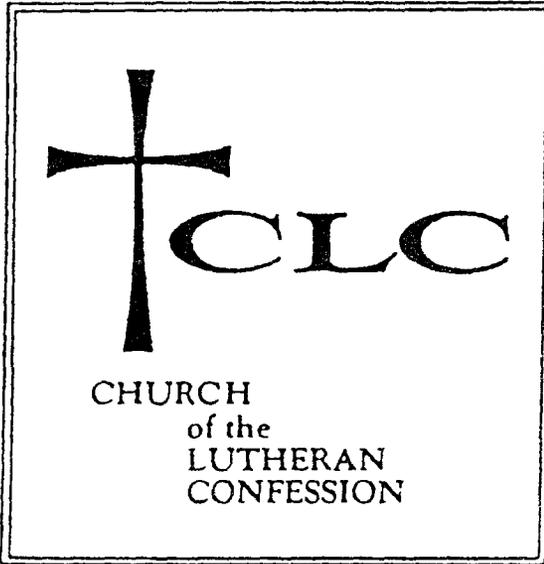


The Blessings and Benefits of Synodical Membership



Blest be the tie that binds
Our hearts in Christian love;
The fellowship of kindred minds
Is like to that above.

Presented by
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The hymn verse printed on the bottom of the front cover is not unfamiliar. I'm sure you recognize it as the first stanza of Hymn 464 in the *Lutheran Hymnal*. Hymn 464 is a great hymn because it reminds us of that truly precious and undeserved blessing which God has bestowed upon each one of us, namely, the blessing of faith in His Son, Jesus Christ. This faith — implanted in our hearts as a free gift by the Holy Spirit working through the Gospel Word — is "the blest tie that binds our hearts in Christian love." It gathers us into a tightly-knit spiritual family (also known as the Holy Christian Church) with God as our dear Father and Jesus Christ as our beloved Brother...a family whose fears, hopes, aims, comforts, and cares are the same...a family that shares its mutual woes and bears its mutual burdens...a family whose unity cannot be disturbed even when its members are separated by many miles. Not even death itself is able to destroy the unity of the family of God because on the Last Day He will summon them from the grave and take them into heaven. There they will enjoy an eternity of happiness together with God and all His sons and daughters.

The Unity of the Early Believers

The Spirit-worked unity described above has been in evidence among Christians from the earliest days of the Church. In the book of Acts Luke informs us about the activities of the Jerusalem believers in the days following Pentecost. He writes, for example:

"All the believers were together and had everything in common...Every day they continued to meet together in

the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts." (Acts 2:44,46 -NIV).

"All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had." (Acts 4:32 - NIV)

Later on when these Christians - due to bitter persecution - were forced to flee from Jerusalem and travel to other parts of the empire, their unity in the faith (and their reciprocal love which flowed out of this faith as a natural by-product) continued to manifest itself. In the opening verses of II Corinthians 8, we hear Paul commending the churches of Macedonia for their generosity and eager willingness to share their material blessings with their Christian brethren. Farther on in that same chapter (and in the next) we hear about a collection which the Corinthian congregation was in the process of gathering up for the poor believers in Judea. And there are other similar examples.

Something else which bears witness to the marvelous unity and love with those early Christians shared are the greetings which we find Paul including at the close of most of his New Testament letters. This one is typical:

"The churches of Asia greet you. Aquila and Priscilla greet you heartily in the Lord, with the church that is in their house. All the brethren greet you. Greet one another with a holy kiss...The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. My love be with you all in Christ Jesus" (I Cor.16:19-20,23-24).

Surely, only those whose hearts are "bound together in Christian love" would be moved to write such touching

words in their correspondence with one another. (No doubt the letters Paul received from his fellow-Christians contained similar love-greetings.)

The reason why the Jerusalem Christians made use of every opportunity available to them for fellowship and why, after they were scattered to far-flung regions of the world, they sought to remain in contact with each other (to the extent possible in those times) is obvious. The days were evil. Persecutions were severe. The temptation to abandon the Christian religion and to give up "contending earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints" was strong. If those early believers were to continue as a united family in Christ they needed their faith in Christ bolstered regularly. The way they accomplished this (actually it was the Savior who accomplished it!) was by gathering together in worship and prayer, the celebration of the Sacrament, and the study of the Scriptures. They also recognized the importance of keeping in touch with their distant brethren through letters since "face-to-face fellowship" with them was impossible.

Contending for the Faith Still Necessary

What about today? Is it still necessary for believers in Jesus to "contend earnestly for the faith"? Is it important for twentieth century disciples of the Lord to utilize the opportunities given them for Christian fellowship, for worship and prayer, celebration of the Lord Supper, and Scripture study? The obvious answer is "yes." For we also are faced with temptations to give up contending for the faith even as those early believers were. We still live in a world that persecutes Christians with the hoped for end of breaking them of their religious convictions. True, we are not confronted with the same kinds of persecution with which the first century believers were confronted. We

don't have to be afraid of being thrown into an arena with a bunch of ferocious lions. There are no laws which give others the right to come and arrest us and throw us in jail on account of what we believe. We will probably never have to endure the kind of physical and mental torture which Paul and countless other Christians of his day had to endure. In our country we're blessed with religious freedom. The Constitution of the United States guarantees us the right to believe and worship as we please. And yet...the persecutions are there. They've just taken on a more subtle form. Consider, for example:

- The TV programs and videos which promote attitudes and behavior that stand in direct opposition to the Word of God and which send to viewers the message: "The moral standard of the Ten Commandments is obsolete! There are no absolutes when it comes to right and wrong! And if you believe otherwise you're a fool!"
- The evolutionists who keep bombarding us (in newspaper articles, books and magazines, TV nature shows, etc.) with their belief (of course, they would call it "fact") that the world came into existence as a result of the Big Bang and that humans are the descendants of apes. What are they saying to Christians except that their belief in an all-powerful Creator-God is ridiculous and that the teaching of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ is nonsense?
- Those in the religious community who, on the basis of "critical scholarship" contend that is no longer possible to assume the inerrancy of the Scriptures. What are they saying except that those who still hold to the inerrancy of Scripture are stupid and naive people?

From all that has been said it is clear that the need and importance for believers to assemble around Word and Sacrament for mutual encouragement in the faith is as important today as it was many years ago. (If anything it's more important in these last evil times.) It is through His Word and Sacrament that God supplies His children with the spiritual stamina they will need to withstand the assaults which the devil and the unbelieving world are making upon their faith. This is how He gives us power and ability to "hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering" and to continue as a tightly-knit spiritual family in Him.

Membership In A Local Church A Great Blessing

It naturally follows from all of this that membership, first of all, in a local church is a tremendous blessing and boon to God's Christians. Here is an "oasis" to which they may return again and again to quench their spiritual thirst as they travel through the barren desert of this world with all its pressures and problems and temptations. Here the Bread of Life is offered to them every Sunday for the nourishing of their soul. Regular times are scheduled for the celebration of the Lord's Supper. In, with, and under the earthly elements of bread and wine He gives them His true body and blood for the assurance of their forgiveness, the strengthening of their Christian life, and the confirmation of their hope of eternal glory. Other opportunities for fellowship and growth in the faith are also offered them as members of a local congregation: Bible classes, Ladies' Aid meetings, church choir, and other church functions. Parents are blessed with the opportunity to enroll their children in Sunday School, Confirmation Class, and perhaps even a Christian Day School (as a supplement to the Christian training they provide their children in the home).

Would anyone like to venture a guess as to how much the above-mentioned blessings are worth? I don't think so. For the simple reason that it can't be done! All the money in the world cannot compare in value to the spiritual blessings showered upon us by the Lord through His Word and Sacraments. As believers in the Lord Jesus we agree heartily with the psalmist who wrote: "The law of Your mouth is better to me than thousands of shekels of gold and silver...Through your precepts I get understanding; therefore I hate every false way. Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path" (Psalm 119:72,104-105).

Membership In A Synod Also A Valuable Blessing

Now perhaps the reader may be wondering: But what does all this have to do with the title of our essay "The Blessings and Benefits of Synodical Membership"? Really it has a lot to do with it. We've already noted the blessings God showers upon us through our membership in a local congregation. Well, He also blesses us in many similar ways through our membership in a synod. Or to put it somewhat differently: Just as the Lord uses membership in a local congregation to help strengthen the individual Christian in his faith and in his commitment to the cause of Christ, even so He uses membership in a synod to help strengthen groups of Christians in their faith and in their commitment to the cause of Christ.

What are some of the opportunities for fellowship that God has given us through membership in our synod, the CLC, which serve to strengthen us in the faith? The following are a few examples:

- Joint Reformation services
- Special Mission Festivals services

- Ladies' fellowship gatherings
- Conferences and conventions
- Pastoral "study clubs"
- Special events on the campus of ILC (like concerts, musicals, plays, graduations, sports tournaments)
- Retreats for "Adult seniors" and "Christian singles"
- Summer youth camps

If there were no "Church of the Lutheran Confession" these opportunities for Christian fellowship and mutual encouragement in the faith would not be available to us. And the blessings we have come to enjoy as a result of these opportunities would be missing. It is, of course, true that all are not able to participate personally in the above-named activities, oftentimes due to the great distances that separate some of our congregations. Nevertheless, ALL may find great encouragement and joy in the knowledge that they have a host of spiritual brethren who are united with them in a confessional family and who have the same goals and objectives for their lives as they do, namely, to worship and serve the Lord Jesus and to continue steadfast in the Truth of His Holy Word unto eternal life. They may also find it uplifting to remember that their Christian brethren – even if they are separated from them by many miles – continue to hold them close in their thoughts and prayers.

There are also other benefits and blessings which God has given to us as members of the CLC:

- The privilege of being able to support our synod's mission program. Through our gifts to "CLC Missions" we make it possible for missionaries to proclaim and spread the Good News of the Gospel in cities and lands where we ourselves cannot go. (In Nigeria and India, and the various "Home Mission Congregations" scattered throughout the United

States.) Thus we are able to fulfill the responsibility our Savior has given us in His Great Commission ("Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations...") in a marvelous way.

- The opportunity to support and maintain Immanuel Lutheran High School and College in Eau Claire, to which we may also send our young people for Christian training and education (additional faith-bolstering!). Here also is where young men are trained for the preaching ministry and young men and women for the teaching ministry. Where would our pastors and teachers come from if there were no ILC? Where would ILC be if there were no synod called the CLC? The school would not exist!

Let us mark well and remember these benefits and blessings which God, in His rich grace and mercy, has poured out on us as members of the Church of the Lutheran Confession from the time of our synod's founding. And may our hearts swell with praise and thanksgiving together with the hymnist, Johann Mentzer, who wrote:

Oh, that I had a thousand voices
To praise my God with thousand tongues!
My heart which in the Lord rejoices,
Would then proclaim in grateful songs
To all, wherever I might be,
What great things God hath done for me.
(Hymn 30:1)

A Closing Word

In this essay we have recounted some of the benefits and blessings that come to us as members of the Church of the Lutheran Confession. Now, after all is said and

and done, a practical question that presents itself is: What can we do to help preserve the unity which the Lord has created among us? How may we reinforce "the tie that binds" so that it will become increasingly stronger and never "come loose"?

At this point we refer the reader back to what was said earlier about the opportunities for Christian fellowship given us as members of the CLC. It was mentioned that not all members of the CLC are able to participate personally in "synod activities" (joint Reformation services, mission festivals, conferences and conventions, etc.) oftentimes due to the distances involved. Nevertheless, there are many who are able to participate. And we should to encourage our people to make use of these special opportunities for their own spiritual benefit and the health and welfare of our synod.

And let us not forget that there is something that everyone can do, no matter what congregation of the synod they happen to belong to: They can lift up holy hands in prayer for their brethren. They can petition the Lord to keep the CLC under the umbrella of His grace and mercy, to always bless its members with a joyous faith in the Savior who lived, died, and rose for them, and to use this wondrous Gospel message to motivate and energize them to eager and active participation in the work of His kingdom (whether on the congregational level or the synodical level).

For that, finally, is what it's all about! We have been called to be witnesses for Christ. We have been duly commissioned by God to spread the Good News of forgiveness and salvation so that His name may be glorified among men. As Peter wrote: "You are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him

who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light" (I Peter 2:9).

And this also is the reason for our existence as a synod: to draw individual Christians and congregations into a close-knit confessional family in the Lord that they may with a bold and confident faith in Him carry on the all-important work He has given them of preaching the Good News of the Gospel to every creature. May the Lord so bless us and our CLC.

And we pray:

O Lord, let this Thy little flock,
Thy name alone confessing,
Continue in Thy loving care,
True unity possessing.
Thy Sacraments, O Lord,
And Thy saving Word
To us e'er pure retain.
Grant that they may remain
Our only strength and comfort.

Help us to serve Thee evermore
With hearts both pure and lowly;
And may Thy Word, that light divine,
Shine on in splendor holy
That we repentance show,
In faith ever grow;
The pow'r of sin destroy
And all that doth annoy.
Oh, make us faithful Christians.
(Hymn 477: 2,3)
