

THAT THEY MAY BE ONE

A Scriptural and Confessional Statement Concerning Church Fellowship and Public Prayer

PREFACE

On September 11, 2001, multiple acts of terrorism shocked our nation. Responses to the recent atrocities and reaction to those responses have revealed a deeply divided Synod, particularly with regard to church fellowship, especially unionism and syncretism. Long-held positions have been interpreted in significantly different ways. We believe there exists today severe confusion and discord concerning church fellowship. We believe this lack of clarity and concord is damaging and threatening to the very Gospel we seek to proclaim.

The terrorists' attacks directly affected hundreds of families of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LC–MS). We recognize we are in very trying times. We appreciate that the Reverend Dr. David Benke, President of the Atlantic District of the LC–MS, and others have been expending considerable effort to bring comfort to our church and particularly to those whose lives have been devastated by the loss of loved ones. Such extraordinary circumstances present enormous challenges. We most certainly want to offer as much support as possible for the extensive effort being made by those bringing comfort, hope and material assistance to the survivors.

In response to the atrocities, *A Prayer for America* was held Sunday, September 23, 2001, at Yankee Stadium in New York City. The purpose of this gathering was to generate and demonstrate unity in our nation and to secure support from the general population for the survivors of these horrors. These were worthy goals. However, the means to that end have raised questions in our Synod. Some have contended that this was merely a civic event. Others have maintained that the event's agenda calls into question that contention.

At the service political figures offered "remarks," while the clerics offered "readings," "prayers" and "reflections." The agenda included the reading of and commentary on Scripture as well as other religious literature. Each representative clergy called upon all the others to hear, or reflect upon, or join in prayer to his god. There were no qualifications or mention of the exclusivity of salvation by grace, through faith, for the sake of Christ alone.

Participants included Jewish Rabbis, a Sikh, several Muslims, a Hindu, a representative of the Armenian Church, a number of Protestant clerics, a Greek Orthodox, several Roman Catholics, and one Lutheran, Dr. Benke, who participated with the approval of Dr. Gerald Kieschnick, President of the LC–MS.

Many have lauded Dr. Benke's participation. Many others have raised concerns. We believe most who have expressed concerns have done so believing that this participation violated our agreement to renounce "unionism and syncretism of every description" (Constitution of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, Article VI). God's Word is clear on this issue. The Reverend Daniel Preus, First Vice President of the LC–MS, has accurately described what we believe has occurred:

When it comes to the Interfaith Service in Yankee Stadium, however, I cannot come to any conclusion except that [Dr. Benke's] participation was wrong....the more I learn about the events, the more I am convinced that it was a unionistic and syncretistic service for it not only involved Christians of differing beliefs in a common service but even brought pagans and Christians together in prayer as though all were praying to the same god or as though prayers to false gods are as valid and effective as those to the only true God, the Triune God. The event was advertised as an 'Interfaith Service' a 'Prayer Service' and a 'Memorial Service.' Dr. Benke himself indicated that, in his view, God had turned 'a field of dreams into God's house of prayer.'

Clarity and concord are essential to our unity. Therefore we present the following confession to bring clarity and concord to this situation. Our desire is to remove the division that presently separates us by making a sound confession on the basis of Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions. Uniting under Christ, we will remain steadfast in the truth and purity of the Gospel, proclaiming Jesus' love and forgiveness to the world. We believe the following confession is in full agreement with the Lutheran Confessions and therefore correctly expresses the teaching of our Lord in the Holy Scriptures.

WE CONCUR WITH HOLY SCRIPTURE AND THE LUTHERAN CONFESSIONS CONCERNING THE FOLLOWING POINTS. WITH GREAT UNANIMITY WE BELIEVE, TEACH, CONFESS, AND, WITH THE HELP OF GOD, PRACTICE THE FOLLOWING:

1. We believe, teach, and confess that church fellowship is not created by our action but is created and sustained by the Triune God. Church fellowship consists in "unity with [one another] in teaching and all the articles of faith and in the proper use of the holy sacraments" (Epitome X, paragraph 7). This unity is a gift of God, Who alone "calls, gathers, enlightens, and makes holy the whole Christian Church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one common, true faith" (SC II, par. 6). This action of our Lord finds its external expression wherever the "Gospel is preached harmoniously according to a pure understanding and the sacraments are administered in conformity with the divine Word" (AC VII, par. 2).

We reject the teaching that Holy Scripture allows us to be joined in fellowship with heterodox church bodies. Such an action does not create unity among men but destroys fellowship with Christ, Who insists that we teach *all* things He has commanded us.

2. We believe, teach, and confess that the Triune God gives church fellowship to His church for her good and for the good of the world. Christ prays to His Heavenly Father, "Sanctify them in the truth, Your word is truth...that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that you sent Me" (John 17:17,21). It is only the Gospel of Christ that creates true church fellowship. Fellowship created solely on the basis of outward structures, without unity in faith given by God, is a human invention. To ignore differences in doctrine is to destroy the very unity of faith we seek.

We reject the teaching that differences in doctrine are trivial. We reject the teaching that differences in doctrine do not or need not destroy the outward unity of the church. Also rejected is the teaching that in the freedom of the Gospel we may ignore such differences.

3. We believe, teach, and confess that all church fellowship proceeds from the “one God in Three persons, and Three persons in One God,” Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We must not be guilty of “confusing the persons, nor dividing the substance...so that in all things...the Unity in Trinity and the Trinity in Unity is to be worshiped” (Athanasian Creed). To deny one person of the Trinity is to deny the entire Godhead.

Those who offer prayers outside of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are “praying to a god that cannot save” (Isaiah 45:20). Therefore we condemn the teaching that those who are members of the Jewish or Islamic religion pray to God the Father while denying the divinity of the Son. For Jesus says, “No one comes to the Father, except through me.” (John 14:6) and “Whoever denies the Son does not have the Father either” (1 John 2:23).

We join the church of all ages in condemning all those who teach that prayers designated to “a god” or “any god” are valid, or that prayers directed to a god other than the Triune God are valid, even if such groups claim a portion or all of Holy Scripture as sacred writings. Included here are the prayers of the Mormons, the Jews, the Muslims, the Jehovah’s Witnesses, the Unitarians and many others.

4. We believe, teach and confess that Christian fellowship means that we are not to be “unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness?” (2 Corinthians 6:14).

We join the church of all ages in condemning all those who teach that joining in a prayer prayed to a false god is an acceptable practice of fellowship. Rather, it is an exhibition of syncretism. For our Lord says, “You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only shall you serve,” and “You shall have no other gods.”

5. We believe, teach, and confess that fellowship based on anything other than complete agreement in the Gospel and all its articles as taught in Holy Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions is fellowship with those who deny a part or all of God’s Word.

We reject the teaching that differences in doctrine are in some way a blessing from God, rather than the curse of Satan. Also rejected is the teaching that such differences of belief are God-pleasing in any way.

6. We believe, teach, and confess that on certain occasions Christians may pray with persons of a heterodox confession without injury to their conscience and without compromising the purity of the Gospel. Such prayers must be directed only to the One True God and must not give the impression that differences in doctrine which exist are insignificant. Furthermore, no limits may be placed on one’s ability to speak the Word of God.

We condemn the teaching that one can similarly pray with non-Christians, hoping that through such prayers they might receive the Gospel.

Placing confidence in prayer, in and of itself, to lead an unbeliever to faith is to view prayer as a means of grace. Prayer is the response of the believer, and therefore presupposes faith. While it is true that “the prayer of a righteous man avails much” (James 5:16), that righteousness is not his own, but Christ’s. In prayer, believers speak back to God His words of the Gospel. Therefore the prayer of the righteous will contain the means of grace, but such prayer is not of itself a means of grace.

We condemn the teaching that one can offer prayer to the one true God at services where prayers are also offered to false gods. Such an event, by definition, is a service of worship to false gods. To participate in such a service is always an act of syncretism. The ecumenical council of Laodicea condemned this practice in the fourth century, saying, “No one shall join in prayer with heretics or schismatics” (CTCR, *Theology of Fellowship*, 1967, 16).

We reject the teaching that every prayer which uses the name “Jesus” is automatically prayed to the Triune God and thereby an expression of the Gospel. We reject the teaching that every opportunity to pray is an opportunity to give public witness to Jesus Christ.

7. We believe, teach, and confess that civic events often present an opportunity to proclaim the Gospel, and that Christians can publicly offer prayers to the Triune God at such events. “Interfaith prayer services,” by definition, cannot be considered such civic events, but must be considered unionistic and syncretistic services.

8. We believe, teach and confess that “the use of the Word of God and prayer as an entity in itself (as a corporate worship of God) constitutes a ‘service’. This is not to be confused with a similar use of the Word and prayer as an integral part of a broader program (e.g., the opening or closing devotion of a meeting)” (CTCR, *The Lutheran Understanding of Church Fellowship: A Report on Synodical Discussions*, 12, n. 1). Further, “any occasion on which a public worship of God occurs—that is, in which the Word of God and prayer are used by a regularly designated worship leader of the church—is to be understood to be a ‘service.’ This would therefore include not only those occasions regularly designated as worship services but also occasions—such as weddings, funerals, dedications, baccalaureates, etc.—which may have an ad hoc assembly different from the regular congregational worship assembly” (CTCR, *The Lutheran Understanding...*, 10–11, n. 1).

We believe, teach, and confess that it is possible to worship false gods, as Satan tempted our Lord, “All these things I will give You if You will fall down and worship me” (Matthew 4:9). While such worship can occur privately, it can also be a part of a public service of worship. Such a service is no part of worship to the Triune God, as Jesus says, “You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only shall you serve” (Matthew 4:10).

We reject the teaching that events of the type described here can be considered civic events.

9. We are to make a clear confession of the Gospel at every opportunity presented to us. Further, one can pray in the presence of those who are non-Christian, if all the prayers are offered only to the One true God, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, and only by those confessing faith in the Triune God. In this regard we do not speak of prayer services, as elsewhere described, but strictly of prayer itself.

We condemn the teaching that one may present the Gospel as one option among many. We similarly condemn the teaching that one may participate in events where Christianity will be presented as equal to religions that pray to false gods. Condemned also is the teaching that those who confess the name of Christ can join in prayer with those who are a part of non-Christian faiths.

10. We believe, teach, and confess that our worthiness to approach God in prayer consists only in the propitiatory sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross, and that there is nothing inherent in us which makes us worthy to approach God.

We condemn the teaching that prayers are made worthy because of human actions. We reject as invalid any prayer offered outside of the Christian faith

11. As Christians we welcome and accept the opportunity to proclaim the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ to people who have not heard the message of salvation. We teach that at every opportunity that presents itself, the Christian should be ready to give a defense for the hope that is in him.

We condemn the teaching that it is acceptable to be “unequally yoked” with unbelievers, or that it is acceptable to give the impression that Christianity is at all related to the religions of the world or indebted to the religions of the world. For Christianity is in every way superior to every religion of the world in that it teaches an entirely different message and presents an entirely different God, which is the only true God.

12. We applaud the efforts of all who work to preach and teach the pure Gospel of Jesus Christ, especially in times of crisis, and we thank God for their zeal to do so. We thank our Lord that such mission opportunities arise, even in the face of unspeakable horrors.

We condemn the practice of participating in inter-faith prayer services. Although an attempt may be made to speak the Gospel, the situation gives the impression that Christianity is only one option among many. We condemn statements which give the impression that such services are God-pleasing, that we are spiritual brothers and sisters with those who are outside of the Faith, and that those who are outside of the Faith have access to our Triune God apart from the merits of Christ.

We condemn the idolatrous practices which occur at such services. We condemn the teaching that participation in such services is an adiaphoron, an indifferent thing.

13. We believe, teach, and confess as Christians that we must let Christian charity prevail in all things. True Christian charity, that is, Christian love, requires that we at all times hold fast to the Word of God in all its articles—both Law and Gospel—as it has been given to us in Holy Scripture and set forth in the Lutheran Confessions.

We believe, teach, and confess that it is unloving and uncharitable to hide or obscure differences in doctrine for the sake of outward unity. Such actions are unloving toward God, Who gave us His Word and has commanded that we proclaim it. Such actions are unloving toward our neighbor, as they present to him a false view of God’s word and will, and work against his salvation.

We believe, teach, and confess that it is the highest expression of Christian charity and love when a Christian confronts an erring brother, so that he might turn from his error, and be saved. We believe, teach, and confess that to speak the law where unrepentant sin exists is the only truly charitable and loving action, as St. Paul admonishes us, “Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted” (Galatians 6:1).

We reject the teaching, explicitly or implicitly, that charity and license are the same thing. We reject the teaching that, in Christian charity, teachings which contradict the Word of God can be viewed as acceptable, valid options for true belief in God.

14. We believe that there are matters of adiaphora for which there can be honest differences of opinion. Church fellowship as described in Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions is not one of them.

We reject the teaching that any of the statements made above are adiaphora. We also reject the teaching that any statements previously produced and accepted by the LC–MS in convention have given approval to any of the practices and teachings condemned above. We reject the claim that the LC–MS has ever taught that such practices and teachings are in conformity with Holy Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions. We also reject any statements that would lend approval to such practices and teachings.

CONCLUSION

We humbly stand with the Blessed Reformer, Dr. Martin Luther. “When Christ stood before Annas, he said, ‘produce witnesses.’ If our Lord, who could not err, made this demand, why may not a worm like me ask to be convicted of my error from the prophets and the Gospels? If I am shown my error, I will be the first to throw my books into the fire... Unless I am convicted by Scripture and plain reason...my conscience is captive to the Word of God.” If the President of our Synod together with the Presidium and Council of Presidents can show us by Scripture and plain reason any error in our confession, we will gladly recant. Otherwise, we must stand by this confession of faith, for “to go against conscience is neither right nor safe.”

We invite our Synodical President, the members of the Presidium and the Council of Presidents to join us in common confession of the one Holy, Christian and Apostolic faith, as set forth in the Holy Scriptures, as taught in the Book of Concord, and as presented above. In this way, we may continue to walk together as we proclaim the Gospel delivered to us by our Lord, which is the “power of salvation for all who believe.”

We hereby subscribe ourselves to this, the correct interpretation of our Lord’s teaching regarding fellowship, unionism, and syncretism. We invite all those who hold our Lord’s teaching dear, and who desire to teach the true, unadulterated Word of God, to join us in our confession.

**WE HEREBY SUBSCRIBE OURSELVES TO THIS,
THE CORRECT INTERPRETATION OF OUR LORD'S TEACHING REGARDING
FELLOWSHIP, UNIONISM, AND SYNCRETISM.**

The following signatures were added on the twentieth day of December in the year of our Lord two thousand and one at Saint Paul Evangelical Lutheran Church, Lockport, Illinois.

| | | | |
|------------------------------|------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Luther E. Russert, | Pastor, | Saint John's, | Decatur, IN |
| Walter Otten, | Pastor, | Saint Paul's, | Brookfield IL |
| David J. Behling, | Pastor, | Christ, | Northlake, IL |
| Burneal Fick, | Pastor, | Emmanuel, | Aurora, IL |
| Daniel F. Ognoskie, | Pastor, | Emmanuel, | Dwight, IL |
| Don Stuckwisch, | Pastor, | Our Savior, | Milford, IL |
| Dr. Burnell F. Eckardt, Jr., | Pastor, | Saint Paul's, | Kewanee, IL |
| Dr. Martin R. Nolland, | Pastor, | Christ, | Oak Park, IL |
| Roger Gallup, | Pastor, | Bethlehem, | River Grove, IL |
| Steven Cornwell, | Pastor, | Hope, | Hillside, IL |
| Timothy A. Rossow, | Pastor, | Bethany, | Napperville, IL |
| Mark H. Hein, | Pastor, | Saint Paul's, | Lockport, IL |
| Ronald D. Rock, | Pastor, | Zion, | Beecher, IL |
| Keith E. GeRue, | Pastor, | Our Savior, | Momence, IL |
| Lon E. Landsmann, | Pastor, | Zion, | Grant Park, IL |
| Daniel Woodring, | Pastor, | Prince of Peace, | New Buffalo, MI |
| David C. Mumme, | Pastor, | Trinity, | Marseilles, IL |
| Lincoln C. Winter, | Pastor, | Bethany English, | Chicago, IL |
| Paul Mumme, | Pastor, | Mount Calvary, Saint Michael, | Franklin Park, IL Chicago, IL |
| Erich R. Fickel, | Pastor, | Saint Peter, Trinity, | Thawville, IL Onarga, IL |
| Steven J. Anderson, | Pastor, | Messiah, | Chicago, IL |
| Ralph Tautz, | Pastor, | Apostles, | Melrose Park, IL |
| Stephen M. Heuser, | Pastor, | Zion, | Bensenville, IL |
| Linda A. Meyer | Deaconess, | Zion, | Beecher, IL |
| Raymond D. Parent | Layman, | Saint Paul | Lockport, IL |

**WE HEREBY SUBSCRIBE OURSELVES TO THIS,
THE CORRECT INTERPRETATION OF OUR LORD'S TEACHING REGARDING
FELLOWSHIP, UNIONISM, AND SYNCRETISM.**

The following signatures were added in abstentia.

| | | | |
|------------------------|----------|---------------|---------------------|
| Dr. Edwin S. Suelflow, | Pastor, | Emeriti, | Mequon, WI |
| Todd A. Pepperkorn, | Pastor, | Messiah, | Kenosha, WI |
| John M. Berg, | Pastor, | Lamb of God, | Kenosha, WI |
| Joseph M. Fisher, | Pastor, | Pilgrim, | West Bend, WI |
| David R. Meyer, | Pastor, | Pilgrim, | West Bend, WI |
| Dean Spooner, | Pastor, | Immanuel, | Osman, IL |
| John Gutz, | Pastor, | Holy Trinity, | Steator, IL |
| Frederick E. Davison, | Pastor, | Zion, | Kokomo, IN |
| John E. Klieve | Pastor, | Saint John, | Port Washington, WI |
| Valerie F. GeRue | Teacher, | Zion, | Beecher, IL |
| Al Wipperman, | Layman, | Saint John, | Topeka, KS |
| Jan Wipperman, | Layman, | Saint John, | Topeka, KS |

**WE HEREBY SUBSCRIBE OURSELVES TO THIS,
THE CORRECT INTERPRETATION OF OUR LORD'S TEACHING REGARDING
FELLOWSHIP, UNIONISM, AND SYNCRETISM.**

The following have subsequently subscribed themselves to this statement:

| | | | | |
|-----------------|--------|----------------|---------------------|-----------|
| Wade Seaver | Pastor | Saint Luke | Richland Center, WI | Jan. 2002 |
| Marcus T. Zill | Pastor | Saint Andrew | Laramie, WY | Jan. 2002 |
| Bruce Ley | Pastor | Holy Cross | Albany, OR | Jan. 2002 |
| Drew Newman | Pastor | Trinity | Kearney, MO | Jan. 2002 |
| Robert J. Shipe | Layman | Saint Mark | West Bloomfield, MI | Jan. 2002 |
| James K. Heap | Layman | St. Paul's | Lockport, IL | Jan. 2002 |
| Don Neuendorf | Pastor | St. Paul | Ann Arbor, MI | Jan. 2002 |
| Kevin A. Karner | Pastor | Grace | Muncie, IN | Jan. 2002 |
| Dennis Bestul | Pastor | Our Savior | Cupertino, CA | Jan. 2002 |
| Glenn Huebel | Pastor | Messiah | Keller, Texas | Jan. 2002 |
| Dan Costello | Layman | First Lutheran | Boston, MA | Jan. 2002 |