



Together we are strong!

A study of our unity in Christ

by
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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May God make this Bible study a blessing to all who read it and may He be glorified through it as we celebrate the true unity we have in Jesus Christ, our Lord.



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INTRODUCTION

With a thankful heart I received and accepted the invitation to prepare a Bible study for an organization of women I hold in highest regard, notwithstanding that, in a district LWML convention sermon, I referred to the organization as “a chain gang.” Believe me, it was a term of endearment. The theme of the convention was “Linked by Love.” The sermon was based on 1 John 4:7-11, which concludes with these words, “*Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.*” We are linked by love to God. But, it is not that we tossed the chain up to God, and He, therefore, loves us in return. That can’t happen anymore than a man standing on the pavement can toss a chain up to the boom of a crane. The crane slowly lowers the chain to the ground to be hooked to whatever is to be raised and moved to another location. It is “*not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as the atoning sacrifice for our sins.*”

This study emphasizes doctrine and practice. Christian doctrine is not stale bread. It speaks to us of the Bread of Life. It shapes the convictions and spiritual life that are pleasing to God. Therefore do not readily dismiss something because it is “too doctrinal.” In the document *Closed Communion in Contemporary Context*, it has been correctly observed that “The Scriptures are to be our source and norm for practice as well as for doctrine, because practice is based upon doctrine... Properly understood, ‘practice’ is not just ‘what we do,’ but what is required because of what we believe.” We do, however, have customs, traditions, and practices that are neither commanded nor forbidden by Scripture. It is my prayer that through study and discussion the participants will grow in understanding and be enabled to walk the talk concerning unity and its practical implications for daily life. How do we practise unity? How do we acknowledge and practise lack of unity?

The leader of this study is asked to consult other resources. If you do not have appropriate and helpful books, go to your church library or ask your pastor for assistance. You may find related topics helpful, such as the document referred to above by the Commission on Theology and Church Relations of Lutheran Church–Canada, entitled *Closed*

Communion in Contemporary Context. The Commission on Theology and Church Relations and the President of The Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod have produced a document entitled, *The Lutheran Understanding of Church Fellowship*. If you have computer savvy and are on the internet, please remember there are all kinds of helpful resources. Bible dictionaries, commentaries, concordances, sermons and devotions are available at the click of a mouse. Speaking of devotions, remember to begin your personal study with prayer. Ask yourself often, “What does this Bible verse have to say to me?”

Ironically, the subject of unity and church fellowship can be the source of heated discussions and exchanges. All of us have experienced the pain and the tension involved in external fellowship issues in the church. Some of the most painful sessions at district and synodical conventions have dealt with resolutions concerning church fellowship. It is not the purpose of this study to explore in depth altar and pulpit fellowship, closed communion and ecumenical activities.

Unity is the opposite of division. Let us rejoice that we are at one with our Creator because of the atonement achieved by the blood of Jesus, and let us celebrate the unity we have with one another. Let us rejoice in the unity members of the LWML have had for so many years with each other. The LWML has given countless women and men mountain-peak experiences in their spiritual journey. The source of joy has been our union with Christ and with each other in the body of Christ. The object of this study is to celebrate true and genuine unity.

The comments in the “Help For The Leader” section for each lesson are not intended to be explanations of the lesson content, although that may also happen. But the primary purpose of these brief paragraphs is to provide some additional thoughts to the subject under discussion. Prayers for the beginning of each class are submitted, but you may choose to read another prayer or compose your own prayer.

The Rev. Ronald Reisdorf

THE INCOMPREHENSIBLE NUMBER ONE

HELP FOR THE LEADER

It has been said that the Christian theologian must resist presenting the doctrine of the Holy Trinity in such a way as to make it comprehensible to reason. In his book, *Christian Dogmatics*, J.T. Mueller says:

Every attempt of this kind involves either a self-deception, i.e., the supposition that things have been explained which cannot be explained, or a surrender of the Christian doctrine of God. Nevertheless, though the doctrine of the Holy Trinity is beyond reason, it is not against reason or self-contradictory.... A real contradiction would exist only if the Christian doctrine would affirm: "There is one essence, and there are three essences; there is one person, and there are three persons." However, the Christian doctrine of God is: "There is one divine essence, and there are three divine Persons."

Of people, it must be said that there are as many essences as there are persons; but of God, Holy Scripture testifies that the three Persons of the Godhead have one and the same essence. The divine essence with its attributes is not divided among the three Persons, so the Father has one-third, the Son one-third, and the Holy Spirit one-third, but each Person has the whole divine essence entire and undivided. Neither are there three sets of attributes, so the Father has one set, the Son another, and the Holy Spirit a third. As we confess in the Athanasian Creed, the three Persons are almighty, but there are not three Almighty's, but one Almighty.

God the Son became man, but God the Father and God the Holy Spirit did not. God the Father spoke to God the Son at His baptism, and God the Holy Spirit descended upon God the Son in the form of a dove. God the Son prays constantly to God the Father. And here is the mystery of all mysteries: God the Father withdraws from God the Son as God the Son bears the sin of all mankind on the cross. In agony the Son cries, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Great is the mystery and how great is the love that drove the Father to forsake His Son so we never have to experience being forsaken by God. God does not present Himself as a mystery or a puzzle for us to solve but as a God who is to be worshiped, praised, and glorified for who He is and what He does.



P

PRAYER

Lord God, You are beyond the capability of our reason and understanding. Yet You have revealed Yourself in Your holy Word as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Heavenly Father, You have created us and provide our daily needs. Lamb of God, You have redeemed us with Your precious blood and gained for us eternal life. Holy Spirit, You have made this salvation gained for us our very own. How can we praise You enough for being the God You are and thank You enough for what You have done for us? Forgive us when our hearts falter and our words fail to give You the glory and praise You deserve. In Your holy Word, You revealed Your love for us and that You want us to have the joy of eternal salvation. Grant that our study together will not be made in vain by indifferent and callous hearts but that we will grow in knowledge and wisdom, be lifted up in spirit and strengthened for service in Your kingdom. We pray this in the name of Jesus. Amen.

S

STUDY GUIDE

We tried twice in the heat of an August afternoon to solve the puzzle of a maze in a cornfield, also known as a maize maze. Trying to work our way through the complicated network of paths with many blind alleys, we ended up at the entrance instead of at the exit both times and decided to give it up. If you have the time and inclination to get lost in a cornfield, you won't be disappointed trying this increasingly popular summer activity. The puzzle can be solved because many emerged successfully through the exit by patiently working at it for about two hours.

Shall we who have difficulty with a maze try to solve the mystery of an incomprehensible God? The doctrine of God is a mystery so great that it is beyond reason, not against reason, but beyond it. This inability to comprehend God is not a cause for sorrow. Our God would be too small if we could totally comprehend and understand Him. After all, are there not things in this universe that we cannot understand? Who can comprehend the vastness of the galaxies? Should our God be so small we can fit Him into the pocket of our limited

reason? What kind of a God would that be? Yet the church fathers have been so helpful in formulating creeds and confessions based on the clear teaching of Scripture concerning our God that we boldly, together with Christians the world over, confess our faith in the one true God. This is what we firmly believe no matter how many times we say the word “incomprehensible” in our confessions of faith.

The incomprehensible God is one God. The Nicene Creed begins with “I believe in one God.” The Athanasian Creed boldly declares that the catholic faith is this, “that we worship one God in three Persons and three Persons in one God....” The Augsburg Confession says, “There is one Divine Essence, which is called and which is God.” Let there be no doubt that these words formulated by men express what the Scriptures teach.

Exodus 20:2-3 *I am the Lord, your God...You shall have no other gods before me.*

Deuteronomy 6:4 *Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God is one Lord.* (KJV)

Isaiah 45:5 *I am the Lord, and there is no other; apart from me there is no God.*

Isaiah 45:21-22 *There is no God apart from me, a righteous God and a Savior; there is none but me. Turn to me and be saved, all you ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is none other.*

1 Corinthians 8:4 *We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world, and that there is no God but one.*

The Scriptural doctrine of the Holy Trinity is absolutely incomprehensible to the human mind. My pastor often made such statements when he was instructing us in Confirmation Class. I remember wondering why he couldn't figure it out when I thought I had it all straight in my mind. I have forgotten the reason for my adolescent arrogance, but it probably had something to do with thinking each person of the Trinity was one-third of God. I had not yet grasped that the Christian faith, on the basis of Scripture, professes one undivided and indivisible God so each person is the entire God. There are three Persons, each of them not one-third of God but each totally and fully God. That is part of the mystery of the Trinity I cannot comprehend or solve.

The consolation is that God is not out there like a maze in a cornfield, waiting for us to figure out the alpha and the omega of His being and, once we've solved the mystery of the Godhead, rewards us

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*Without the work
of the Father
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with freedom. He is the God who makes Himself known in His actions. As a matter of fact His name in Hebrew (YHWH, which with vowels added becomes Yahweh) is a verb. Israel's God was a God who did things, in contrast to the idols of surrounding nations who had ears that could not hear and mouths that could not speak. This is the God who makes things happen.

This is the God who created us. See how Genesis 1 is supported by Romans 4:17; Hebrews 11:3; Psalm 33:6,9; Amos 4:13.

This is the God who redeemed us. *“Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us.” Galatians 3:13. “In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding.” Ephesians 1:7,8.* The ransom has been paid. We have been delivered from the bondage of sin and death – a deliverance accomplished through the blood of Christ; that is, through His atoning death. Pause to reflect on the words, “the riches of God’s grace that he lavished on us.” Does that sound like He did only half a job at redeeming us and there is something further we need to do to achieve redemption? See also Galatians 4:4-5, 1 Peter 1:18-19.

This is the God who sanctified us. *“You were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.” 1 Corinthians 6:11.* See also 1 Corinthians 2:14.

Without the work of the Father, we would not exist. Without the work of the Son, we would still be in our sins. Without the work of the Holy Spirit, we would not believe what Jesus has done for us. But these works are not the exclusive domain of the Persons to which they are ascribed.

Whenever we focus upon one Person of the Holy Trinity, we always find the other Persons close by. The Holy Trinity always works as a unit. We may identify one activity primarily with one Person of the Trinity. For example, we usually think of creation as the Father’s work. However, we discover the other two Persons working in concert. The Son and the Spirit also had a hand in creation. While we think of our redemption primarily as the work of God the Son, the Father and the Spirit were much involved also. (Sharing the Christian Faith by Frank D. Starr)

Our God is the faithful and merciful God, who by His nature and works evokes fear and reverence. Nothing in heaven or on earth can

compare with the grace of God, with the love of Jesus, and with the work of the Holy Spirit.

The Lord our God is one. The big question is this; “Is He number one in your life?” What people, ambitions, or things threaten to replace the one true God as the object of our worship, trust and loyalty? Consider Luther’s comment in his Large Catechism. “A god is that to which we look for all good and in which we find refuge in every time of need. To have a god is nothing else than to trust and believe him with our whole heart.... That to which your heart clings and entrusts itself is, I say, really your god.”

A modern writer has issued this reminder, “As far as the Bible is concerned there are only two kinds of gods available to man — the real one and the phony one, but there are multitudinous variations of the phony god, ranging from the intellectually sublime to the childishly ridiculous — and vice versa. All phony gods, however, have this one thing in common: It kills your soul to worship one of them.”

DISCUSSION

1. In what ways is our God an awesome God?
2. In what sense are we to fear God?
3. In what way are we *not* to fear God?
4. What is the good that God makes happen according to Exodus 34:6?
5. Comment on the following, “It is the greatest insult to our most precious ‘Lord-companion’ if we, like slaves, crawl in the dust before Him instead of walking as children, at his helping hand.”
6. What qualities or attributes of God are listed in the following verses:

John 4:24	Leviticus 19:2
Psalms 90:2	Deuteronomy 32:4
Malachi 3:6	2 Timothy 2:13
Luke 1:37	Psalms 145:9
John 21:17	Psalms 145:8
Jeremiah 23:24	

UNITED WITH THE INCOMPREHENSIBLE



HELP FOR THE LEADER

Ask yourself what you can do to create a sense of wonder and amazement in this lesson. Here we have this incredible awesome God, the Creator of the universe, who condescends to make us part of Him. “What is man that thou art mindful of him?” What an incredible thing it is for Christ to bind us to Himself through His Word! How fantastic it is to be a member of the body of Christ! What a wondrous thing is this that we, who were once strangers and foreigners, should be made members of the household of God! Work at presenting the fantastic imagery of being united with God and what that means for us. If we are united with Him, does that not mean His desire for the world becomes our desire for the world? His mission becomes our mission, and His Word becomes the Word we share. Can we offer the world anything better than what God Himself offers and provides?



PRAYER

Heavenly Father, many are talking about the importance of connections these days, but so many people we know do not realize how important it is to be connected to You. We thank You that in Holy Baptism You have united us to Yourself. We belong to You. We have no greater connections than the love that binds us to You. We pray that You will enlighten our hearts so we will increasingly see how much You want to use us as Your instruments to bring the good news of salvation to those who do not know You. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

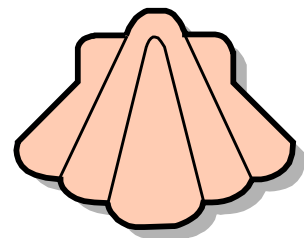
STUDY GUIDE

There is an emphasis today on being connected. “It is not what you know, it is who you know that counts.” This is a somewhat cynical observation often made with a tinge of bitterness. A woman, who feels she is more qualified for a job in terms of knowledge, experience and capability, laments that she didn’t get the job because “the winning applicant knows the boss’s son very well.” In a positive sense, Christianity is all about being connected. It is all about a relationship. The gospel we believe and teach is not general information about God, about ourselves, and the world in which we live, but it is very specific, very direct, and a very person-oriented message. And the Person is Jesus Christ. *“I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you ... that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scripture...” 1 Corinthians 15:1,3,4.*

The Gospel is very specific information concerning salvation. It is a gigantic entry on the information highway. But it is much more than information. The devil also knows about Jesus. The gospel is *“the power of God for salvation.” Romans 1:16 RSV.* By the power of the gospel, through baptism I am connected to the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. *“We have been buried with Christ through baptism into death through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.” Romans 6:4.* We need to be united with Jesus in His death and resurrection. Baptism makes that connection.

It is interesting to note how the Scriptures speak of Christianity in terms of connections. We are not balloons floating in the air but branches connected to a vine. We are not donated organs in a lab, waiting to be attached to a compatible recipient. We are not sheep without a shepherd. We are not an army without a captain. In our baptism we were united with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We belong to God. We are members of the body of Christ. That is some connection!

The connection is for life with daily benefits. It is not the same as saying; “I once shook hands with the Queen.” That would have been a touching experience, fondly remembered, but nothing to sustain me every day. It is, of course, historically correct to say, “I was baptized.” But when we say, “I am baptized,” we are talking about a state of being. I have a new life to live each day because of my connection to Jesus in baptism. *“I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by*



faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”
Galatians 2:20.

It is important to consider where and what you have come from to be able to appreciate where and what you are now. The biography of every Christian has these two elements, sin and grace. It is best to remember this when paying tribute to a person at his funeral. Sin is not just something we do that is contrary to God’s will, but it is a condition with which we came into the world. *“As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of the world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient.”* *Ephesians 2:1-2.* We were part of the crowd seeking only to gratify the cravings of our sinful nature and follow its desires and thoughts. That is how we were. It is not a pretty picture. It is a picture of a life separated from God.

How precious are the words that speak to us of God connecting us to Himself again! *“Because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions – it is by grace you have been saved.”* *Ephesians 2:4-5.* Look at Romans 6:3-7. Talk about being connected! Baptized into His death. Buried with Him through baptism. United with Him in His death. United in His resurrection. Through faith we are united with the second Adam, just as in our natural birth we were united with the first Adam.



DISCUSSION

1. What does it mean to be saved by grace?
2. In what ways do we sometimes resort to “gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and follow its desires and thoughts?”
3. What is different about us now, and how did it come about? Who gets the credit for us being united in Christ?
4. Comment on the statement, “To be united with Christ is already a heavenly experience on earth.”

5. It is clear, from a study of Ephesians, we did not initiate the unity we have in Christ. Read Ephesians 2:4-5. Read also Ephesians 1:1-3. We did not on our own, out of the clear blue sky, decide one day we wanted to be members of the body of Christ. Before the creation of the world, God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ planned our redemption, chose us to be His sons and daughters, and blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

*We did not
initiate the unity
we have in Christ.*

UNITED WITH EACH OTHER



HELP FOR THE LEADER

One of the great chapters of the Bible on unity is Ephesians 4. “This chapter describes the very nature of the Church. Only those who believe are members of Christ’s body.... The Christian faith possesses a uniting power. It binds human hearts together... It is not true that Christians must through their own efforts, consultation, and agreement bring about this union. It is the creation of God.... This union endures beyond death and even beyond the end of the earth.... The Church of God at the present is still a hidden thing.... It exhibits certain visible well-known and recognized marks, Word and Sacraments.”

The importance of being united, sticking together, is seen also in the animal kingdom. A few years ago there was an interesting article in a Canadian nature magazine, entitled “Togetherness: The Logic of the Herd.” The article gave, among other things, these three examples of animals “sticking together” for survival:

★ A herd of musk oxen will form a distinctive circle with heads facing outside the circle so an enemy attacking from any direction will be seen. It cannot sneak up on an animal from behind.

★ Monarch butterflies wintering in Mexico stick so close to each other they form a multi-coloured sheet without any gaps between the butterflies. The reason for this sticking together is because butterflies have a foul-tasting toxin; and, while predators can stomach a single butterfly, getting a whole mouthful of them at once is just too much toxin to digest.

★ The third example the author gave was his observation of pigeons lifting off from a barnyard in a remarkably tight formation. In city environs, pigeon flocks are loose and erratic in their flight. But here they were flying closely together. Then he saw why this was so. High above the flock, a falcon was descending for the kill. Suddenly it had a change of heart because it knew that a midair collision with the flock of pigeons at 150 miles per hour would fracture its own wing bones. So it resorted to a flapping pursuit on the edge, hoping that a

single pigeon would separate from the crowd. The pigeons, knowing what was good for them, stuck together.

The above illustrations from nature were used in a confirmation sermon. What point do you suppose the pastor was trying to make?

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, You have not only united us to Yourself but also united us with all who believe in You. When we ponder what that means, we begin to realize we are part of a vast company of those who have been called out of darkness into the kingdom of light. Lord, help us to rejoice in the fellowship we have with all those who believe in You. Blessed indeed is the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love. Through the study of Your Word, help us to make a good confession of the faith once delivered to the saints. Do not let us stray from Your Word and be drawn in by false doctrine that may sound good to itching ears. Help us to maintain true unity among us. We pray this in the name of Jesus. Amen.

THE STUDY GUIDE

There is a unity that just might not be getting enough attention among us because we tend to be preoccupied with what we can see, and we do not give enough attention to the unseen. This unity is the unity of all those who belong to the one holy Christian and apostolic Church. This invisible unity is precious beyond human imagination. The faith by which we become members of the Church is invisible to human eyes; therefore the Church is invisible to man. Read Luke 17:20-21. The fact that this one Church exists, that there is such an entity as the communion of saints, and that we belong to it, should cause us unspeakable joy. When we get to that part of the Creed in which we say, "I believe in the holy Christian Church, the communion



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of saints,” we ought to be beaming with gratitude to God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, whose very being and work we are confessing. What a sight it would be if we could see the whole Church in heaven and on earth, all Christians who have died in the faith and gone to heaven, and all Christians still living in the world! What a sight it shall be! Meanwhile it should not trouble us that the Church is invisible. What counts is that the Lord knows those who are His (2 Timothy 2:19). What counts is that we examine ourselves to see whether we belong to the invisible Church. If we believe in Jesus, we pass the test. Read 2 Corinthians 13:5 and 2 Timothy 1:12. Why can we be as confident as Paul was? Be sure to also read the context of the latter passage, especially 2 Timothy 1:8-12.

What a thrill it was for Germany and the whole world when the Berlin wall was sledge-hammered to pieces, and came crumbling down in 1990! We could hardly believe what we were seeing on television. But an even greater barrier, *a wall of hostility*, has been destroyed. Read Ephesians 2:11-22. These verses are often entitled, “One in Christ.” Here Paul talks about the separation between two groups of people, Jews and Gentiles. Concepts highlighting the differences are: circumcised as opposed to uncircumcised; citizenship in Israel as opposed to foreigners to the covenants of the promise. The Gentiles were without hope and without God in the world. But now something great and wonderful has happened. “*In Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ.*” Eph. 2:13. The purpose of Christ was to create in Himself one new man out of two and to reconcile both groups to God through the cross. “*Through him we both have access to the Father, by one Spirit.*” Eph. 2:18. The result for Gentiles is, “*You are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household.*” Eph. 2:19.

The Church is one. The eye beholds a multiplicity of Christian churches belonging to a wide variety of denominations, and the beholder forgets there is one invisible Church. There is one fold and one Shepherd. There is only one body of Christ, one temple of the Lord, one building, and only one family of God. One. One. One.

“*There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one Baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all.*” Ephesians 4:4-6 RSV. One Lord refers to Jesus Christ. One faith refers to that which is believed. One baptism is the initial sacrament, the one whereby we enter the one church. For this reason, the Lord’s

Supper is not mentioned. The Nicene Creed repeats this thought: “I acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins.”

It is interesting to note the correlation. Body and spirit are always together in a living body. “In this spiritual body God’s own Holy Spirit dwells, not a single part of this body, not a single member of it is without the Spirit. If we have the Holy Spirit, we belong to the body. If we belong to the body, we have the Holy Spirit.”

DISCUSSION

1. What is the one hope referred to in Ephesians 4:4?
2. What can you say in the light of this passage to the person who asks, “Do you have the Holy Spirit?”

When we become members of Christ’s body, we are united with all believers in Christ. This unity exists apart from any church declaration regarding altar and pulpit fellowship, ecumenical worship services, closed communion and the like. The unity we have in Christ is not established by or voided by any decision of a church body or congregation. There is one body. Christ is the Head of that body. We are united in one body with all believers in Christ.

It is not the purpose of this study to treat the subjects of altar and pulpit fellowship, ecumenical relationships and related matters. For detailed studies of these matters the participant is referred to excellent documents prepared by the Commissions on Theology and Church Relations of Lutheran Church – Canada and The Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod. But it is perhaps necessary to also acknowledge here, in view of what has been said above, that, in a fallen world, unity in the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments does not exist among all Christians. Our theologians have correctly made a distinction between internal and external unity.

While the church’s unity is perfect and known only to God (Eph. 1:4) the limits of external fellowship are determined by whether the Gospel is preached purely and the sacraments are administered according to Christ’s institution. The Gospel and the sacraments are in



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themselves always pure. In this way they create and preserve the church in her hidden unity throughout the world. Yet when church bodies make public confession of the Gospel and the sacraments, tragically some obscure or explicitly contradict the teaching of the Gospel and the proper administration of the sacraments. For this reason the limits or the boundaries of the external fellowship are creeds and confessions. Churches in altar and pulpit fellowship share the same confession, including the rejection of errors that contradict this confession. Where churches cannot agree on a common confession, the basis for fellowship does not exist.

False doctrine always has the potential of destroying unity. Error threatens fellowship with Christ and with the saints. Genuine love requires that Christians teach sound doctrine, defend the truth of God's Word and warn that error leads people away from Christ, not to Him. Christ's church is not a political party or a service club adjusting its position on doctrinal issues according to the wishes of the people and the expectations of contemporary culture. "The Scriptures teach that, under certain conditions, Christians are to withhold certain outward expressions of fellowship." What do the following passages have to say about separation?

Romans 16:17-18

Titus 3:9-11

2 John 7-11

Galatians 1:6-9

Sometimes people talk as though disunity is a good thing because the differences in denominations offer people a variety of options in doctrine and practice. The Lord Jesus does not want the church to be divided. Nor does He want a "pretend" unity. Jesus prayed, "*My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.*" *John 17:20-21.* We need to pray for unity as Jesus prayed for unity. We have an obligation to follow the instruction given in Ephesians 4:3, "*Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.*" The meaning is "to be zealous to preserve."

DISCUSSION

1. What is our responsibility in regard to preserving unity?
2. What bearing does Ephesians 4:2 have on preserving peace?
3. Would you agree with the statement, “As soon as these virtues listed in Ephesians 4:2 are disregarded, the result is dissension and disagreement, division and sectarianism?”

We need to celebrate the unity existing among us in the common confession of faith we have in the LWML, our congregations, Lutheran Church–Canada and with all those with whom we have altar and pulpit fellowship. Preserving external unity also requires prayer and vigilance. Here also we have an obligation to follow the instruction given in Ephesians 4:3, “*Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.*” What endangers unity among us? What can we do to promote unity in our midst?

The church in Arizona which my wife and I attend during the winter is a young, thriving church attended by many other snowbirds. The sanctuary has chairs instead of pews, and they are often a little too close to each other. For years I have had a whole chancel to myself, except when sharing it with a guest preacher. It takes some adjustment to be comfortable being confined to the width of a chair. Almost every Sunday we are sitting beside somebody we don’t know. But what unity one feels with these strangers! There is the familiarity with the hymns and liturgy, the confession of sin and the confession of faith. You don’t have to know their names or where they come from to know you are united with them in Christ, in confessions, in celebration. What a feeling! It is quite unlike riding on a crowded subway in which you sometimes don’t know whether or not you should make eye contact with a stranger.





DISCUSSION

1. If you have attended an opening worship service at a convention — district, synod, LWML–Canada, International LWML — share with the group your impressions. Did you feel a unity among strangers? Were you inspired by the louder-than-usual singing? Was the address edifying and inspirational?
2. Remember that Jesus said, “Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am in the midst of them.” What was the most meaningful small group devotion you have ever had?

In his book, *God’s Joyful People*, Dr. Oswald Hoffman, who himself is one of the most exuberant and joyful Christians I know, laments that we don’t see that joy as much as we ought in our congregations:

When you look around you in the church these days, you have to say to yourself: People certainly must have forgotten something. The people in the church are often so gloomy, so hostile to others and even to one another, so suspicious of everyone, so eager to find fault rather than to forgive, so solemn, so whisperingly quiet, so afraid to let something go, so unhappy. There isn’t anything our world needs more today than a church that is happy in its faith, happy in its love, happy in knowing Jesus Christ.



DISCUSSION

1. Do we sometimes let trivial matters rob us of the joy of our oneness in Christ?
2. Does a kind of sourness take place in the LWML and in our congregations?
3. What can we do to celebrate our oneness in Christ with greater joy?

LESSON FOUR

A UNITED FAMILY

HELP FOR THE LEADER

If time permits, share the following letter to the editor of the *Vancouver Sun*:

“Oh, you’re so lucky, all your family is grown and you have no more hard work.” How often we seniors hear this phrase. Well as parents of eight children and grandparents to 13, we’d like to describe how life really is. “No more crying babies.” No, but when we hear our adult kids cry, it tears us apart. “No more going to boring games just to root for your kids.” No, but how about an adult son who finished Douglas College with a high-B average? Who doesn’t even smoke. A true family man who can’t get a steady job even with an excellent résumé so he works for anything at less than \$10 an hour. How often can you silently root for him while saying, “Things will get better” – when they never do? “No more walking the floors with crying little ones.” No, but how we wish colds and chicken pox were all we worry about. Now its cancer, not once but twice, while our 35 year old daughter and her teenage son both fight to stay in remission. Yes, it’s hard having little ones. There’s no money and little time to oneself. We remember, but we also know the agony of seeing our adult children’s pain. Unlike when they were little and kisses helped to solve their problems, there is little we can do now except pray. But remember to enjoy these hard years, too. Cherish them. They end all too soon. Life isn’t easier now; it is just different.

The editors considered this to be the letter of the day. Can you relate to it in any way? Why do you think our Saviour went through the stages of life we go through?



P

PRAYER

Almighty Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named: We thank You for family life. We acknowledge that except You build our house, we labour in vain. We pray for our children and for our grandchildren, that they may grow up rejoicing in Your love and mercy. Give parents the grace to train their children in the way in which You want them to walk. Equip them to use both Law and Gospel so children may come to know sin and its consequences and learn that You have given Your Son to absolve guilt, replace imperfection with His perfection, and change the destiny of wrath and punishment for a destiny of everlasting life and eternal bliss. Lead us in Your ways by Your Fatherly hand. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

S

STUDY GUIDE

Currently there are these annoying and only somewhat funny beer commercials in which the participants grunt, hiss, mumble, and groan, “Wassup?” After exchanging some wassups at an animal level, one will finally say, “Nothin’, just havin’ a Bud.” Would you believe there are several hundred internet sites with the word *wassup*? People must really be bored. Did I hear you say “boring”? Can a family survive on “wassup”?

It was the end of the day. My wife and I had been baby-sitting two of our grandchildren, and we had just finished having dinner with their parents. My five-year-old grandson was standing beside me, and I had my arm around him and was jostling a little with him. We were having a pleasant conversation, rehearsing the events of the day and other matters with the parents, when all of a sudden the five-year-old said, “This is nice.” My wife and I talked about that for quite a while on our 45-minute journey home. He had made our day with a three-word comment. It is so much better than “wassup?”. My computer spell checker really has difficulty with that one. It always wants to

split it into “was up.” Hopefully, by the time you read this, “wassup?” will indeed be “was up.”

Unity is so nice. It is nice for families, for members of congregations, for members of the LWML, and members of any organization. To communicate in a meaningful way and live in harmony is so very nice. The emphasis here is on Christian unity. *“How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity!” Psalm 133:1.* Charles Spurgeon writes concerning this verse, “The combination of the two adjectives ‘good’ and ‘pleasant’ is more remarkable than the conjunction of two stars of the first magnitude: for a thing to be ‘good’ is good, but for it also to be ‘pleasant’ is better. All men love pleasant things, and yet frequently the pleasant is evil; but here the condition is as good as it is pleasant, as pleasant as it is good.” Just think about that. Unity is both good and pleasant. In unity there is strength. Is it not worth trying to achieve and preserve?

It is pleasant to have much in common, but we can also enjoy each other’s individuality and differences, even in marriage, without destroying unity. Billy Graham once said, “If my wife and I would be the same, one of us would be unnecessary.” Again Spurgeon, in a broader context, says:

We can dispense with uniformity if we possess unity: oneness of life, truth, and way, oneness in Christ Jesus, oneness of object and spirit — these we must have or our assemblies will be synagogues of contention rather than churches of Christ.... Since we are imperfect beings, somewhat of the evil and the unpleasant is sure to intrude; but this will readily be neutralized and easily rejected by the true love of the saints, if it really exists.

That brings us to a word we have not used enough in this study and that is the word *love*. This love is not mere liking and affection as covered by the word *philia*. This love is the love that loves the unlovable as Lenski describes it, “the love of intelligent comprehension united with corresponding blessed purpose. So God loved the world, understood all its depravity and purposed to remove it.” This love is expressed in the word *agape*. God is love. *“Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God.... This is how God showed his love among us. He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.” 1 John 4:7a, 9,10.*



Concerning this verse George Stoeckhardt writes, “If we want to find out what love is, we must look to God as the One who is love. Not man, but God has originated love. He was the first One to love. All efforts to love would have failed, had God not loved them first.”

God showed us what love is by sending His Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. See the unity achieved here in the atoning sacrifice. Atonement = at-one-ment. We have been made at one with God through the sacrifice of His Son. We are reconciled to God by the blood of the Son of God. See 1 John 2:2. Here we learn what love is.

This is the Gospel of God’s love, pure and undefiled. But there is another doctrine God has given us that we dare not overlook and that is the Law.

Unless we hear the sin-exposing Law proclaimed clearly from the pulpit, in Sunday School, and through daily devotions; and unless we are cut deeply by God’s Law which is “living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword,” we will easily go along with and adapt to the most pagan and godless morality of the society in which we live. We need to confess with the apostle Paul, “I would not have come to know sin except through the Law.” Romans 7:7.

Children who are fed God’s Word in its truth and purity will hear the Law. They will hear God has standards and rules by which He wants His people to live. They will hear God hates sin and threatens to punish all that transgress His holy will. What happens in a lawless family? The morning paper tells of an 11-year-old child holding up a bank. The mother has been charged with putting him up to it. A youth court worker said, “It’s a reflection of where the family unit is at these days.” How tragic! How very sad! How lawless!

When a youngster gets into trouble with the authorities, it is often assumed there hasn’t been enough supervision, there haven’t been enough rules to govern the child. Obviously, as illustrated in the above story, that can be the case. Is that what is behind the move to hold parents legally responsible for the crimes of their children? I am not speaking against that, but perhaps we need to look a little deeper. Is it lack of Law or a lack of Gospel causing problems in our homes, schools, and society? Is it a lack of both Law and Gospel properly proclaimed and exercised?

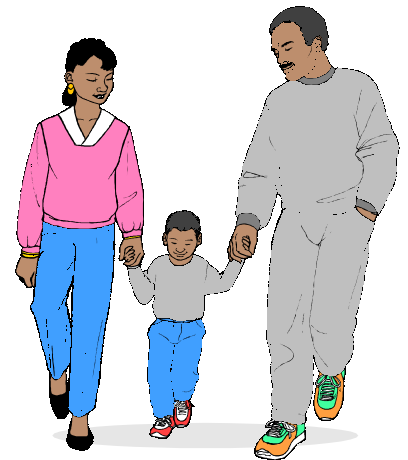
When does Law become too much Law? Well, this is probably true every day of the week for most people. Law not followed up with the Gospel is invariably too much Law. After all, consider there is not only the Law of God, but there are rules and regulations governing a

But there is another doctrine God has given us that we dare not overlook and that is the Law.

child's every hour. You have to clean your room. You have to study. You can't watch that much television. No, you can't have another ice cream cone today. Sit down and behave. No, you are too young to ride your bike to school. Are the rules bad? They are intended for the welfare of the child. That is also true of the Law of God. But what is there for the child who has not lived up to all the rules and regulations? What is there at the end of the day for the child who knows he has not lived up to what God expects? What is there for a child who knows there is such a thing as the anger of a parent, the anger of a schoolteacher, the anger of a policeman, and, most fearful of all, there is the wrath of God? The Law is always demanding, never forgiving, and always condemning; but the law is also necessary for salvation and for living a God-pleasing life. *"I would not have known what sin was except through the law."* Romans 7:7. Not knowing sin, we feel no need for a Saviour. The gospel is the good news of salvation in Christ Jesus. *"For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ."* John 1:17. The Gospel never demands, always forgives, and gives life and salvation. *"Now brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you ... that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scripture..."* 1 Corinthians 15:1,3-4.

We need to deal with others in our homes, LWML units, congregations, and in society in the same way in which God deals with us. God uses both Law and Gospel. Law and Gospel provide a Christ-centered lifestyle which God has given us to practise and enjoy. Great is the need for more Gospel. We can be certain that child who was allegedly coerced by his mother to rob a bank will hear plenty of law for the rest of his life. The question is, "Will he receive the forgiving, cleansing, healing power of the gospel?" Children need to experience forgiveness. They need to see it practised between their fathers and mothers.

A study in British Columbia showed that a feeling of family disconnection increases in children as they age. Parents, by their example, can show their children how lovely it is to dwell together in unity and peace. Christians are members one of another, and father and mother should be of one heart. Often children will play one parent against another. A young girl will come to her father and, with a charming smile, ask if she can go out and play. But the smile quickly vanishes when the father responds with, "What did Mother say?" The child knows her mother has just said, "You can't go out until you have cleaned your room." Pity the household in which the father knows



what the mother said and will give opposite instructions just to be ornery. How very much needed are the words of the apostle Paul, “*I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought.*” *1 Corinthians 1:10.*

Suggested Activity

Present a practical Law-Gospel approach to a typical day in an imaginary family. Needed are four volunteers — father, mother, son, and daughter. Determine ages, circumstances, strengths, problems, and ask the participants to come back next week or in two weeks, ready to enact a 10-15 minute Law-Gospel approach to family life. If practical, the group could meet ahead of time to outline the strategy. Have fun, but make the presentation pack a punch.



Look at the list of the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22. Note that love heads the list, is the mother of all other Christian virtues. “Jesus did not love the Pharisees with *philia* and does not ask us so to love our enemies. It is *agape* that He asks, the love that understands the hatefulness of the enemy and purposes to remove it.”

God Himself has made the beginning with love and has set the pattern for our love toward others. “*Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.*” *1 John 4:11.* It has been said nothing can warm and win the heart as effectively as can a reminder of God’s wonderful and infinite love in Christ toward us sinners.

God’s love is an everlasting love. It does not alter with the changing circumstances in our lives, whether those changes involve the changing role in the status of women or in family life. Considerable changes took place in the lives of women during the years I served congregations. At the beginning of my ministry, women did not attend council or voters’ meetings, or, if they did, they didn’t hold office or have a vote. Look in on any voters’ assembly or council meeting and you will find this is no longer the case. Women worked and they worked hard, but not as many worked outside the home as they do today. Few held public office. Not so today. The role of women in society has changed and is changing dramatically.

It is in itself no big deal that times are changing. Each and every woman at any time in history has undergone many changes during her life span. Every grown man and woman was at one time a baby in need of all the tender, loving care parents can offer. An adolescent, a teenager, a young adult, a middle-aged person, a senior, we have been there. At least those of us who are seniors have been there and are presently living that stage of our lives. We have been sustained through the various stages, the anxieties and frustration of the teen years, the education and career challenges of young adulthood.

DISCUSSION

1. Between the ages of 20 and 30 I left home, received my seminary education, courted my future wife, mainly by correspondence, got married, became the father of our first three children, and served my first parish. That is a lot of change for a 10-year period. Share with the group an approximate 10-year period of your life in which there were profound changes.
2. How were you strengthened and sustained during those years? Who played a significant role in helping you cope with the changes?
3. Bible heroes have feet of clay. That is often clearly shown in family life. Families have never been perfect. They never will be. Read Genesis 37:3-4. What mistake did Jacob make relative to his sons? The rest of the story is well-known Biblical history. How did God turn the treachery of the jealous brothers into something good? See Genesis 50: 19-20.



What about David? Adulterer. Murderer. David repented, and God forgave him without any strings attached. However there were consequences. Did not his sons also try to get away with sin? Absalom gathered a following and created a civil war. Another of David's sons raped his half-sister. What sorrow! What grief! But like a golden thread, God's mercy runs through the fabric of Bible history. God used David for the good of the nation and uses David's great Descendant for the good of the nations. Each Christmas we welcome "King David's royal heir." In Him and through Him we still see the golden thread of God's mercy also running through our family history.

It should be remembered that God's mercy, resulting in forgiveness and freedom, is not a license to do as we please in family life or in society. An old jingle has this spin on the subject.

Freed from the Law!
O happy condition!
I can sin as I please
And still have remission.

Not so, says the Bible. "*If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment...*" Hebrews 10:26-27. Instead may we be "dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus." See Romans 6:11.

But, like a golden thread, God's mercy runs through the fabric of Bible history.

LESSON FIVE

A UNITED NATION, EH

HELP FOR THE LEADER

This lesson is intended to begin with a lighter touch and to give people an opportunity to express what they like about the country, or name some of their heroes or favourite Canadian characters. Make the introduction fun. Do you say *eh*? Follow that with a sober look at what the Bible has to say about government and our relationship to government. This is a much bigger topic than many realize, for the Bible has much more to say about government than the admonition to pray and obey, although it is certainly a very important part of what the Bible has to say.

This topic rises above politics and political parties. It is not an easy subject. There are many tough questions, some of which you may not want to get into, such as what is a proper approach regarding paying taxes to support abortion. Challenging questions may arise regarding separation of church and state.

PRAYER

O God, most merciful and most gracious, You have told us in Your Word to pray for all people. We pray for the citizens and residents of this nation in which we are privileged to live. We pray for those who live in crowded cities and in quiet villages and remote country places. We pray that You would prosper agriculture and industry, and help us to use present and evolving technology for the welfare of the nation. Cleanse our national life from besetting sins. Fill our hearts with Your love and our homes with Your peace. For all the nations of the world, make an end of war, cruelty, oppression, and ignorance, and grant people everywhere justice and peace. Use us to bring Your saving gospel to every land. Hasten the coming of the kingdom of our Lord Jesus, in whose Name we pray. Amen.



S

THE STUDY GUIDE

My wife and I have lived in four provinces, Saskatchewan, Ontario, Manitoba, and now British Columbia and have visited all the other provinces, except Newfoundland. We know the country fairly well. We have noticed some unifying forces. It is good to travel the country and be able to listen to the CBC, our favourite station, no matter where we have lived.

As a fun starter, list some Canadians who have made significant contributions to the image of the country and, in a certain sense, define or at least have given a certain flavour to the country. I'll start you off: Pierre Trudeau, Maurice Richard, Wayne Gretzky, Anne Murray, and Peter Gzowski. You carry on.

People everywhere live with certain stereotypes relative to how other people see them. The truth is that you don't have to say 'eh' after almost every sentence to be a Canadian. The Joe guy from the beer commercial deals with some stereotypes. You know the rant that starts, "I'm not a lumberjack or a fur trader. I don't live in an igloo, or eat blubber or own a dog sled," and ends with a triumphant, "My name is Joe, and I'm Canadian." It has received much public attention, been mentioned in sermons, and written about in *The Canadian Lutheran*.

I get a real kick out of the CFL satirical clip in which these Canadian football players are in a pile-up and apologize to each other for their roughness, "My fault." "No, I'm sorry." And this new recruit asks the big man on the bench, "Are they always this polite?" He gets the answer, "Yep," and he shakes his head and mutters, "Weird." That goes along with what they say in Florida. "How do you get seven Canadians out of a swimming pool at once? You just ask them to leave."

D

DISCUSSION

1. What are some of the things in Canadian life that unite us?
2. Without discussing the issues themselves at this time, list some of the things that divide us.

Is there no Word from the Lord for a nation such as ours at a time such as this? We need to see the hand of God in government. When tracing the origin of human government, many scholars go back to the days of Noah. After the flood, God delegated the authority of avenging murder to human agents. *“Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed.” Gen. 9:6.* Here God instituted governmental authority. “Noah the father of the family was the first head, the first ruler, the first government in the new world, vested by the Lord himself with judicial authority, even the power of the sword, for the punishment of evildoers.”

The power of government, judicial authority granted by God, is seen in the life of Abraham, Moses, Joshua and the kings. A careful study of Bible history and the writings of Paul clearly reveals that God institutes government. What did Jesus tell Pilate? John 19:11. What does Paul tell us in Romans 13:1-2 concerning the origin of government? What else does he tell us?

Consider the fact that many holding official positions in the Roman Empire were dishonourable characters. The notorious Roman emperor Nero was in power when Paul wrote these words. *“I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone – for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. This is good and pleases God our Savior, who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.”*

1 Timothy 2:1-4.

In the following verses, what instructions are given to us in regard to government?

Romans 13:7

1 Peter 2:13

1 Timothy 2:12-13

Jeremiah 29:7

Matthew 22:21

The Bible has much to say about government and our relationship to government. The principles set forth are that the powers that be are ordained of God. This applies to democracies, monarchies and dictatorships. By God’s ordinance, civil governments are authorized to enact and enforce laws for external peace and order. Those who resist the power, sin, not merely against the authority of human rulers, but against God’s ordinance and His method of ruling the world. This is true no matter how corrupt the ruler may be or with what blood-stained

A careful study of Bible history and the writings of Paul clearly reveals that God institutes government.

hands he came to power. If a law conflicts with God's Law and obedience would clearly mean disobeying God's command, the word of Peter comes into play, "*We ought to obey God rather than men.*" *Acts 5:29 KJV.*

In his book *Getting into the Theology of Concord*, Robert Preus asserts that, if Lutherans follow the Scriptures and their Confessional writings, they will be among the best citizens in the land. The Augsburg Confession emphasizes the principle that civil government with all its faults and imperfections is "instituted and ordained by God." Therefore Christians are encouraged to occupy civil offices; serve as princes and judges; pass laws and sentences; and, in their civil capacity, punish criminals and evildoers. They can buy and sell, take oaths when required by civil authorities, and serve as soldiers and fight for their country. Luther described government as one of the "masks" behind which God works.

A better understanding of what the Bible has to say about government and the Christian's civic responsibility will go a long way toward peace, harmony and unity in the country we love dearly. Remember to pray and work for good government.

...if Lutherans follow the Scriptures and their Confessional writings, they will be among the best citizens in the land.

ONE WITH THE SAINTS IN HEAVEN

HELP FOR THE LEADER

There is a beautiful statement given several times in the Old Testament concerning the death of believers: “*He was gathered to his people.*” Genesis 25:8 says that concerning Abraham. The statement is made of others in Genesis 25:17; 35:29; 49:29; Numbers 20:24; 27:13; 2 Kings 22:20; 2 Chronicles 34:28. Does this not imply the teaching of eternal life and unity with the saints who have gone before us? One could not be gathered to his people if those people no longer existed. Those who have gone on before in death are regarded as still existing. H.C. Leupold in his commentary on Genesis says, “Nothing in this passage (Genesis 25:8) or in other instances of the use of the expression indicates that the existence in the hereafter is regarded as dull, shadowy or unreal.” He also quotes Luther, “If now there is another ‘people’ apart from those among whom we live, there must be a resurrection from the dead.” After the deaths of the patriarchs, the Lord identifies himself in this manner. “*I am* the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” He does not say, “*I was* the God of Abraham, etc.”

When teaching a Bible class, it is good to keep the principle in mind that Scripture interprets Scripture. Read Hebrews 11:13-16 for a wonderful confirmation of the above interpretation.

Canada is our temporary address. Heaven is our eternal home. How important it is for us not to focus only on the things of this earth but to lay up treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not corrupt and destroy. Canada is a beautiful country with its mountains, lakes, vineyards, orchards, wheat fields, meadows and forests. Canada is consistently rated as being among the best countries on earth in which to live. Heaven is far better and much more lasting. While we fix our attention on what is unseen, we are sustained in our journey through Word and Sacrament. We are renewed by the Holy Spirit through His Word and as we receive the body and blood of Christ. Here is food for the soul. Here is food for the journey.



P

PRAYER

Lord Jesus, precious Redeemer, You have given us some indication of the glories of heaven. We await Your fuller revelation at the time of our arrival in the blessed place You have prepared for us. You have purchased us with Your precious blood that we may become heirs of the eternal glories. While we make our journey to that blessed country, we are often ambushed along the way by trials and tribulations which dishearten and discourage us. Teach us to remember that the pain and suffering of this present countryside are not worthy to be compared to the glory awaiting us at the end of this journey. O, blessed Guide, prevent us from turning to the left or the right when we need to follow the narrow way leading through death valley into the Promised Land. There we shall live forever with You and all who have gone before us. Who could ask for anything more at the end of the journey? Praise to You our Saviour and King. Amen.

S

THE STUDY GUIDE

The years come and go. The child goes to kindergarten, graduates from high school, receives career training, marries, has children, has grandchildren, and, the first thing you know, he or she is called a senior citizen. The hair has turned grey. Climbing steps becomes difficult, and the bathroom cabinet begins to look like a mini-pharmacy. The disease is diagnosed as terminal. Is that all there is? If this life were the end of it all, would you be content?

There is in each soul a longing for immortality. In all religions there is some concept and hope for some form of life after this one. Consequently some myths have arisen such as reincarnation, becoming an angel, or floating around in space in some bird-like fashion. The Christian Church emphasizes the resurrection. In a day when there is so much emphasis on staying fit, on exercise and proper diet, on cosmetic surgery, changing hair colour — in short, on the body beautiful — does it not seem strange there should be such a lack of emphasis on the resurrection of the body, this body finally made

perfect, this body and soul separated by death, reunited in the resurrection?

We fight death. We do not normally want to die. We want to keep on living on this earth. This is natural. It is part of our creation. We were created to live, not to die. Death itself is an enemy. That is why there is so much grief at the death of a loved one, especially when that death is an untimely death. Death is a conquered enemy, but nevertheless an enemy. We need to think more on the fact that death has been conquered, and we need to focus on Jesus who has conquered death for us. What a relief and a joy it is to know that this life is not the end of it all!

In a previous lesson, we mentioned our fellowship, not only with the saints on earth, but also with the saints in heaven. How our unity with Christ and with those who have gone before us should sustain us and comfort us in those days when we know death is inevitable, just around the corner!

What a tremendous section of Scripture is that gallery of saints, that hall of fame found in the eleventh chapter of Hebrews! Please visit this gallery now. Are the people mentioned famous for their exploits, for their conquests? No, they are remembered and lauded for their faith. Their recited activity is preceded by reference to their faith. *“By faith Abel offered a better sacrifice than Cain did.” “By faith Noah...built an ark to save his family.” “By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as inheritance, obeyed and went.”* Find in this chapter (Hebrews 11) a verse you may have often quoted without knowing its context. *“Without faith it is impossible to please God.”* It is made in reference to whom?

The apostle doesn't have time to tell us about all the other heroes. When he has concluded his tribute, he gives us one of those “therefore” words we find so strategically situated in the Bible. It has been said that when we see a “therefore” in the Bible, we need to ask, “Why is it there?” Invariably with the “therefore” we are given something to do. *“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.” Hebrews 12:1.*

The *Concordia Self-Study Bible* says, “The imagery suggests an athletic contest in a great amphitheater. The witnesses are the heroes of the past who have just been mentioned. They are not spectators but inspiring examples...they bear testimony to the power of faith and to

God's faithfulness." Does this not speak to us of a wonderful oneness? The saints above and the saints below do but one communion make. What is the great thing we have in common with them? The Old Testament saints focused their faith on God and His promises, promises fulfilled in Jesus, and their redemption, too, is now complete in Him. We live on this side of Easter. We know more details than they did when they were on this earth. All the more reason for us to follow in their train and keep our eyes focused on Jesus, the Author and Finisher of our faith.

"May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." Romans 15:5-6.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The author is a Lutheran Church–Canada pastor living in retirement with his wife Freda in Langley, British Columbia. The Reisdorf's are parents of four grown children and five grandchildren in whom they take great pleasure and delight. Both have been active in Lutheran Women's Missionary League in congregations and on circuit and district levels.

Pastor Reisdorf graduated from Concordia Theological Seminary, Springfield, Illinois, in 1961 and began his ministry in the Wellesley-Petersburg-Poole parish in Ontario, and he served congregations in Pembroke, Elmira, and Etobicoke, Ontario, as well as in Winnipeg, Manitoba. He has served the church-at-large on mission boards and social ministry committees. He participated in the establishment of Lutherwood in Waterloo, Ontario, a facility for emotionally disturbed youth and he organized and taught Christian education classes for children and adults with mental handicaps.

In his retirement, he produces greeting cards of his own flower and nature photography. Upon request, he shows an audio/visual slide program entitled "The Story of Jesus in Stained Glass" and continues to preach the good news of salvation in Christ.

He is thankful for the opportunity to present this Bible Study in the fortieth anniversary year of his ministry and considers it a wonderful way to celebrate and glorify our gracious God in whose mercy alone our unity and our strength exist.

Postscript:

Since the initial publishing of this study Rev. Reisdorf has joined the saints in heaven, praising our good and gracious Father with those who have have gone on before us.