

THE HOLY CHRISTIAN CHURCH, THE
COMMUNION OF SAINTS

Carl J. Lawrenz

Presented to: Nebraska District
Convention (WELS)

Hadar, Nebraska
July 17-20, 1956

(Also presented to Arizona-California
District Convention at East Fork
Lutheran Mission
East Fork, Arizona
July 24-26, 1956

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2-11-86

494 Grove Street
Lomira, WI 53048
February 9, 1986

Prof. Martin O. Westerhaus
6633 W Wartburg Circle 117 N
Mequon, WI 53092

Dear Martin:

This is in answer to your letter of February 6, 1986. The essay: *The Holy Christian Church, the Communion of Saints* was presented by me at two district conventions during 1956. This was the year when all of our WELS district conventions were scheduled consecutively after the 1956 LCMS synod convention and before the special WELS convention at Watertown, WI, in 1956 to consider the Standing Committee on Matters of Church Union's recommendation of holding the 1955 termination of fellowship with the LCMS resolution in abeyance pending renewed discussions. Two members of the Standing Committee were appointed to visit each of our nine district conventions. President Oscar Naumann and I were appointed to attend the Nebraska and Arizona-California District conventions.

I delivered the above-mentioned essay at both of these conventions. At the Arizona-California convention there were, however, also three other essays on the church, the fourth being delivered by President Naumann. The topic of the church had been selected in view of the momentous decisions which the district convention was called upon to make as a church.

The Nebraska District convention was held at Immanuel Lutheran Church, Hadar, NE, July 17-20, 1956 (cf. *Northwestern Lutheran*, Aug. 19, 1956, p. 266).

The Arizona-California District convention was held at the East Fork Mission, AZ, July 24-26, 1956 (cf. *Northwestern Lutheran*, Aug. 19, 1956, p. 268).

Cordial greetings from house to house.

Fraternally,



Prof. em. Carl Lawrenz

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THE HOLY CHRISTIAN CHURCH, THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS

When in our public services we regularly confess our common Christian faith in the words of the Apostle's Creed, we include also the statement: "I believe in. . . . the holy Christian Church, the communion of saints." Through your district president I have been invited to lead you in giving special thought to this particular portion of your Christian faith. I have been invited to unfold the glorious Scriptural truth that the Church is the communion of saints. In this wording of the assignment we have more than a mere topic; we have a concise statement which sets forth the basic truth concerning the Church. As long as we keep this truth firmly in mind, namely the truth that the Church is the communion of saints, everything that the Scripture tells us about the Church will fall into its proper place and can be readily understood. At the same time, all the false notions which men have entertained and still entertain concerning the Church are readily exposed.

That the Church is the communion of saints is certainly not a new and unfamiliar truth. As already indicated in our opening statement, it is a truth which we include in that very concise summary of our Christian faith which we use more than any other. Neither is there any reason why it should be a meaningless phrase, which we merely repeat without really understanding what we are saying. For we have all benefited by Luther's Catechism explanation of the words: "I believe in the holy Christian Church, the communion of saints." Those of you who are pastors and teachers regularly use Luther's Catechism explanation to instruct others in the true meaning and import of this statement of the Creed. Now in the explanation of the Third Article of the Creed Luther, first of all, reminds us of the gracious work which the Holy Spirit has done in each one of us individually. He teaches each of us to confess for himself: "I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, nor come to Him; but the Holy Ghost has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith." But then Luther goes on to teach each one of us to confess that what the Holy Spirit has done for me He has done for me "in like manner as He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith." Thereby Luther has made it very clear to us what the Christian Church is, namely that it is nothing else than the entire number of those whom the Holy Spirit has brought to faith in Christ as their Savior but whom through this gracious gift of a common faith He has most intimately joined together to form one congregation, one body, one blessed fellowship, namely the communion of saints.

For when we speak of saints we are merely using a Scriptural synonym for the believers in Christ. Those whom God's Spirit through the Gospel has brought to faith in Christ as their Savior are called saints because they have been sanctified; they have been set apart from the world as God's very own. Through Christ's imputed righteousness and holiness, which has become theirs to have and to enjoy by their God-given faith, their sins are covered and they appear holy and spotless in God's sight.

Yes, already from childhood we have as Lutherans been made mindful of the truth that the Church is the communion of saints. Yet at the same time we are still in need of bearing this truth even more fully in mind in all of our thinking concerning the Church. To this end we shall undertake to draw this truth anew from Scripture that we may see it in its full import and with its manifold implications. Even so, we will not be able to exhaust this subject in the scope of this presentation.

I

According to Scripture the Church is the Communion of Saints

Anyone who carefully studies the New Testament will become convinced that when it speaks of the Church or of churches it always refers to the communion of saints or to a part of it present at any given locality. There are 115 passages in which the authorized version translates the Greek word ecclesia as church. The reference is always to believers. In the scope of this pre-

sentation it is, of course, neither possible or feasible to examine all of these passages. We shall content ourselves with a representative selection to exemplify how the New Testament, in speaking of the Church, means the communion of saints.

It is from the lips of Jesus Himself that we first hear express mention made of the Church, of His Church. We are told in Matthew 16 how Jesus took His disciples aside at Caesarea Philippi for a rather solemn and formal questioning. For more than two years Jesus had instructed them. Now the time of His suffering and death was drawing near. Therewith their training would practically come to an end. Then they were to go forth and bear witness of Him, even as He was training them for this purpose. What would they tell others about Him? Having first questioned them concerning the many faulty and unsatisfactory opinions which others were harboring concerning Him, Jesus went on to ask: "But whom say ye that I am?" It was Peter who answered: "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the Living God." Yet he expressed not only his own conviction of faith, but that of all the disciples to whom the question was addressed. Peter professed faith in Jesus as God's Son who had come as the promised Savior to fulfill all of the divine promises of salvation. Jesus answered: "Blessed art thou, Simon Bar-jona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven." In acknowledging Peter's confession Jesus reminded him that it was not by his own flesh and blood, by his own reason and strength as a sinful human being, that he had come to such faith; it was a pure gift of God.

Our special interest at present, however, lies in what Jesus added: "Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." Here where Jesus speaks of His Church He compares it to a building which is being built upon a firm foundation. He says, "Upon this rock will I build my church." Who is this rock? It is not the person of Peter, whose own spiritual inability Jesus had clearly pointed out. Neither is it any special office of Peter which he was later to pass on to others to form an unbroken succession of Popes as Roman Catholicism vainly claims. Such thoughts are excluded by the wording which Jesus uses. He indeed says of Simon, the son of Jonas, that by virtue of the faith that he confessed he is Peter, Petros, a rock, a building stone. Yet Jesus uses a slightly different word when he speaks of the rock on which He will build His Church, uses petra, a foundation rock. This foundation rock is none other than the one on which Peter had confessed that he and his fellow disciples were already grounded in faith, namely Jesus, the Christ, the promised divine Redeemer. This entire discourse centers in Jesus, His true person, office, and work. Through his God-given faith in Jesus as his divine Redeemer Simon had become Peter, a building block grounded on Christ the foundation rock to form a part of the growing edifice of Christ's church. Such building stones were also the other disciples, whose faith Peter had likewise voiced at their spokesman.

To believing Peter Jesus now entrusted the keys of the kingdom of heaven, telling him: " whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." And what He entrusted to Peter He entrusted to the other disciples likewise who shared Peter's faith and expressed it through him. This is verified in John 20. These keys are nothing else than the Gospel of the forgiveness of sins which Jesus as the divine Redeemer had come to procure for all men with His suffering and death and to establish as an accomplished fact with His victorious resurrection. Note that immediately upon this text we hear how Jesus, in order to deepen His disciples in the understanding of their faith, began to tell them that with His suffering, death, and resurrection He would complete His Savior's work. When that work would be finished, Peter and his fellow disciples were to go forth and proclaim the Savior's gift of the forgiveness of sins that through this message many other sinners might be brought to faith and thus be added as further spiritual stones in the structure of Christ's Church, the communion of saints.

In the account of Peter's Pentecost sermon found in Acts 2 we have a glimpse of Peter's use of the entrusted keys of heaven after he had been fully enlightened by the Holy Spirit. In the Jewish multitude that listened to Peter there were many who were convicted in their conscience of their sin of having rejected and crucified Jesus, whom God had raised up as Lord and Savior of all men. As they cried out: "Men and brethren, what shall we do?" Peter told them: "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost." Then we are told: "They that gladly received His

Gospel proclaimed for their own spiritual nourishment and that of others. To natural man the Gospel is foolishness. Natural man wants to enjoy the things of this world. He finds it too humiliating to be treated as a lost sinner who cannot come to God's favor and get to heaven except through the pure grace of God as it is revealed in the vicarious work of Christ. He also thinks that if heaven is offered as a free gift to the sinner then no one will any longer make any effort to lead a decent life. Thus unbelievers left wholly to themselves would not provide for the proclamation of the Gospel. Believers, however, who have been reborn through the Gospel as new creatures, treasure it as the bread of life, hear it gladly for the nourishment and preservation of their faith, long to have it sealed to them in the Sacraments, and desire to have the saving Word of God brought to others.

Therefore when we see people join together to have the Word of God proclaimed to them, see them celebrating the Sacrament of the Altar, see them bringing their children to Holy Baptism, see them join together in the endeavor of bringing the Gospel to the unchurched and the heathen, find them joining together also with other congregations for the purpose of training pastors, teachers, and missionaries, find them pooling their gifts and administering them to maintain the necessary church buildings, schools, seminaries, colleges for all these purposes--then this is all an indication that we are dealing with the Church, with members of the communion of saints.

To those who profess faith in Christ as their Savior and who manifest their faith in such use of Word and Sacrament the Lord wants us, who cannot look into the hearts of men, see our fellow believers with whom we have opportunity to express the blessed fellowship that we have in the communion of saints. The possibility, yes the probability, is always there, of course, that some hypocrites may slip into the group who for ulterior motives profess Christian faith that does not actually live in their hearts and who take an outward part in the affairs of the Gospel in which they have no real and essential interest. Yet they are like chaff among the wheat, outwardly adhering to the company of believers but not a part of them. The possible presence of hypocrites involves no obligations for us in our expression of fellowship. Dealing with hypocrites is something that the Lord has reserved for Himself who is alone able to deal with them properly. There was an Ananias and a Sapphira outwardly mixed in with that company of believers at Jerusalem who remained steadfast in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship. Until God exposed these hypocrites they, too, were the outward recipients of the expressions of fellowship of the believers.

There is also a further consideration that we want to bear in mind. Just because believers rejoice in the Word of God as the bread of life, they will be very careful not to adulterate it. For to change it in the least might jeopardize their spiritual life. Since the Sacraments as the Lord gave them are their source of comfort and strength, they will not take a chance on ruining them by any alterations. Thus we will want to say that the right use of Word and Sacrament are the true marks of the Church, the marks by which the Lord points us to those with whom He would have us express the fellowship that we have in the communion of saints. Where Word and Sacrament are not rightly taught and administered, there Christian faith is imperiled. Thus the Lord in His Word bids us to withdraw our fellowship from those who persistently teach, spread, condone error, and demand recognition for it. On the other hand we rejoice in the fact that God in His grace and mercy can and does sustain and preserve believers even in the midst of erring church bodies, always remembering, however, that He does so not through the errors that are taught and condoned there, but by counteracting the pernicious effect of these errors, that He sustains and preserved believers only through the true Gospel message that is still heard in these erring church bodies. Yet our joy over the fact that in His grace and mercy the Lord preserves His Church, the communion of saints, even in the midst of the many erring church bodies will incite us to proclaim the pure Word of God with great zeal and faithfulness and also with meekness and love at every God-given opportunity, so that our testimony may perchance be heard also by those who are still God's children in erring church bodies and help them in overcoming the errors with which they are surrounded.

After having briefly touched upon these special considerations let us return once more to the general thought that the Lord wants us to look for the Church, the communion of saints there where people profess Christian faith and are gathered around the true Word and Sacrament. Here let us bear in mind that the specific

forms in which believers group themselves together for the fellowship and work of the Church, the specific forms in which they arrange for the use of the means of grace in public worship, the particular form in which they establish the public ministry, have not been prescribed by the Lord to His New Testament Church. In and through their common faith the Holy Spirit leads the believers to create the adequate and wholesome forms which fit every circumstance, situation, and need. Even as the bond of faith which the Holy Spirit creates and sustains gathers them together in local congregations, so this same bond of a common faith also draws congregations together in larger groupings to share their mutual gifts in the blessings of fellowship and to gain strength for certain phases in the great task of the Church. Since the believers ordinarily remain at some local place where they will regularly want to satisfy their need of the means of grace, the local congregation will always be the primary grouping, but in essence these groupings all lie on the same plane.

It is to such local congregations or several of them grouped together that epistles of the New Testament are addressed. As we read the epistles of Paul we find that at least five of them are expressly addressed as churches. In both first and second Corinthians we read: "Unto the church of God which is at Corinth;" in Galatians we read: "Unto the churches of Galatia"; in first and second Thessalonians we read: "Unto the church of the Thessalonians." Is Paul here using church in quite a new and different sense from that sense in which we have thus far spoken of it? This question is answered for us when we note how Paul himself wants the designation church to be understood as he applies it to those whom he is addressing. When in I Corinthians, for example, he writes, "Unto the church of God which is at Corinth," he adds "to them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, with all that in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours." Thus we see that he is addressing his readers at Corinth as the Church of God because he is addressing them as saints, as believers. Of course, they do not form the whole Church, but they are for him the communion of saints present at the specific locality of Corinth.

So again, when in I Thessalonians Paul writes: "Unto the church of the Thessalonians," he adds "which is in God the Father and in the Lord Jesus Christ." This addition likewise marks them as believers and shows that he addresses them in this sense as a Church.

Now in Ephesians the formal address simply reads: "To the saints that are at Ephesus and to the faithful in Christ Jesus." Here Paul does not happen to employ the designation of Church. This does not mean, however, that he did not think of them as the communion of saints at Ephesus. For in this epistle, where as we have seen, he speaks so extensively of the Church as the communion of saints, we also find him applying all these glorious truths concerning the Church to these very Ephesian Christians. In like manner we find all the other congregations and groups of congregations, such as those addressed in II Corinthians and Galatians, to whom apostolic Christians are addressed, treated and spoken of exclusively as believers. This was true though these Christians were still in need of much instruction and were still troubled with many spiritual weaknesses which needed to be corrected and overcome. In Corinth we find some of them assailed on the truth of the resurrection, and in Galatians it becomes evident that some in these churches had been made uncertain and had become confused concerning the very heart of the Gospel, the truth of justification. Yet in Christian love Paul did not yet consider them persistent and confirmed in these errors. Considering them still ready to be taught and hopeful that they could still be won, he still addresses them all as brethren throughout these epistles. We see, therefore, that when Paul applied the designation of Church to a local congregation of confessing Christians gathered around Word and Sacrament, he did not speak or think of them as consisting of anything else but believers. Also in these apostolic congregations there may well have been some hypocrites, some who were not really believers or who were no longer believers. Yet since they were not manifest as such Paul gives no thought to them when he speaks of these congregations as churches. This designation has only believers in mind.

When someone had manifested himself as an impenitent sinner, as was the case of the man found guilty of incest in Corinth, Paul guided the congregation to declare unto him that with his impenitence he had put himself outside of God's Church as a final testimony of love that still might lead to his repentance. Also when in other cases members of his congregations were involved in errors and

express his faith-born fear and love of God in every situation of life according to God's holy will.

Again all this growth takes place in Christ, as our faith is fixed ever more firmly upon Him and His saving gifts, and draws ever new and richer comfort and strength from His grace. As such growth takes place in the individual members of Christ's Church, they serve each other more fully in faith and love and thus become the more intimately bound together in the Church as a holy temple in the Lord. The true glory of this constantly growing spiritual structure of believers is this that it is the habitation of God. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit dwell in every one of the Church's members. They are all cleansed by Christ's blood and sanctified by God's Spirit and thus constitute a holy temple in the Lord, the communion of saints.

II

The Church, the Communion of Saints, Is a Blessed Reality

Just because the Church is the communion of saints, the congregation of all true believers, it is of necessity invisible, that is, it can be apprehended only by faith. Since faith in Christ, which alone makes sinful human beings members of the Church, is a matter of the heart, God alone can discern all those who are really His, discern them in an infallible manner. We can be sure only of our own faith. Others we can judge only on the basis of the profession of faith that they make in word and deed. Such a profession may be false and hypocritical. Hence the Church cannot be identified with any individual church organization whose members can be determined and tabulated by men on the basis of their outward profession. Just as little is it to be identified with the sum total of all such outward churches.

This fact that the individual members of the Church as well as their full number can be known only to God does not make the Church any less of a reality, however. It is not merely a platonic idea in the mind of theologians. It is in fact the greatest of all realities. The Church, the communion of saints, was the object of God's gracious thoughts from all eternity. Everything that has transpired under God in time, that transpires now, and that will transpire has been, is, and will be bound up with the gathering and completion of the Church. The gates of hell shall not prevail against it. It alone will endure and finally be received by God into eternal glory when everything else on earth will have perished or been banished from God's sight.

St. Paul tells us at the end of Ephesians I that the Heavenly Father raised up Christ from the dead and "set him at his own right hand in the heavenly places, far above all principality, and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come: and hath put all things under his feet, and gave him to be the head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fulness of him that filleth all in all."

God's right hand denotes His almighty power in which He rules and directs and holds absolute sway over all things animate and inanimate, over all rational and irrational creatures, over men and angels; it denotes His omniscient power in which He sees and knows and discerns all things and all happenings in their minutest details; it denotes the omnipresence of God in which He is present everywhere and fills all things. Thus when we are told that God set Christ at His own right hand, this means that ever since His ascension our Savior, true God and true man, is ruling over all things in heaven and earth with divine omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence. We are reminded of the account in Genesis which tells us that Pharaoh, the ruler of Egypt, put his royal signet ring upon Joseph's hand and arrayed him with royal vesture, saying: "Thou shalt be over my house, and according unto thy word shall all my people be ruled." Thus God the Father has placed all divine power and authority and honor into the hands of our ascended Savior and now rules and directs all things through and by Him.

Yet note that in doing so the Heavenly Father "gave him to be the head over all things to the church, which is his body. . . ." When Joseph exercised sovereignty in Egypt, he used his royal power and position in the interest and for the benefit of his brethren, the patriarchs of God's chosen people. Thus Christ our Savior governs and directs all things for the particular interest and well-being

of His brethren, His Church of believers. Through the Gospel entrusted to His believers and proclaimed by them He is gathering and extending, strengthening and perfecting this Church unto eternal life. Under Christ's wise and almighty guidance all things must in some way serve this plan and purpose, not only every happening in ecclesiastical circles, but also all wars and disasters, political and economic and social upheavals, even the ungodly with all their plans and activities.

When a large and costly building is being erected, the scaffolding that is put up during the construction is often very elaborate. Judging from the material used, judging from the labor and care that is devoted in putting it up, one might easily come to think that it was meant to be permanent. Especially one who did not know what was being built, one who did not understand the plan, might easily be led to consider as vital and important something that is only a part of the scaffolding, and at the same time be led to regard as insignificant some smaller item which is to be put into the building itself. The heavy timbers which served the workmen in putting an item of adornment into its proper place might easily appear more significant to him than the small item of permanent decoration itself. When the building is finished, however, everything that was a mere help and tool, regardless of size and costliness, is taken away; but everything that went into the planned building itself remains.

Just so Christ is now building the holy temple of His Church, the communion of saints, building it for all eternity. Everyone, be he humble or renowned, who through the Gospel is brought to saving faith becomes a part of this building, and all that the believer does out of faith through the Gospel's power becomes a part with Him in this temple. As the exalted Savior thus builds His Church with His Word, also the unbelievers must unwittingly render Him service with all their plans and activities. Yet those who remain without faith are, with all that they do, but a part of the scaffolding which the Lord employs. When Judgment Day breaks, Christ's holy temple will be complete. Then all that was mere scaffolding will be taken away and thrown into the fire of eternal judgment. Only those who through faith were built as living stones into the Lord's temple will then remain to glorify Him eternally. As we see things from this viewpoint, it will become our most vital concern that we be and remain members of Christ's Church, the communion of saints. We shall be ready to have the Lord use even the heavy hammer of conflict and persecution, and the sharp chisel of sacrifice and sorrow, whenever He finds them necessary for fitting us firmly with His Gospel in a true and abiding faith into His eternal structure. Yes, we shall also be greatly encouraged and incited to use our gifts, our time, our strength, our means to help build up that which shall alone remain for eternity.

Yet let us see the Church, the communion of saints as a blessed reality from still another viewpoint. A number of times in Ephesians the Church is called the body of Christ. But it is particularly in I Corinthians 12 that Paul unfolds this figure of the Church, summing it up in the statement: "Ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular." No better imagery than that of the human body could be found to impress upon us that our common faith in our Savior and His pardon binds us most intimately together, that it makes us one unit with Christ as our head, a unit in which we are mutually dependent upon one another and meant to serve one another.

Let us take time to remind ourselves of the close knit unit that we have in the human body as our Creator has made it. Think of the hundreds of individual members that make up the human body; think of the variety of their tasks, some of greater, some of lesser importance, but all essential and all indispensable for the normal functioning of the body. There is the eye giving sight of the body, there is the ear giving hearing, there are the hands making it possible for the body to grasp objects, the feet making it possible for the body to move. Just to analyze the function of the feet a bit further, think of the many muscles and the countless nerve fibers which contribute their part to give the feet the function of motion. Then there is the heart which must pour the blood stream through the muscles, and the digestive organs which must fill that blood stream with food to replenish and renew all these fibers and muscles of the feet.

The first thing that the apostle would have us note in such an analysis of the human body which he uses for purpose of comparison is this that there is no schism through envy through envy and pride. Each member willingly does its task together with all the other members, so that the individual activity is

lost sight of in the harmonious functioning of the body as a unit. Not one single part is loathe to act because its particular function seems less important than that of another. The ear does not out of envy refuse to function because it cannot do the task of the eye; neither does the foot refuse to work because it cannot perform the more intricate motions of the hand. The individual muscle does not refuse to act because its work does not attract the same attention as the actual walking of the foot toward which it is contributing.

Neither does any member of the human body despise another and refuse to give recognition to its function. The eye just because it is able to reach out to great distances, does not scorn the hand because it is able to grasp only nearby objects. Nor does the head, because it is placed so high, look down with disdain on the feet plodding along in the dust. Each member fully recognizes the necessity of all the others as it functions together with them in the body under the direction of the mind. Another thing that the apostle would have us note about the human body as God has created it is this that it is a unit in which all the component parts show a deep concern for one another. Paul writes: "Whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honored, all the members rejoice with it (12:26)." You know what the whole body does when a foot is trodden upon, how the eye looks alarmed, how the nose draws up, how the mouth cries out, and all the members are ready to help and rescue. You know what happens when one of the members of our body is seriously infected, say the appendix or our tonsils. The whole body becomes feverish; that simply means that the rest of the cells of the body are generating heat through working overtime to restore the afflicted member back to health. You know also what happens when our eye is favored with a very delightful sight. Our entire face brightens up. Our heart beats faster, our mouth is apt to utter a cry of delight, and our hands rise to make ready to clap for joy. Our whole body somehow takes part in such a pleasure of the eye.

Now the Church, the communion of saints, is the body of Christ. Through our common God-given faith we who believe in Christ as our Savior are as closely bound together as are the members of the human body. In this common faith we all enjoy one and the same peace before God through the assurance of the forgiveness of our sins; all rejoice in the same comfort of God's fatherly love; all possess the same privilege of prayer; all are cheered by the same sure hope of heaven; all are entrusted with the same mission of preaching the Gospel to all creatures; all are moved to love our Savior in return, so that we have a common strength for doing His will and battling sin. Through the proper functioning of all the members the body of Christ is meant to grow inwardly and outwardly. As has previously been stated, there will be inward growth if the individual members of Christ's body are edified by God's Word, so that their faith is strengthened, their Christian knowledge and judgment increased, their love deepened, their Christian life perfected. There will be outward growth if all the members are harmoniously active in confessing the Savior in word and deed, so that many others will be brought to faith.

Christ our head has assigned various gifts and tasks to His members. All are to confess Him by word and deed. Some have the gifts, the training, and the call to preach and teach His Word in public. Some have a deeper Christian understanding; other members have a specially heroic confidence in God's help to take the lead in undertaking great works for the upbuilding of His kingdom; still others have a special aptitude for comforting the afflicted, or for admonishing the erring, or for convincing the doubters, or for encouraging to cheerful and liberal Christian giving. Some the Lord has trained in a special way in prayer through the school of cross and tribulation. Some have administrative gifts, others manual skills wherewith they can perform needed tasks in a Christian congregation. Some have gifts of music which they can sanctify for the public worship of the Lord. Some have an abundance of time, some an abundance of means to put into the service of God's kingdom.

Let every Christian willingly use his gifts and perform his tasks so that the body of Christ may function as a harmonious unit for its high purposes. Not a single believer should be loathe to do his part because that part may not seem as important, as illustrious as another. The fact that you cannot greatly enlighten others should not keep you from comforting, if that is your special gift. If you have no word of advice, you probably have a word of Christian cheer to give. If

you cannot win souls for Christ as a public servant of the Word, do what you can do, glorify Him before men by worshiping Him regularly in their sight. Do not refuse to give what is proportionate to your earthly means just because others have a much greater income. Instead of enviously looking to what others are able to do or disdainfully on what they are not able to do, let us zealously serve in Christ's body with our own gifts.

As members of Christ's body it also behooves us to show a deep concern for one another. Let us not disdain those who have lesser gifts than we may possess but let us acknowledge and cherish them for what they are and for what they are able to do by God's grace. On the other hand let us rejoice with those whom the Lord has chosen to labor with outstanding gifts. If one member is afflicted, troubled, in a weak spiritual condition, let the others exert themselves all the more, exert themselves feverishly, to help this member again to become what the Lord has meant him to be in His body. Let us not look down upon the fellow Christian whose judgment is still faulty, but with real solicitude endeavor to enlighten him. Let us fight his battles in our own heart as though they were our very own, that we may be able to offer the kind of understanding help that he needs. Likewise the erring brother let us not despise, nor push him aside, but in deep regard for him as a member of Christ's body seek to restore him to spiritual health. What we do to the fellow Christian we do to Christ our head. What we have not done to the least of the members of His body, that we have not done unto Him. When we sin against any of them, we sin against Christ. He is glorified when we function properly as members of His body. His Word of grace must supply all the strength. May we thus see the Church, the communion of saints, as a blessed reality.

III

The Church, the Communion of Saints, is There Where The Means of Grace Are in Use

In hearing what it ought to mean to us that together with our fellow Christians we are the body of Christ you may be led to ask: "How can I show this rich brotherly concern for them, when the Church as the communion of saints is invisible and only the Lord knows all of its members with certainty?" "Where can I find the members of the Church so that I may enjoy their fellowship and be blessed by my contact with them?"

Scripture gives us the answer that the Church, the communion of saints, is present there where the means of grace are in use, where the Gospel is rightly taught and the Sacraments are rightly administered. For the Gospel, in Word and Sacrament, is the power of God unto salvation, Romans 1:16. Jesus says: "The words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life." It is from this Gospel that the Church has received its life. All of its members have been born again by the incorruptible seed of the Word of God. Through it their spiritual life is constantly nourished and sustained. In His high priestly prayer for His disciples Jesus asks the Father: "Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth." In Isaiah 55:11 we have God's promise concerning His Word: "It shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it." The Holy Spirit is active in the Word and convicts the hearers of sin, of righteousness, and of judgment. Through the Word He glorifies Christ in the hearts of believers and leads them into all truth. Where, therefore, the Word of God and the Sacraments are in use, there believers are created and sustained in their spiritual life. We are, of course, also told in Scripture that not all who hear the Gospel are brought to faith. Many spurn its priceless blessings and continue to cling to sin and vanity. Thus we rightly confess in Article V of the Augsburg Confession that the Holy Spirit who is given through Word and Sacrament "works faith, where and when it pleases God." Yet the promise of the Lord stands that His Word will not return unto Him void without accomplishing that which He pleases. Where therefore the Word of God and the Sacraments are in use there we may look for fellow Christians with whom we can fellowship for our mutual edification in the body of Christ.

We can approach this truth from still another angle. The very fact that the Word of God is taught and that the Sacraments are administered at any place points to the presence of believers. Only believers have a sincere interest in having the

Word (received it in faith) were baptized; and the same day there were added unto them (unto the disciples who already believed) about three thousand souls." These continued steadfastly in the apostle's doctrine and fellowship. In other words, the apostles continued in the Gospel preaching and teaching. And the chapter closes with the statement: "And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved" (or to translate it more exactly: such as were saved). The Church consists of the entire number of those who believe in the Savior and who are saved in such faith. It is true that many of the principle Bible manuscripts do not have the phrase "to the church" in this verse. Following them, the RSV translates the verse thus: "And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved." Yet this does not change the matter in the least. For the ever increasing "multitude of those who believed" of whom the subsequent chapters of Acts speak is clearly identified in chapter 8 as the Church which was at Jerusalem.

To add just another testimony from Jesus Himself that His Church is the communion of saints we may well go to John 10, the cherished chapter of the Good Shepherd. Here Jesus does not use the word church, but He clearly speaks of it in figurative language as His flock, the flock of the Good Shepherd who had come to lay down His life for His sheep. His sheep are those who receive His saving Word with believing hearts and follow Him in faith. Jesus told the unbelieving Jews: "Ye believe not, because ye are not of my sheep. . . . My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me: and I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand." When Jesus spoke these words He was gathering such sheep to Himself through His Gospel preaching from the midst of God's Old Testament people, the Jewish nation. Yet Jesus looked forward to the future when as the exalted and victorious Savior He would also gather many out of the Gentile nations into His Church through His faith-engendering Gospel. For He says: "And other sheep I have, which are not of this fold; them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice; and there shall be one fold, and one shepherd." "One fold" is the Church, the communion of saints.

In seeking further testimony in the New Testament for the truth that the Church is the communion of saints, the congregation of all true believers, we can hardly find a better place to turn to than Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians. So rich is the testimony here that full justice in setting it forth could be done only by offering a detailed exposition of almost the entire epistle, even parts of the admonitory chapters. In Ephesians Paul speaks with a jubilant heart of the execution and realization of God's eternal plan of grace in Christ to gather and perfect a Church of believers from the midst of Jews and Gentiles as His eternal possession. We will need to content ourselves with a limited number of references.

At the end of the second chapter we read: "Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellowcitizens with the saints, and of the household of God; and are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone; in whom all the building fittly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord: in whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit."

The Ephesian Christians to whom Paul first of all addressed these words had for the most part formerly been pagan Gentiles. As such they had been steeped in spiritual ignorance and bound in the fetters of Satan, had been without any saving knowledge of God and hence without any true hope in the world. At that time they were aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenant of promise. During the Old Testament dispensation the Mosaic Law code with its many minute ordinances had like a mighty wall separated all the Gentiles from the Jewish nation, in whose midst God preserved His Church of believers who trusted in His covenant promises of saving grace. Yet Christ with His coming and with the completion of His Savior's work had fulfilled this law and thus broken down this middle wall of partition. With His perfect sacrifice for all sin Christ had reconciled both Jews and Gentiles to God. The Gospel of this peace, the Gospel of forgiveness of sins in Christ Jesus Paul had proclaimed at Ephesus. Through it the Holy Spirit had brought faith in the hearts of these Ephesians and thereby made them members of the Church. Now they were no longer strangers and foreigners but fellowcitizens with the saints; they enjoyed all the rights and blessings of God's people. They were now of the household of God. Through Christ in whom they believed and through whom they were cleansed of their sins God was now their dear Father, they His children and heirs, privileged to enjoy all the riches of His grace and all the care and tender-

ness of His love.

These words of Paul are meant also for you and me and every other Christian until the end of time. They are meant to remind us what it means to be a member of the Christian Church, which is the communion of saints. Outside of it we, too, would still find ourselves in spiritual darkness, in bondage to sin and Satan, without God and without real hope in the world. Yet through the Gospel in Word and Sacrament the Holy Spirit has graciously led us to our Savior. Through our God-given faith in Him we, too, are now in fellowship with the saints and blessed members of God's family. It matters not what nationality or race we belong to, whether we are rich or poor, learned or unlearned, highly honored by men or ignored by the world. Together with all who in the past have trusted in God's grace in Christ, beginning with Adam and Eve after the Fall in Paradise, and together with all who now trust in Christ we through a common God-given faith are intimately joined together in an enduring spiritual structure. We constitute a holy temple in the Lord, the communion of saints.

This temple of the Christian Church is not yet finished. New living stones are constantly being added. But all this growth is in Christ, through faith in Him. That is why Paul speaks of Christ as the chief cornerstone, having in mind the stone in ancient buildings which determined all the lines and angles both of the foundation and the super structure. Now Christ offers Himself with all of His saving gifts only through the word of the apostles and prophets and through the Sacraments administered according to this inspired Word. All Christian preaching and teaching which is to awaken and nourish faith for the upbuilding of the Church must rest on their inspired Word. That is why Paul here speaks of the believers as being built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets. Yet in doing so he adds: "Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone." Christ delivered for our offenses, raised for our justification, and exalted for our glorification is the heart center, and substance of the word of the apostles and prophets. Thus also Paul in First Corinthians 3, 11 simply calls Christ the foundation of the Church, saying: "For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Christ Jesus." No one is added as a living stone to God's temple of the Church unless the Holy Spirit has led him to place his implicit trust in Christ as his Savior. To have a part in proclaiming the Gospel to more and more sinners who are still lost, so that they, too, may be brought to faith by God's Spirit and built into the Church-- this should ever appear to us as the grandest privilege on earth.

Yet the Christian Church is also continually growing in another manner. St. Paul speaks in a special way of this growth when in the fourth chapter of Ephesians he calls attention to the manifold gifts which the exalted Savior bestows upon His Church so that the whole counsel of God may be proclaimed particularly also to those who have already come to faith. Paul writes: "And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ."

The Church is edified, is built up, from within when those who already belong to it are through God's Word strengthened and furthered in their Christian faith, joy, comfort, understanding, love, and hope. The Church is built up when through the Gospel the individual believer is strengthened in the blessed assurance of faith that for Christ's sake all his sins are blotted out, that he is a dear child of God and rests securely in His fatherly love, that his prayers are acceptable to God and heard, that all things must work together for his good, that a blessed inheritance in heaven, a glorious resurrection unto eternal joy is awaiting him. The Church is edified when through God's Word the individual believer grows in Christian knowledge and understanding so that, as Paul writes, "we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness whereby they lie in wait to deceive; but speaking the truth in love may grow unto him in all things, which is the head, even Christ." The Church is edified when through the Gospel the individual Christian's thankful love toward his Lord and Savior becomes ever more ardent and his child-like awe and reverence before Him ever deeper, so that he is constrained from within to glorify God more and more in all that he thinks, says, and does, letting his words and deeds be motivated and permeated by faith-born fear and love of God. The Church is edified when through God's Word the individual believer is guided and trained to

in practices contrary to apostolic doctrine, Paul earnestly warned that persistence in them would have to lead to severance of fellowship. But until such impenitence or such persistence in error had become manifest Paul treated them all as believers and applied to them all the blessings that belong to the Church, the communion of saints.

All this points to a practical use that also we want to make of the truth of the Church as the communion of saints. The manner in which the apostles thought of Christian congregations as Churches, in the sense of believers, and spoke to them as such, should be a guide also for us, having implications both for pastor and people.

Also our pastors ought ever to look upon their congregations as Churches in the sense of believers, ever treating all the members as believers and speaking to them as such. If patient, forbearing, hopeful Christian love no longer makes this possible concerning individuals, this is an indication that manifest impenitence and unbelief is involved, or persistence in error, and that excommunication or withdrawal of fellowship is called for, particularly also in their public preaching, our pastors will want to address their congregations as Church, as believers. Preaching, for example, to his Christian congregation on the Gospel of Sexagesima, the Parable of the Sower, the pastor will not think or speak of the members of the congregation as though they were somewhat proportionately represented by the four-fold kind of hearers depicted in the parable. Yes, he will indeed warn all the members of the congregation against the imminent danger of becoming any one of the types of hearers of the Word of God who hear it in vain, namely such as receive the seed by the wayside, in stoney places, or among thorns. At the same time he will in Christian love still think and speak of all the members of the congregation as still belonging to those who are receiving the seed on good ground, and will utilize the earnest warnings of the text for the very purpose of preserving them as such hearers.

On the other hand, all the members ought likewise to think of the Christian congregation in which they have fellowship in the use of the means of grace as Church, as a gathering of believers, as a part of the communion of saints. This will constantly remind each of them individually that they, too, are really members only inasmuch as they stand in faith. Thus instead of being content with merely being and remaining on the outward membership roll of a Christian congregation, they will rather realize that what is important is the diligent use of the means of grace, which can alone sustain them in faith so that they remain a part of the congregation as Church, as a gathering of believers, and become fit to take part in its spiritual work.

If our people think of the Christian congregation and also of the larger Church body, the synod, in which they have fellowship, as Church, as a gathering of believers, this will also have a wholesome effect upon them when any one of them may have fallen into some sin, become involved in an error or in an unChristian association which is not in keeping with their confession. It will keep them from resenting admonition and correction and from simply looking about for another congregation or synod in which their sin, their error, their unChristian association will be condoned. They will rather consider very earnestly what the sin, the error, or the offense for which they are admonished is doing to their faith which alone gives them membership in a Christian congregation and also in a larger Church body insofar as they are Church, a gathering of believers.

May God give us grace to keep our hearts and souls ever more firmly fixed upon the Church, the communion of saints, in respect to all of our outward Church relations and Church activities.

Carl Lawrenz