues as divergent as life insurance and prayer. For we are a "Synod" a strange sounding word which indicates we are on the same road, and that implies a measure of unanimity on our part. And so we struggle for that union of thought and practice, struggling to maintain a practice that is in harmony with the doctrine we hold to be true. The struggle is tough - and in our striving for that unity, our collective beards are dripping, not so much with the oil of Psalm 133, but from the wounds which our struggles evoke. And that's a sad thing. It hurts us. It brings shame to the Body of Christ, of which we are also a part.

In my mind the ongoing enrichment, health, and even growth of our church body will be commensurate to the respect we give to one another as men and women who stand under the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, as women and men who are brought together by God's gracious and free gift of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. We are forever bound to one another and will be spending an eternity together at the foot of the Throne of God and the Lamb. So if and when you and another disagree wholeheartedly on this side of the river, let that be done in such manner befitting those who from their hearts know and believe the ultimate truths stated above. *For how will brothers and sisters who have defamed one another on earth speak well to one another in heaven.* An idle thought perhaps, but one which haunts me now and again.

We are here to talk about such things. One might put it this way: How do we as Lutherans who have been united forever with our Lord Jesus in his life, death, and resurrection, how shall we live out this faith and make confession of this Savior in our days and in the confusing circumstances that confront us from day to day? Each of us comes into the arena of making such decisions from varied and equally valid life experiences. Because of this our decisions will vary and even change. For example, a particular decision as to how we make a witness to the world of our Lord and to the Faith on a particular day and time, may be completely different at a future time, because of the particular circumstance in which we find ourselves. For life experience and circumstance teach us and hopefully give us a new depth of understanding of the mystery and will of God.

This is not implying that truth is relative. I don't believe that. Discomforted Pilate throws out his response to Jesus who has been speaking about truth, "What is truth?" (Jn 18:35) When I am wont to ask that question, I must remember that the ultimately true answer to the question is the answer of Jesus, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life." (Jn 14:6), his words to Thomas who has in a somewhat frustrated way insisted, "How can we know the way?..." .

Jesus is THE Truth. Someone compared Truth to an island in a sea of unknown. As you study and pray and reflect on Jesus the Truth, your knowledge of that which you deem to be true grows. Thus that island of Truth becomes larger and expands within that sea of unknown. But as that happens, the shoreline touching the unknown also grows and there is the dilemma.

My Dad, in heaven now, was an LCMS pastor - so I guess you could say that there is hope, even for pastors,... he said to me, over a beer, in 1970 when he was 68 years of age:

"Tommy, I used to know all the answer when I was a young buck. But the older I get, the less I know for sure about a lot of things, but one thing I know. I know Jesus. He is my truth."

And Dad was a man who held on to the truth of Scripture. Every word inspired and to be believed. The last time I saw him was Advent 1971 when he was 69 years old. He preached at my little church in Columbus, Georgia for a German language Advent Service, "ADer Herr ist mein Hirte." Then he drove to my brother Ron's home in Ohio, suffered a stroke on Christmas Day and died before the end of the year. And now he is in the presence of Jesus, the Way, the Truth, and the Life, the One he loved so much and who loved him.

The point: I like to talk about my dad and thus honor him is one point, but his holding on to truth is another point - and committed to Jesus the Truth with all his heart, there was in his ministry, and this is the case for so many of us, a great flexibility and freedom.

Recent events in our dear LCMS have caused so much concern, and have raised the broad issue of fellowship, what we can do and what we cannot do, to dizzying heights. Most of us have gotten angry about it, no matter what our viewpoint - for we come at it from different positions, understandings, and life experiences.

As you, I have read and re-read the various documents on church fellowship, ecumenism and the like, which over the years have been brought to our Synod, mostly through the CTCR for discussion and some for adoption. I really like them, at least most of them. For they reflect the scriptural and confessional basis upon which we have always stood. Basically they attempt to set parameters, and say in effect, this far and no further. I also like the sensibility which prevails in most of them when they invite and encourage sanctified common sense to enter into our decision making. They talk

about the cases of discretion that must be allowed for, and I like the language which calls for charity when differences of opinion are obvious as to what one does in any given situation. That's true Missouri Synod spirit at its best. It reminds me of the greater interpretation that Jesus puts on the Ten Commandments or the Sabbath Day laws, which goes beyond the words to the greater reality to which the words point.

I indicated earlier that in my opinion, life's experiences train us for ministry. I learned not to steal when I was 9 years old. On a summer evening I rode my old green fender-less Schwinn bicycle to Graves Drug Store in Winfield, Kansas. No money at all, but a vivid imagination and I loved Batman comics. Standing in front of the magazine stand at Graves, with great and ashamedly demonic skill honed mysteriously in my previous 9 years of existence - *mea culpa* - I tucked a delicious Batman comic book under my shirt and rode off with it. Fortunately in-bred proclivity to Lutheran guilt tormented my conscience, and mid way home, I turned back to the drug store, found Mr. Graves and confessed my thievery. He talked sternly to me, and said, "Tommy, I forgive you." Great charity there. And I was taught about the ministry of forgiveness.

Mr. Clark was dying with full-blown lung cancer. As a merchant marine he had come into the Yokohama port years before, met and married Eimiko Fujiwara, only daughter of a leading family, wealthy for generations through import and export businesses. Mr. Clark was officially an Episcopalian. But circumstances dictated that I become his pastor in his time of trial.

Eimiko was a Buddhist, sort of, but when I visited Mr. Clark weekly for devotion, prayer, bible reading, and just talking, she would be there quietly listening. Then Mr. Clark worsened and on a particular day came to the point of death. Emiko called and told me to come quickly, and I did. We prayed as usual and it was obvious that this would be his last day on earth. I read to him from Holy Scripture, passages and words of comfort, including the passages from the prophet Isaiah which he had come to love, "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you..." (Is 43:1- 2). I left thinking I would not see him here alive again.

Next morning, Mrs. Clark called. I expected her to tell me that he had died, but instead it was "Something has happened. Please come back." I went and found a new Mr. Clark. Still desperately ill, but with a look of joy and peace and relief on his face. He told me, "Jesus came to me. He stood there." he said, pointing to a shoji paper wall across the tatami room. "He spoke to me." "What did he say to you?" I asked. "Frank, you are mine. I have redeemed you and very soon I will come to take you home with me." Frank was a happy man.

I returned home, amazed at this story. As I walk in the door, the phone rings, and it is Mrs. Clark, and she said, "Iki o totta." He died.

Now comes the dilemma. Mrs. Clark comes from a prominent Yokohama family with old money and prestige. Of course, there will be a Buddhist funeral, this for the sake of the family and the life long Buddhist connection. Now mind you, Mr. Clark is a Christian and Eimiko told me she wanted him to have a Christian funeral to which I readily agreed. But the Buddhist stuff, what was this. Unionism didn't quite fit, but would I be guilty of syncretism, although probably I didn't know that word, especially in Japanese. But now I do, and it is "*Shosetsukongoshugi*." Literally it means "an amalgamation of all kinds of varied opinions - ism."

Now let me tell you what happened. Come with me to the Fujiwara home, a magnificent old Japanese style home built at the turn of the 19th century. Mr. Takahashi and two others from Izumi

Lutheran Church, the parish I served in Yokohama, were with me. We took hymnals, bibles, prayer cards, candle sticks, and cross. While at that time not yet terribly proficient in the Japanese language, I could communicate. Scared to death, I entered unknown territory, three Christian friends at my side, four really, but one was dead, a wet behind the ears missionary of the Gospel into Buddhist territory.

Arriving an hour before the ceremonies were to start, the monks and priests and many folks from the community were there already. A prominent family was burying one of their own. Walking through the entrance gardens toward the house, a Buddhist priest clad in magnificent robe preceded us as we made our way to the main entrance of the house, throwing salt over his left shoulder to ward off any evil spirits who might venture in and bother Mr. Clark as he wandered toward wherever it was that he was supposed to be going in the world of the dead. The large assembly room in the home was packed with people. The sonorous but disturbing Buddhist chant was coming along nicely, the air was thick with smoke of incense, the sweet smell overwhelming. At front through the haze, the open pine box in which Mr. Clark lay was visible. The Buddhist service went on for an hour and finally concluded. And now it was my turn.

I have to tell you, the first thought I had at that time was not "Do they think that by being here I am giving credence to their service and religion." Rather it was, "OK, now what do I do." Being a Lutheran pastor I determined that we needed the cross and lighted candles up front. My three members and I moved the large pots of Buddhist stuff from Mr. Clark's side as well as the rice and orange offerings that were there, and in their place put the candles and the cross. Then, candles lighted, we were ready to begin.

We passed out copies of the Sambika, the hymnal (at that time the only one we had was a pan-Christian book - but it did have A Mighty Fortress in Japanese, so that sort of helped), the Bible, and some prayer cards I had prepared which included the Lord's Prayer. We sang Christian hymns, new to virtually all of the participants - and they really liked them. Then we opened the bible to pertinent passages such as, yes, Psalm 23, John 14, and that Isaiah passage that Mr. Clark liked. And after reading each one I spoke a word or two about the appropriate meaning and application. We prayed, they all joined in the Lord's prayer. We had a benediction, and then it was over. And when it was over, so many of the attendees came to me and said how nice it was, and wondered if they could have a Christian service at their funeral too. I think I probably said, "Well, when you are getting ready to die, come talk to me." or something like that. There were two who asked about our church, they were invited, and wouldn't you know it, they came, were caught by the Gospel, instructed, baptized and now they belong to us and we to them forever.

And Mrs. Clark, she announced that she eventually wanted to go where her husband had gone, that is to heaven - and could that be arranged? And so, conversation, teaching of the Faith, prayer, baptism, communion, that became a part of her life too. That was also the case for her little boy, the young son of Eimiko and Frank Clark.

I don't know if everyone here would have consented to be an addendum to a Buddhist funeral service, perhaps you may have thought it to be a compromise of the truth to do those services in that way. Perhaps some may have told Mrs. Clark it would not be possible to do such a thing, and I don't think I would be in line criticizing anyone for that. But I made a decision, the best one I could, and in my opinion it turned out pretty darn good. The Gospel was shared, its power touched the hearts of some of the people there, and because of that the Kingdom of God was increased - all according to the design of our Lord which was on the books long before I ever came around, that

design spoken of by Jesus when he said, "The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost." (Lk 19:10) And "Go therefore and teach all nations..." (Mt 28:19).

Some may say that it is OK to do things like that in foreign lands because of this or that, but I don't know. Seems to me if it is good to do it there, then probably it is not bad to do it here. I have problems with the logic of it all when it is OK here but not there. But wait a moment, let's think about that. Having said what I said, I would also like to say, you know sometimes you will do something in a certain circumstance, but for whatever reason in another place and time you may not do the same thing - such as drink beer so as to offend someone who thinks its wrong, or to drink it to express Christian freedom. That's something like deciding to eat meat offered to idols or not to eat it depending on the circumstances. I seem to remember that some in the church were criticized for such things, unjustly. And then there is circumcision - shall we or shall we not? Titus, Timothy, one of you will be circumcised and one of you won't. Now, who wants to volunteer?

Perhaps I am playing too much, a little fast and loose, and I apologize if it offends you, But it is true that we need to be cautious about condemning the action of another brother or sister also in the area of fellowship and times of discretion. For we must allow and support this business of responsible freedom to do what we think is proper at a given time and situation. And we when we disagree, we are called upon by our own synod's wisdom to view another person's action with charity! Not to judge one so quickly and with such certainty. Oh, I need to pay heed to that.

George Carlin said, "You know, we have heard the adage, 'Don't criticize a man until you walk a mile in his shoes.' Good advice of course. Why? Because then, when you do criticize him, you will be a mile away, and you will have his shoes."

A friend recently wrote a paper on "Jesus, the Law-Breaker." It was well done, but I complained about the title. I suggested that it be titled rather, "Jesus the Law-Fulfiller" or something like that. But he withstood and kept his dumb title. But I understand what he was saying. For Jesus did break some rules (Mk 2:24), but not just as an "in your face" breaking of the rule. But rather he was attacking a mechanical spirit-less misunderstanding of the Law. He interpreted the Ten Commandments in a radical way (Mt 5:17 ff et.al), and took people to task for their slavish bondage to Sabbath Day laws which, while they were meant for the welfare of people, had been turned into routines which could do great damage. "The Sabbath is made for man, not man for the Sabbath" (Mk 2:27 et.al.).

Laws take on a life of their own. But Jesus gets to the heart of the matter and in breaking the outward form of the rule is really keeping it at its heart. In like manner, our rules, resolutions, by laws and all this stuff, good and well intended as it may be, must be utilized not just for the sake of the rule, but for the sake of the people of God. Of course!

We are hear for the sake of Christ's mission. There are of course many ways to describe that wondrous mission, but I like the one mentioned above, "The Son of Man is come to seek and save the lost." The Great Commission of our Lord Jesus pushes us into Christ's mission. That is why we are here - and if our rules for fellowship get in the way of that, then they should go away. And that is not to say that we will not be faithful to our Lord Jesus. But we know that being faithful to the Lord Jesus Christ puts us on a road of unexpected turns and difficult choices. Sometimes we may err, but the Lord Jesus will cover that with his forgiveness and move us on to the next crisis.

Naaman was a leper (2 Kg 5), the poor man, with not much hope. He heard about Elisha from a little girl servant. "Too bad, she said, that you are not in my country, for there is a prophet there who

would be able to heal you.” So Naaman goes there and takes his chariot and horses to the front door and has his servant knock. He is chagrined because a servant answers the door. He is wanting a grand show, with the waving of hands and the shouting to the gods above for healing. “Can you cure me?” Elisha answers, “Yes, dunk yourself in the River Jordan seven times and you will be cleansed.” Naaman doesn’t like that because he has cleaner rivers where he lives and he would not have had to come so far to this dreary land. But the servants prevail, “You might as well do it. What do you have to lose?” Thus the beginning of Pascal’s Wager.

He is cleansed and in his joy and delight he becomes a child of God, leaping with joy and praising the Lord for his deliverance. But then comes the challenge. His new found faith compels him to look at his life and what he does. He sees trouble - and this is the trouble “Master,” he says to Elisha, “when my master goes to worship his god Rimmon, (aka Baal) I have to go with him to the Temple. And when he bows down to Rimmon, I have to do that too, because he is not able to do that without me. What should I do?”

Now we understand the dilemma, for it would be ours as well. Naaman worries that he will give the impression to bystanders that he too is worshiping Rimmon. So he comes to Elisha “What should I do?” And Elisha says to Naaman, “Go in peace.” My smart bible notes say, “*Elisha does not directly address Naaman’s problem of conscience, but commended him to the leading and grace of God as he returned to his pagan environment and official responsibilities.*” Not bad.

Incredible words from Elisha, this same prophet who has a temper that causes him to sick she bears on a bunch of kids who shouted once at him, according to the KJV version, “Go up, thou baldhead, go up, thou baldhead!”, this one tells troubled Naaman, “Go in peace.”

And so we are faced with all sorts of decisions as to how to properly proclaim the faith we hold in our hearts in the public and church forum. I think we do well to say to one another as we do our best to be faithful to Christ, “Go in peace.”

We will never get it right, never really right as we move about on this side of eternity.

And I am not sure that we are called to do things right. Rather we are called to do the right thing. And if as we do those things we make mistakes as we go, we support and comfort one another with the same attitude that our Lord has for us, “Come to me, you who are weak and heavy laden, (and are always messing things up in my church), come to me and I will give you rest.”

It is time to stop all the talking. I think we have said enough about it. We have honed and parsed the language more than enough, we have debated, argued, accused. It is time to stop all that and get to the mission that the Lord of the Church has graciously and with a great sense of optimism given to us, to bring the Good News of the Gospel to all people. So “Go in peace” and do it.

Thomas R. Zehnder
Williamsburg, Virginia
August 5, 2002

Greetings and comments from the President

by Rev. Dr. Gerald B. Kieschnick

Greetings and Comments from the President

Grace and peace to you, dear brothers and sisters, from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

At the June 4, 2002, funeral of former LCMS First Vice President Augie Mennicke, I stated that we in The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod have our share of challenges and shortcomings as a human institution. But we certainly know how to do funerals!

Following last night's worship service, I would add: "And we certainly know how to sing wonderful Christian hymns!" Thank you and thanks to all who were involved in planning and leading that wonderful worship experience!

1. **I have a confession to make.** During my ten years as District President, a number of pastors expressed to me their contention that District Pastoral Conferences should place greater emphasis on Theological study and reflection, rather than, or in addition to, a major focus on the practical aspects of accomplishing the mission of the church. In spite of the fact that our District conducted an annual Theological Convocation devoted specifically and exclusively to Theological topics, I agree that it would have been helpful had additional time also been spent on specific Theological matters in other Conferences. I encourage you to consider this important matter in your respective Districts and Circuits, as well.
2. **I have an affirmation to offer.** A number of months ago, when I asked the Commission on Theology and Church Relations, in consultation with the Council of Presidents, to plan and conduct a series of Theological Convocations around the Synod to address matters of Theological importance facing The LCMS, I had nothing more specific in my mind than a number of similar previous experiences in a couple of Districts of the Synod, and trusted that the godly members of the Commission and of the Council would be able to do just fine without Presidential micro-management.

It is with no reservation whatsoever that I hereby publicly affirm both the Commission and the Council for their unanimous support of the proposal of the joint planning committee and express my sincere appreciation for their significant expenditure of time and energy in planning and conducting this first model Convocation. In addition, I wish to thank publicly the planning committee, our Convocation facilitator, the table facilitators, our chaplain, our Bible study leader, our presenters, our Convocation coordinator, the CTCR staff and the President's staff and last, but certainly not least, Thrivent Financial for Lutherans, for all their faithful and generous contributions to this Convocation.

It also is my privilege to thank each and every one of you for the time and energy you have spent these past days in coming to this place and for your faithful participation in a fairly arduous schedule that I realize may be difficult for folks back home to comprehend fully, since this Convocation was held at "Camelback Inn...Resort Golf Club & Spa". I hope you enjoyed the golf and the spa as much as I did. Rrrright! Thank you also for your willingness to assist in planning future Convocations in

your respective Synodical Districts. You will all be in my prayers as you do so in the months and years ahead.

It is my belief that it is critical to see these initial Convocations as only the beginning of a renewed endeavor on the part of the leaders and members of the Synod to regularly participate in the challenging and time-consuming task of listening to, understanding, applying and coming to agreement on the meaning of clear passages of Holy Scripture on the basis of which our covenants of love may be renewed, refocused, confirmed and established.

Without such genuine commitment to the Scriptures of the Old and the New Testament as the written Word of God and the only rule and norm of faith and of practice and to all the Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church as a true and unadulterated statement and exposition of the Word of God, our efforts to achieve genuine unity and God-pleasing concord will surely fail. But with such commitment, not only cerebrally but also viscerally, these efforts can do nothing but succeed, under the blessing of our gracious God.

3. **I have a number of observations to share** , based on my extensive travels throughout the Synod these past eleven months, participating in many District Pastoral Conferences, meeting with District Presidents, Boards of Directors, District staff members, pastors, teachers and lay leaders from many congregations of the LCMS:
 1. ***The LCMS is a graying, declining church body. But I believe that Christian education endeavors, human care opportunities and re-energized mission strategies provide critical opportunities for transformation of the LCMS into a vibrant, vital gathering of Christians in mission to the world.***
 2. ***The LCMS is partially fractured by a party spirit that has, in some respects, replaced the mission zeal it may have once possessed. But there are many, many exceptions in our congregations, institutions and entities that give me great hope for the future of our beloved Synod.***
 3. ***The LCMS is held together by the grace of God, by the commitment of pastors, teachers, people and congregations to that grace of God and to its theological confession of that grace at work in the world, along with the passion of many to communicate this confession through word and deed to the unsaved billions of people in the world.***

In the midst of these areas of challenge and opportunity, the mission of the LCMS must move boldly ahead. That mission is stated as follows:

“In grateful response to God’s grace and empowered by the Holy Spirit through Word and Sacraments, the mission of the LCMS is vigorously to make known the love of Christ by word and deed within our churches, communities and the world.”

Three specific illustrations of our efforts to accomplish this mission will suffice:

-  ***Shake the Earth!*** -- An initiative to reach 100 million people with the Gospel of Christ in the next 15 years, in partnership and alliance with congregations, institutions, agencies and partner churches throughout the world.

- ✍ ✍ **For the Sake of the Church!** -- An initiative to double the number of LCMS students in our colleges and universities and to raise \$400 million in endowments to support the financial needs of these students.

- ✍ ✍ **Serving with Joy!** -- An initiative to provide answers to the twin questions:
 - o How does the LCMS increase the number of servant leaders entering a vocation of church work?

 - o How does the LCMS help those in a vocation of church work be joyful, competent and faithful as they serve?

All these initiatives are borne of the mission God has given to His church on earth.

- ✍ ✍ It is my conviction that we must begin to honestly view as simply unacceptable the fact that we are surrounded by people who do not know Jesus as their Lord and Savior from sin.

- ✍ ✍ It must be of utmost concern to the Lutheran Church and to each member thereof that such individuals are on their way to eternal condemnation.

- ✍ ✍ We must, in faithful and winsome fashion, share the Good News of what God has done through Christ in order that those who accept by faith His undeserved love will spend eternity with Him, in heaven, forever.

- ✍ ✍ Today is the day to begin to refocus our efforts on the mission that Christ has given His church on earth, and to do so with renewed vigor, energy and passion!

My friends, this is not a game.

- ✍ ✍ We have not the luxury of time and energy spent on incessant internal purification at the expense of the eternal destiny of the souls of men and women for whom Christ died, but who know not His name and have accepted not His saving grace.

- ✍ ✍ Instead, for the sake of the Gospel mission, we must be not only helplessly concerned about but also sincerely committed in our efforts “vigorously to make known the love of Christ by word and deed within our churches, communities and the world.”

In an attempt at a brief condensation of all the above, I share with you a succinct summary of my hopes, dreams and visions for the LCMS:

- ✍ ✍ **One Mission—Witnessing the Gospel to the ends of the earth...**
 - o Isaiah writes, *“The Lord says, ‘It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.’”* Isaiah 49:6

 - o Jesus said, *“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”* Acts 1:8

- ✍ ✍ **One Message—Jesus Christ is the Savior of the world...**

o St. Paul writes, *“There is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all...”* 1 Timothy 2:5

o *“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled the world to himself through Christ, not counting men’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.”* 2 Corinthians 5:17-19

 **One People—United by God’s love in Jesus Christ...**

o Again, St. Paul writes, *“Stand firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the Gospel...”* Philippians 1:27

o Jesus said, *“I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me—just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd.”* John 10:14-16

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

 I commend you for your participation in this model Theological Convocation.

 More importantly, I commend you for your faithfulness and for your courage as a leader of the LCMS in the mission that God has given His church on earth.

 I truly thank you for our partnership in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, Savior of the world and Lord of the universe.

 *“Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved”* (Acts 4:12).

It is in that salvation that you and I rejoice as we receive the absolute assurance of the forgiveness of our sin through the blood of Jesus Christ, shed on Calvary’s cross. Like you, my friends in Christ, I kneel before the throne of my Heavenly Father every day and every night, confessing my sin, seeking His forgiveness and reveling in the joy that comes alone through His grace and mercy!

Thank you and God bless you!

Gerald B. Kieschnick, President
The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod

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