

October 21-23, 2003 Pastors' Conference Wenatchee, Washington

My Fellow Redeemed in Christ,

In Psalm 131 verse one King David writes: "**How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity**" (NIV). I suppose we often take things for granted until we no longer have them. If it is good and pleasant when brothers live together in unity; then it is not good and it is painful when brothers do not live together in unity. I say this not to be judgmental, but to express my own pain and frustration, and perhaps yours, that are caused by the divisions that are among us in the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod.

Truth and love seem to be the keys to such unity. Truth and love must never be put into conflict with each other. They go together. In Ephesians 4:15 Paul says that we are to "**speak the truth in love**" (NIV). There is always the danger that zeal for truth will create self-righteousness, hypocrisy and even hatred. Yes, the truth must be spoken, but with love. The truth must not only be for the glory of God, but for the good of our neighbor. Love then determines how the truth is to be spoken. Love forms the words and the approach to bring the truth to my neighbor. I must confess to you that in my zeal for truth I may at times not sound very loving. For this I ask your forgiveness. If I sound unloving at times, it is because of my own pain and frustration, and perhaps and yes, perhaps even self-righteousness; for we can never underestimate the power of our own flesh. And yet, I do not believe that I am motivated by hatred of other people. Not that this excuses anything unloving on my part. It is true that some of us may speak the truth in love better than others. Perhaps because of my own shortcomings, I admire and respect people who do this so much better than I do. And yet, none of us does this perfectly. And so this calls for self-examination and repentance for all of us when and where necessary.

But Paul not only tells us to speak the truth in love, but in 1 Corinthians 13:6 he says that "**Love rejoices in the truth.**" And because love rejoices in the truth he says in 2 Corinthians 13:8 that "**We cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth**" (NIV). There is always the danger that we will emphasize love to such a degree that truth is neglected or minimized or marginalized or in some other way distorted. A saying such as "**doctrine divides, but love unites**" only deepens our divisions and puts obstacles in our way to reconciliation. For whether intended or not, saying that love unites and doctrine divides implies that on one side there are loving people and on the other side are unloving people who are overly concerned with doctrine. The implication is that it is unloving to talk about the doctrines that divide us. Of course, this discourages any kind of meaningful dialogue. This too calls for self-examination and for repentance when and where necessary. Thus, our divisions can be explained, at least in part, in our failures to keep truth and love in their proper relationships with each other.

But I think that there is another source of our divisions as well. And it occurs whenever we focus on symptoms and consequences of our divisions instead of talking about the core issues that divide us. Our Lutheran confessions know a little bit about controversy and division and give us some guidance. In the "**Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article XXIV, on the Mass**" (p. 259:10 Kolb's edition, 2000) we read: "*We need to remind our readers that this is the point at issue here. Just as Aeschines reminded the judges that, like wrestlers fighting for their position, both parties in a controversy must deal only with the central point of the controversy and not be allowed to wander off into side issues. In addition, a knowledge of the central point at issue will facilitate an evaluation of the arguments presented by both sides.*" Here our confessions remind us that we need to be careful to focus in on the real issues, the real problems. I wonder how often we talk past one another because we are focused on secondary issues and not really getting to the core problem. Obviously, the chances of reconciliation and unity are diminished if we are not talking about the real problem but only related issues. Can we really say what the problem is in the Missouri Synod? Can we say what the problems are?

The second thing we learn from our confessions is that God's word and "reliable writings" are to explain the controversy as we read in the "**Solid Declaration, Rule and Norm**" (p. 526:10 Kolb's edition, 2000): "*Therefore, necessity demands explanation of these disputed articles on the basis of God's word and reliable writings, so that those with a proper Christian understanding could recognize which position regarding the points under dispute is in accord with God's word and the Christian Augsburg Confession and which is not, and so that Christians of good will, who are concerned about the truth might protect and guard themselves from the errors and corruptions that have appeared among us.*" But, even here, there might be a problem. For if we are divided on our understanding of Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions, how then can we solve the controversies that divided us? Indeed, if different hermeneutics are applied to Scripture and to the Lutheran Confessions, how then can we solve our problems?

With the time I have left I simply want to identify some of the issues that divide us and suggest some questions on each issue that must be addressed if we are to be reconciled and walk together as one. I certainly don't mean to imply that my questions are the only questions. And perhaps, someone else might be able to suggest even better questions.

I don't remember where the phrase originated but the issues that divide us have been summarized with the little saying: "**Wine, women and Song.**" I will take them in that order.

We begin with **wine: closed communion and fellowship issues**. Concerning closed communion do we really need to be taking a lot of time and energy arguing about the letter "**d**". I'm referring to the "**d**" in the word "**closed**" versus the word "**close**". Is it really critical to be talking about the differences between the term "**closed**" communion and the term "**close**" communion? From my vantage point, it seems that time and energy could be better used by talking about the substance or essence of fellowship at the Lord's table. What is the basis of Christian fellowship? Do we disagree on this issue because of hermeneutical differences? If so, what are these differences? Do we need a Bible passage that says: "**Thou shalt practice closed communion**" before we can practice closed communion? Or can the Bible communicate such a practice without such an explicit statement? And if not, does such an approach threaten such a basic teaching as "**the Trinity/the Triune God**"? For that language is not explicit in the Bible either, but the language of the Trinity is based on deductions. Are deductions as binding as explicit statements? Does it matter to us that the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Church practice closed communion? Where did they get this concept and practice? Does it matter to us what the practice of the church was in the first four centuries? Are those passages from our confessions that speak about proper instruction prior to communing still relevant today? Does the fact that the authors of our confessions refused fellowship with the reformed and with Rome have any significance for us today? What do these references have to say to the practice of closed communion in our day?

The next subject is **women: women as pastors**. It seems that some basic questions must be answered here too. Are those Bible passages that speak about husbands and wives still valid today? Is a husband in 2003 the head of his wife as Paul says? Should a wife in 2003 submit to her husband? Or are those passages restricted by time and culture? Closely related, are those passages that have been historically used to support male pastors restricted by time and culture? Or are those passages for all times and all cultures? And how do we determine if these passages are valid today or not? What is our hermeneutic? Do we have the same hermeneutic? If so why do we come to different conclusions? Or do we come to different conclusions because we have different hermeneutics? How much influence has the modern women's movement been on the church? What is the relationship between church and culture?

And finally we come to **song: worship**. Is this controversy simply about change? True some people just don't like change. But is it that simple? Or could the issue be concerned about the

necessity of change and the nature of the change? Why do we differ over the necessity of change? Why do some think that a church can grow using the liturgy; while others see the liturgy as a hindrance to growth? Is liturgy the real issue? Or is the real issue the way liturgy is done? Is the real issue not liturgy, but excellence? Is the issue not the liturgy, but our rapidly changing culture? How much of our contemporary culture is affecting our ideas of worship? Such things as individualism, consumerism, entertainment, pragmatism, technological methods and statistics, narcissism, therapeutic models, and secularization. Do these cultural realities matter? Do we embrace them in worship? What is the relationship between culture and worship? What is the relationship of worship and evangelism? Is all change good? Is it legitimate to discuss the nature of the change? What is the relationship of style and substance? Can style and substance truly be separated? Or is there a connection between style and substance that may or may not be obvious? Is there any real difference between having a **word and music ministry** and having a "**word and sacrament ministry**"? How does the concept of adiaphora determine our course of action? On the basis of adiaphora, something neither commanded nor forbidden, could the pastor ever dress up as a clown to lead worship? What is the basis for our evaluation? How we answer all these questions will determine our course of action.

More recently, there seems to be a growing concern about **the relationship of Synodical resolutions and bureaucracy to the authority of the Scriptures and our Confessions**, but because of time constraints I must pass over this subject.

As those who trust in Jesus Christ, we live under God's grace and we seek his forgiveness. In this we rejoice. But we must be careful not to use his grace and forgiveness to excuse either unloving behavior or to justify doctrine and practice that are contrary to Scripture. Ah!..but that's the problem isn't it? We can't seem to agree on what is and what is not Scriptural. What is or is not confessional.

Finally, I fear that if we do not find Scriptural and Confessional resolutions to the problems that divide us, it will be only a matter of time until there will be some sort of split in the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. Yes, I know as well as you do the promises of God for his church. But his church is bigger than the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. His church was here long before the Missouri-Synod existed. And his church will still be his church even if the Missouri Synod becomes a footnote in the pages of church history. But I also believe, as I'm sure you do, that God has used the Missouri Synod for his glory, for the good of his people, and for the extension of his kingdom. And it would be nice to think that he will continue to do so for a long time to come. So, we pray not simply that his will be done, but that his will be done among us.