

63rd Biennial Convention of the
WISCONSIN EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN SYNOD



Convention Essay

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Introduction

As a prisoner for the Lord ... I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received ... Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all (Ephesians 4:1,3-6). The apostle Paul was in Rome under house arrest, “a prisoner for the Lord.” While there, word came to him that the members of the church in Ephesus, a congregation he had founded and spent three years building, were at each other’s throats. So, he wrote a letter urging oneness and unity.

How could oneness ever happen in Ephesus? You see, the congregation was made up primarily of two culture groups. Some Christians in that congregation had come from an Israelite background, some had come from a Greek or non-Israelite background, and they didn’t get along. The Greek Christians brought ham and bacon to the Easter brunch, and the Jewish Christians became nauseous. The Jewish Christians were asking, “How can Greeks be in God’s family? That doesn’t seem right. They aren’t blood descendants of Abraham!” The Greek Christians were wondering, “Are we good enough to be members of God’s family?”¹

One in Christ is the theme for this convention. How can oneness ever happen in our synod? We come from different homes, different congregations, different districts. We have different views on what areas of ministry should get priority in synodical funding, different opinions about which translation of the Bible to use, different opinions on how to carry out worship that serves God’s people and also attracts prospective members, young people, and church-shoppers. In light of those differences some might think the theme, *One in Christ*, is wishful thinking at best or a white-washing of reality at worst. Based on what Paul wrote to the Ephesian Christians and us, I believe it is a statement of fact. This God-breathed letter provides the background and basis for this essay, as we track through the apostle’s epistle to see that *One in Christ* means we are one with God, one in faith, one in purpose, and one in service.

If this six-chapter letter can be divided in half with chapters one to three featuring what God did for us, the center, the focal point, of the first half would be the opening verses

¹ It would be like members of Grace Lutheran Church in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in 1910, reacting to the news that for the first time in the history of the congregation there would be worship services in English, once a month, on a Sunday night. “Is that OK? I thought God only spoke German!”

of chapter two (Ephesians 2:1-10)², a summary of the main truths of Scripture: faults, forgiveness, faith, and fruits. You have to have all four, and you have to have them in the right order. If you put faith and fruits in front of forgiveness, you're a Roman Catholic. If you put faith in front of forgiveness, you're a Baptist. If you have all four and have them in the right order, you are a Lutheran. Faults and forgiveness are highlighted in part one of this essay, faith in part two, and fruits in parts three and four.

[1:1-2 greeting]	
1 ST HALF OF EPHESIANS – “CENTERED”	
2:1-10	
faults, forgiveness, faith, fruits	
1:20-22.....2:11-22	
Christ is the head	Christ is the cornerstone
1:15-19.....3:1-19	
we believe by his	we believe by the
incomparably great power	administration of God's grace
1:3-14.....3:14-21	
hymn	hymn

What most people in our world don't know but need to know is that we were born with a death notice hanging over us. Spiritually we were stillborn. That's the shocker the apostle dropped on the Ephesians. **We were dead in transgressions** (2:5)³. It is normal and natural for people to believe that every newborn is innocent, that if your heart and lungs are functioning, you have a spark of good in you. But if you want to know the truth about what it takes to be one with God, then you have to come to grips with the fact that there is no such thing as an innocent baby. No human has potential to be as good as God demands. No human is born with a spark of good or “spirituality.”⁴ What we were born with, our sinful nature, is rightly classified as our biggest fault and the root of all our faults.

What we desperately need in order to be one with God is a miracle of forgiveness from God. Jesus made that happen. This is the best news anyone could ever hear. God works in ways unexpected and undeserved primarily in raising people from spiritual death to spiritual life. Israelites, what did you do to be cured and healed of venomous snake

² Ephesians 2:1-10: As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath. But 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. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

³ Throughout this essay, Scripture references with only chapter and verse will be references from the letter to the Ephesians.

⁴ From God's perspective, “All have turned away, all have become corrupt; there is no who does good, not even one” (Psalm 14:3).

bites? “Nothing! God did it with his promise of healing.” Nicodemus, what did you do to be born of your mom and dad? “Nothing!” My friends, what did you or I do to be one with God? Nothing! The phrases are piled up, excluding all human activity. **It is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast (2:8-9).**

If you wanted to write a letter encouraging people toward unity, how would you start? Pointing out their errors and weaknesses? Offering a step-by-step “how to”? Cajoling them? The apostle begins in a most unexpected way, with a hymn of praise! In fact, he bubbles over with so much excitement that verses three to ten of chapter one are one, long, run-on sentence. **Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ (1:3).** That opening verse of Paul’s hymn of praise is a part of our communion liturgy. In Christ everything we could ever hope for or imagine when it comes to our relationship with God is already ours.

That news fills our heart with so much joy that we spring out of bed each day with a smile on our face, lift our eyes heavenward, and call out, “Thank you, Lord, for this wonderful day!” Right? Or would it be more accurate to say that more often than not, instead of having eyes lifted heavenward, our noses are earth-bound, buried in the drudgery and doldrums of dredging for daily bread? And then what? We complain. Has complaining become a national pastime? We complain about the weather. It’s either too hot or too cold, too humid or too dry. If not the weather, then it’s our health: the allergies, the arthritis, the feet, the back. If not health, then it’s the government: too much Big Brother, not enough compassion, too much red tape, not enough protection. If not the government, then it’s the former councilman who demonstrates during church meetings that he believes negativity is a spiritual gift, the ushers who don’t show up, the noisy kids in the back pews, the lack of any kids in the back pews, the women of the Ladies Aid who won’t let a new member change the potato salad recipe, the public school system, the economy, the unfair demands at work, or our unbelievably hectic schedules.

How can we break the pattern of grumbling and complaining? That happens when we are absolutely clear on how we became one with God. Paul points ahead to the center of this half of his letter in his opening hymn of praise. We are God’s children because of **his glorious grace (1:6)**. Even before God created the sun and positioned it in the heavens, before he set the moon and stars and planets in their places in space, God looked down through the corridors of time and singled us out to be his own. **He chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In**

love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will (1:4-5).

What prompted God to single us out to be his children?⁵ It is his love “in Christ.” That phrase “in Christ” (or “in him” or “through Jesus Christ”) occurs one hundred fifty times in this little letter and ten times in the opening fourteen verses. God did not choose us in the way that children choose players when they pick up sides for a ball game. The captains try to pick the best players first. But when God chose us, it was not because of some potential in us but only because of Jesus. **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 (1:7-8).**⁶

Do you want joy and hope in a world that can drag you down? Then lift your eyes to the cross of Jesus and see the price paid for your oneness with God. In a world of confusion where things do not always add up, Christ Jesus makes sense of it all. Life is no mystery when God has revealed to us the mystery of his mercy. God **made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ ... to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ (1:9-10).** No matter how old or young you are, no matter how tall or short you are, no matter what the amounts and distribution of melanin pigment in your epidermis, no matter where you live, we are one with God because of what Jesus did. No disagreements or dividers here. That’s what it means to be one in Christ.

II.

If I’ve heard it once, I’ve heard it a hundred times, “If God hands out forgiveness for free, what’s to prevent people from going out and sinning like crazy?” The concern is about behavior. “How are we going to get people to live godly lives? How are we going to get people to behave?” The apostle addresses that issue, too. But he doesn’t begin by talking about what people are to do. He begins in 1:3-2:9 with what God has done. Then in 2:9-22 he addresses the impact that has on our insides so that we are no longer dead corpses nor scratching and clawing to get away from him like a trapped raccoon. We

⁵ Paul expands on the answer to that question: God did not single us out to be his own because we are so wonderful or because we have such great qualities. No! He singled us out to be recipients of his mercy “according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, in order that we, who were the first to put our hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory” (1:11-12).

⁶ For the apostle Paul, “redemption” was not an abstract theological term dug out of an old, dusty doctrine book. Redemption is the only way out for people in prison because it involves two things: a payment is made, and then captives are set free. Paul was under house arrest and had no idea whether someone would be able to make a ransom payment so that he could go free. But he did know that whether under house arrest or in jail, whether walking the streets of Rome or Corinth or Ephesus, Jesus had already made the ransom payment for all sins of all sinners. Jesus anteed up his own blood, and with that payment we sinners were set free from the prison of sin and the chains of guilt and declared to be one with God.

are God's dear children, grateful for his love, wanting to do what he wants because all of what God did for us in Christ becomes ours personally through faith. Remember the sequence: faults, forgiveness, *faith*. Faith is trust that what God says about us is true. Faith is passive. It is the empty bowl which God created in us by his powerful words of promise and love. It catches all the good things God pours into our hearts. It is not the reason he loves us. It is the result of his love for us.

But faith is also active. It is alive and producing the fruits of faith like an apple tree producing apples. **We are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do (2:10).**⁷ We will explore that in parts three and four of this essay.

Back to the subject of faith. One way to track the history of your congregation is to note the building projects. But you don't want to overlook another building project that has been going on in your church, the building of the Holy Christian Church. And when we talk about the Holy Christian Church, we can't help speaking about its chief architect, designer, and engineer, Jesus Christ. Jesus is the foundation for our faith and the cornerstone of our faith. He unites us in faith.

You don't have to be an expert builder to know that a firm foundation is essential for any building. But what about your congregation? What about our synod? If our church body were built on human qualities and capabilities, it would have collapsed long ago. We humans blow it. We goof up. We make mistakes. We sin. Some days we do what God wants, and some days we don't. More often than not, that shifting goes back and forth through the sixteen or seventeen waking hours of each day and sometimes within minutes. You're paying attention to the essayist one second, and the next your mind is roaming down Court Street for a cone at Fuzzy's. You're fired up for Jesus after a worship service like last evening, but late at night you're on Internet sites that make the angels nauseous. It's a good thing that God doesn't build his church on sinners like you or me. Paul stated the facts that flip the scenario from "Oh-oh!" and "Oh, no!" to "Oh, yes!" **You are built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone (2:20).**

⁷ A famous professor, whose good-news-proclaiming efforts we are planning to celebrate in a special way in two years, wrote: Faith is a divine work in us which changes us and makes us to be born anew of God. It makes us ... altogether different people, in heart and spirit and mind and all powers ... O, it is a living, busy, active, mighty thing, this faith. It is impossible for it not to be doing good incessantly. It does not ask whether good works are to be done, but before the question is asked, it has already done them, and is constantly doing them ... Faith is a living, daring confidence in God's grace, so sure and certain that the believer would stake life itself on it a thousand times. This knowledge of and confidence in God's grace makes people glad and bold and happy in dealing with God and with all creatures ... Because of it, without compulsion, a person is ready and glad to do good to everyone, to serve everyone, to suffer everything, out of love and praise to God, who has shown this grace (Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, IV, 10-12).

Martin Luther couldn't sleep at night. In fact, he nearly killed himself trying to beat sin out of his body because he knew, "God is holy, I'm not, and I have to be as holy as God is if he's going to open heaven's gates for me." His superiors were afraid he'd go nuts. So, to keep him busy they had him study to be a parish priest and also got him a job as a university professor. Of all things, they asked him to teach the Bible. For the first time in his life, he dug into Holy Scripture. What he found there astounded him. What he found there he proclaimed from his pulpit and in his classroom. What he found there is what a young man in our Bible Information Class found. He said, "Pastor, the thought of Judgment Day scares me. I've tried to be as good as possible at home, at work, and with friends, but sometimes I can't sleep at night because I'm going to be at the pearly gates one day, and St. Peter might not let me in." Ever have a thought like that pass through your brain? I told him what I'm going to tell you. You are not going to make it through those gates, and neither will I, if that's the criteria. If we think we have to get in by being good, we'll never make it because we can't be good enough. That's why God sent Jesus to be perfect in our place. And here's the incredible news of the Bible. God credits what Jesus did to your account and mine. He treats us as though we never sinned even though we do all the time, because we are covered by the rightness of Jesus. The young man looked at me and said, "Now I can sleep tonight. I've got the golden ticket." That good news of Jesus' rightness draped over us is the foundation for our faith.

Buildings often have a cornerstone to mark the date of construction. In ancient times the cornerstone not only held up and supported the building, it also aligned the walls so that they'd fit together just so. Can you imagine what would have happened if the construction engineer for this building watched workmen unload beams and found that two of them didn't fit?

The Christians in the congregation of Ephesus weren't fitting together. They had a hard time finding common ground and working together. So Paul wrote: **[Christ Jesus] came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near** (2:17). My grandma used to say, "*Es gibt allerlei Menschen in Gottes Menagerie*," ("There are all kinds of people in God's zoo"). She was actually saying what the apostle Paul taught: **You are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of God's household** (2:19). When the diverse people of Ephesus were filled with the good news of Jesus' mercy, it didn't matter whether they had grown up thinking that pork sandwiches were yummy or yucky. It didn't matter whether their relatives lived in the shadows of Jerusalem's walls or on the left coast of Asia Minor. Jesus had established peace between God and sinners, and consequently there could be harmony and oneness among sinners of all shapes, ages, and colors.

They were all members of God's spiritual house, one in faith. **In [Christ] the whole building is joined together ... For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit (2:21,18).**

Have there been disagreements among WELS Christians in the past one hundred sixty-five years? Of course. For example: "Should we build a seminary in Watertown, Wisconsin, or Milwaukee, Wisconsin?" "Should we join the General Council with the Ohio and Iowa Synods or not?" "Should we leave the General Council or not?" "What authority should boards of control have over faculty and vice versa in the set up of the school's curriculum or in matters of student discipline?" "Should we venture into a world mission field now or later?" "Should we break fellowship ties with a sister church body or not?" "Should we close prep schools or not?" "Should we amalgamate two colleges into one or not?" How in all the world can a synod with people who have differing opinions hang together and work together? The answer is that we are all parts of one spiritual building. Some of you are the bricks, some the mortar, some the light bulbs, some the doors. If this essayist goes more than sixty minutes, you might consider him to be one of the air vents. But we are all joined together to form one functioning building. The apostle looks at you and me today and says: **In [Christ] you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit (2:22).** No matter how old or young you are, no matter how tall or short you are, no matter what the amounts and distribution of melanin pigment in your epidermis, no matter where you live, we are one in faith, trusting in Jesus Christ. No disagreements or dividers here. That's what it means to be one in Christ.

III.

If someone walked up to you on the street and asked, "What's your purpose in life?" you might be hard pressed to come up with an answer on the spot. But in chapter three of this letter, the apostle Paul zeroes on three purposes for our life on earth.

The apostle experienced the warm and welcoming power of God's undeserved mercy, his grace. The Lord God had forgiven Paul fully and freely for all of his bad past and for all of his future failures **through the working of his power (3:7b).** That happened in only one way. **The administration of God's grace ... has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets (3:2,5).**

God has done that for sinners like us. He does not count our past or future sins against us. Because Jesus is our Substitute we are free from the burden of the consequences of our sin. **In [Christ Jesus] and through faith in him we may approach God with**

freedom and confidence (3:12). That only happens as we use the Holy Spirit's power tool, the words and promises of Holy Scripture.⁸

The Statistical Report for 2014 indicates that fifteen per cent of WELS communicants participated in Bible class. Could we be doing better? Of course. That's why there has been more attention at the seminary (compared to forty years ago) to training seminarians in the skills and art of Bible class planning, preparing, and presenting. That's why the Commission on Adult Discipleship and continued education for called workers feature growth for called workers in personal Bible study and leading small and large group Bible study. While it's obvious that pastors and congregational leaders will always be striving to encourage more and more members to participate in some form of Bible study, and while it's true that in some congregations there will be more of an emphasis on small group Bible study or individual and family devotions, on this we agree: one purpose for our life on earth is to grow in faith, and that happens only when the Spirit is using his "Means of grace" on our hearts. If someone walked up to you on the street and asked, "What's your purpose in life?" one part of your response would be, "God wants me to grow closer to him, and that happens when I dig into and ponder Holy Word." That purpose in life is true for all of us.

And that would have been enough for Paul. It would have been enough to have the scales fall off his sin-blinded eyes so that he could see and hold in his heart and hands the amazing love of Jesus. But God had even more surprises in store for him. What had been given to him was also now to be a gift from him to give to others so that they, too, could experience the "Ooos" and "Ahhhs!" of God's love. **Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you ... Although I am less than the least of all God's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ** (3:2-3,8).

If you were lost in the woods but finally saw a path with a few fresh footprints, you'd be thinking, "Whew! At least there's someone nearby who can help me." But then, if you followed those tracks and came across all kinds of footprints that came and went in every direction, you'd jump out of your skin with excitement because now you were near civilization and all kinds of people. You were safe! God's love to us works like that. There's so much to chew on, to celebrate, to revel in, that when we ponder one aspect of his love, it connects us to another and another, and we can hardly contain ourselves. That's what Paul meant by the **unsearchable riches of Christ** (3:8). He had

⁸ Notice the references to Bible reading and Bible study: In *reading this*, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ (3:4). I pray that out of his glorious riches he may *strengthen you with power through his Spirit* in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, *being rooted and established* in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge – that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God (3:16-19).

been given God's love in Christ and was bursting with a desire to give it to others. Good thing God put him to work in ministry. Paul might have exploded if he didn't have an outlet so that he could give it to others.

But Paul wasn't the only unworthy sinner given the privilege of proclaiming Christ. **God's intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known** (3:10). This is not a command for you lay members to leave your career, sell your worldly goods, and set out on a trek through the barrios of Barcelona or the alleys of Atlanta or the jungles near Djakarta. This is a statement of reality that what we do individually as witnesses for Christ is multiplied exponentially when we pool our resources and work together with fellow Christians. One little night light can help a little child find the bathroom in the middle of the night, but a whole string of lights and, better yet, a beacon of light from the bathroom really lights the way. Christians working together serve as a beacon to cut through the fog of spiritual uncertainty and guide many more, who are headed toward shipwrecking their lives on the reef of unbelief, to the safe haven and harbor of God's own heart.

The report by the Board for World Missions at this convention will, as always, open our eyes to the global opportunities for proclaiming Jesus to the millions who don't know and believe in him. We can have healthy and heartfelt discussions and maybe even disagreements on the proportion of synodical budget to support those efforts. But as excited as we get from encouragements to think globally about outreach possibilities, none of that will be possible for our synod if members of WELS and congregations of WELS are not personally and corporately mission-minded.

The Statistical Report for 2014 indicates that 531 of our 1269 WELS congregations had zero adult confirmands and another 173 had 1. That's 55.5% of our congregations. Can we get better at our personal witnessing and congregation evangelism efforts? Of course. That's why there has been more attention at the seminary (compared to forty years ago) to training seminarians in the skills and practice of evangelism. That's why the WELS Commission on Evangelism has been offering Schools of Outreach for over twenty-three years. While it's obvious that some congregations are located in small towns or rural areas with a population density far less than a city, I believe that in every congregation of WELS someone has to know someone (a spouse, a relative, a neighbor, a friend) who needs to hear about Jesus. So, we flee to the cross for forgiveness for our lack of good-news-proclaiming zeal and receive from Christ Jesus both model and motivation: **The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many** (Mark 10:45). If someone walked up to you on the street and asked, "What's your purpose in life?" one part of your response would be, "God wants

me to share his love with you so you can be with him now and forever." That purpose in life is true for all of us.

Paul concludes chapter three of this letter with another hymn. **Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever (3:20-21).** We know that there is no biblical prescription as to when Christians are to gather for worship and what they are to do when they gather. However, over time and many centuries Christians have developed patterns and language in which God comes to us in Word and sacrament, and we go to him with praise, prayers, and gifts. What I find instructive about those patterns is that even the "us to God" parts reflect the praise hymns and prayers of Scripture in that they are not merely acclamations of God's greatness, majesty, and power, but also proclamations of what God did for us. Consider that even those psalms which are considered "Praise Psalms" (e.g. Psalms 145-150)⁹ include language that proclaims why we praise God. This subject of what we do, say, and sing when we gather for worship has been the basis for much writing and many essays, but one thing is clear, worship is not optional.

Some time ago, I met with a person who indicated that he would like to join our church. In the conversation I mentioned that we look forward to seeing him every week. He replied, "Oh, I have to tell you. I'm not a church-going guy." I said, "Well, maybe this isn't the church for you." Fortunately, that wasn't the end of our conversation. I had the privilege of telling him about soul-food, that worship includes language like, "You were sent to heal the contrite of heart,"¹⁰ "You washed us from our sins in your own blood,"¹¹ "O Christ, Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world."¹² What better soul-food could there be? The happy result was that he became a church-going guy.

You and I get to snack on soul-food each day when we begin our day with a favorite Bible passage or paragraph, but we get a full smorgasbord when we gather each week. The day and time of day are not what makes worship God-pleasing worship. The style of music and instruments enhance the message but are not what makes worship God-pleasing worship because worship is not primarily what we do but a review and retelling of what God has done for us. If someone walked up to you on the street and asked, "What's your purpose in life?" one part of your response would be, "God wants me to worship and honor him every moment of every day and especially when I gather with fellow Christians." That purpose in life is true for all of us.

⁹ Note that the grand praise psalm, Psalm 150.

¹⁰ A phrase from the *Kyrie in Mass for the New World*. GIA Publications, 2010.

¹¹ A phrase from *O Lord, Our Lord in The Service of Word and Sacrament*. *Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal*, 1993.

¹² A phrase from the *Agnus Dei in The Service of Word and Sacrament*. *Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal*, 1993.

No matter how old or young you are, no matter how tall or short you are, no matter what the amounts and distribution of melanin pigment in your epidermis, no matter where you live, we are one in purpose as we grow in faith, proclaim the good news of Jesus' love, and privately and publicly worship him. No disagreements or dividers here. That's what it means to be one in Christ.

IV.

“Oh, brother! He’s gone on for forty-five minutes and only covered the first three chapters of Ephesians. There are three more to go!” It’s true that the material of the next three chapters could be expanded into seminars and Bible studies on what it means to be one in Christ that would span the next two days of this convention and more. For the sake of time, we hit the highlights.

If this six-chapter letter can be divided in half with chapters four to six featuring how we live in the light of what God has done for us, the center, the focal point, of the second half would be Ephesians 5:21: **Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.**

2 nd HALF OF EPHESIANS – “CENTERED”	
5:21 Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ	
5:1-20 (4:17-24).....5:22-33 sexual purity marriage	
4:29-32.....6:1-4 how to act the family in the family of faith	
4:25-28.....6:5-9 work employers/employees	
4:1-16.....6:10-20 ministers & ministry armor of God empowered & growing Means of grace	
[6:21-24 greetings]	

The apostle was unafraid to broach touchy subjects and to press the hot buttons of his day which are still searing in our world, in our American culture, and in our synod. Are there subjects addressed that challenge our oneness? Yes and no. Yes, they bring to light differences of opinions or differences in the way we approach issues, problems, and concerns. But, no, they are also opportunities for us to demonstrate our common commitment: **To the law and the testimony!** (Isaiah 8:20), meaning, “Let’s get back to the Holy Scriptures and listen to what God has to say.” In other words, every

generation needs to recapture the truths and principles of Holy Scripture for itself in order to be one in service to God and to each other. Thus, **submit to one another out of reverence for Christ** (5:21) is the “what” of being one in service to God and each other, and on either side of that center is the “how”: **speaking the truth in love** (4:15), **using the sword of the Spirit** (6:17).

The apostle raised the issue of the doctrine of the ministry of the Word in 4:11-16¹³, including examples of representative ministry (apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastor-teachers) and one of the purposes for representative ministry, to enhance the personal ministry of individual Christians. How can we preserve oneness in Christ regarding this doctrine? We do that by speaking the truth in love, using the sword of the Spirit.¹⁴

In 4:17-24 and again in 5:1-14, Paul addresses a very real threat to the spiritual unity in the Ephesian congregation, namely, Satan’s tool of sexual impurity. If you are unaware of the assault on biblical morals and values created by the effort of the LBGT crowd to shift in the minds of Americans homosexuality from a moral issue to a political issue, you better pinch yourself to see if you’re still breathing. Has the availability of pornography through the Internet become a plague on our society and also affected our church members and called workers? Yes. But people who fall prey to homosexual or heterosexual sin are not the enemy. They are victims of the enemy who need to hear what God has to say about their sin and their Savior in an honest, compassionate, and winsome way. We do that by speaking the truth in love, using the sword of the Spirit.¹⁵

How do we become known as a generous synod and avoid greed and selfishness so that CMO and IMO¹⁶ grow, matching what Paul calls for in 4:28¹⁷, doing something useful with our hands that we may share with others? Whining or guilt trips? No! We do that by speaking the truth in love, using the sword of the Spirit.

¹³ Ephesians 4:11-16: Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

¹⁴ An excellent resource to take us into the Scriptures for a restudy of this doctrine is *The Ministry of the Word* by Dr. John Brug, NPH, 2009.

¹⁵ Helpful tools to study and refocus on what God has to say about sexual purity include *A Study of Marriage, Divorce, Malicious Desertion, and Remarriage in the Light of God’s Word [Originally prepared under the auspices of the Conference of Presidents in December 1989*

and reviewed and updated by the Conference of Presidents in May 2015] and <http://www.conquerorsthroughchrist.net>.

¹⁶ CMO = Congregational Mission Offerings. IMO = Individual Mission Offerings.

¹⁷ Ephesians 4:28: Anyone who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with their own hands, that they may have something to share with those in need.

How can we grow in our communication techniques with each other when in discussions about doctrinal and non-doctrinal issues? **Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths ... Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you (4:29,32).**¹⁸ In that way we also set the tone for how we build relationships and reach out to the lost without beating them over the head with a Bible. We do that by speaking the truth in love, using the sword of the Spirit.

How do we overcome the fear of ministry review so that conversations between congregational leaders and called workers on subjects like faithful use of gifts and time management¹⁹ are not gripe sessions but demonstrations of loving care and support? We do that by speaking the truth in love, using the sword of the Spirit.

How do we go about discussions on the biblical principles of God-pleasing gender interaction and application of those principles, which the apostle lays out in 5:22-33? We do that by speaking the truth in love, using the sword of the Spirit.

When the apostle addresses the issue of parent-child relationships in 6:1-4²⁰, and we observe the break-up of the family in our society, we value all the more the precious privilege of enhancing through Lutheran schools what children learn about Jesus in God-fearing homes. But how can we also make every effort to shift the purpose for a congregation's early childhood center, preschool, and Lutheran elementary school from primarily "taking care of our own" to "reaching out to the lost"? We do that by speaking the truth in love, using the sword of the Spirit.

How can we learn to care more about others than ourselves so that not only employers and employees interact in a God-pleasing way (6:5-9)²¹, but we also ask everyone we know, "How are you doing today" and mean it? We do that by speaking the truth in love, using the sword of the Spirit.

¹⁸ The entire section of 4:29-32: Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

¹⁹ Ephesians 5:15-16: Be very careful, then, how you live – not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil.

²⁰ Ephesians 6:1-4: Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. "Honor your father and mother" – which is the first commandment with a promise – "so that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth." Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.

²¹ Ephesians 6:5-9: Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. Obey them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not people, because you know that the Lord will reward each one for whatever good they do, whether they are slave or free. And masters, treat your slaves in the same way. Do not threaten them, since you know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favoritism with him.

In these areas of the application of doctrine we may long for perfect unity and oneness, but that will not happen on this side of heaven. Yet, we can demonstrate oneness in service to God and each other in our approach, in our attitude, and in the way we interact with each other, submitting **to one another out of reverence for Christ** (5:21), which means putting ourselves in a position to catch the blessings God wants to pour out to us and being **completely humble and gentle ... patient, bearing with one another in love** (4:2). We do that by speaking the truth in love, using the sword of the Spirit.

The apostle concludes this fabulous letter with an illustration of what that means. Can you see him, sitting at his writing desk, quill in hand, writing this letter? As he shifts his weight in the chair, the chain on his ankle rattles, and out of the corner of his eye he sees the Roman soldier assigned to guard him that day, all fitted out and geared up for duty. Then it dawned on him. "Ah! The Christians in Ephesus are soldiers for the Savior." His pen goes back to the paper, "You not only need to know what you're dealing with, Satan and all his forces. You also need to know how to defend yourself and, if necessary, go on the attack. **Put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand** (6:13). There's the enemy. Here's the armory!"

Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist (6:14a). You can see that Roman soldier, can't you? His belt holding his tunic in place and housing his weapons. A faulty belt won't hold in place what it's supposed to hold. So it is with the belt of truth. Mix in some error, and you'll be in danger of having God's truth slip off your hips and roll away. Strap on the belt of God's truth – not part of it; all of it – and you'll have all the tools in place within easy reach.

Stand firm **with the breastplate of righteousness** (6:14b). You can see that Roman soldier, can't you? Shining metal plate formed over his chest and midsection. When we have stepped outside the bounds of what God wants, Satan rightly does what his name implies. He accuses us before God. But Jesus' rightness protects our spiritual heart and lungs. We are declared right by God even though Satan loves to accuse us. Put on Jesus' rightness as a breastplate.

Stand firm **with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace** (6:15). You can see that Roman soldier, can't you? He's balanced, one foot slightly behind the other, standing his ground. When an enemy swings his sword, he can duck it like a dodge-ball. But he's not wearing snow shoes. He's also ready to move forward and carry out his duty. The good news of peace with God through Jesus keeps us

balanced and able to dodge temptations, but also keeps us light on our feet, ready to take the first step in kindness for the needy, in comfort for the hurting, in forgiveness for the guilty. Lace up those boots of peace.

Take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one (6:16). You can see that Roman soldier, can't you? The gleaming shield isn't just to display the emblem of his legion. He can maneuver it for protection. Your trust in Jesus does the same. It's not stuck and static in your heart. It has floated out of your heart to be a force-field when the flaming arrows of temptation come sizzling in. Knock them down. Fend them off. Take up that shield of faith.

Take the helmet of salvation (6:17a). You can see that Roman soldier, can't you? Head injury, and he's a goner. Gotta keep your wits about you. What better way to do that than to have the Head of the Church give us his saving love, urging us to wrap our thoughts in that love so that we can make wise decisions when challenged by a fork in the road? Jesus predicted that even families can be divided, and wouldn't his words apply to our synodical "family"? When differences of opinion come up, will we follow our emotions, follow our personal preferences, or follow what God says? Take the helmet of salvation.

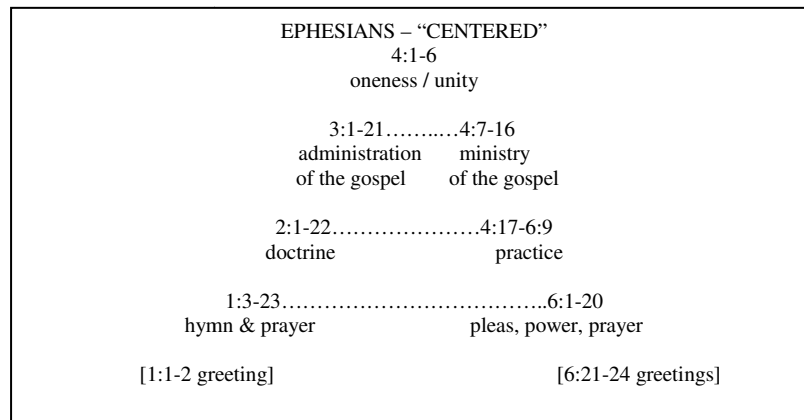
[Take] the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God (6:17b). You can see that Roman soldier, can't you? He's got all the defensive armor. He needs an offensive weapon from the armory. The sword is his. The Word of God is yours. And it works. Use it. You can slice and dice the devil and send him running. Wield the Word of God.

You might be thinking, "Thank God. Here's the armory. I can deal with the devil and all the forces he brings to create disunity." But God is not done. He has one more weapon in the armory for you to use so that we can be one in Christ. **Pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people. Pray also for me** (18-19a). Pray for your family. Pray for your pastors, teachers, and staff members. Pray for your district and synodical leaders. Pray for your synod. Pray for the lost, which means praying that God will unite us as individuals, as congregations, and as a synod in this glorious task to save lost souls.

No matter how old or young you are, no matter how tall or short you are, no matter what the amounts and distribution of melanin pigment in your epidermis, no matter where you live, we are one in service to God and each other. No disagreements or dividers here. That's what it means to be one in Christ.

Conclusion

The Hebrew language often features “centering.” While we often expect the main point, the focal point, the culmination of the story, to be at the end, Hebrew writers put that in the center.²² The apostle Paul was a Hebrew through and through.²³ Could it be that the apostle employs this Hebraistic style of “centering” in his letter to the Ephesians? If so, the apostle, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, offers to the Ephesian Christians and to us a beautiful and powerful message to help them and help us understand what it means to be one in Christ and to pursue oneness in Christ, and his theme stands in the center of the letter, which is all about oneness and unity: **As a prisoner for the Lord ... I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received ... Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all** (Ephsians 4:1,3-6).



One in Christ is the theme for this convention. How can oneness ever happen in our synod? We come from different homes, different congregations, different districts. We have different views and different opinions on a variety of subjects. But in spite of those differences, when we ponder what Paul wrote to the Ephesians and to us, we have reason to praise God that *One in Christ* is neither wishful thinking nor a white-washing of reality. We are *One in Christ: one with God, one in faith, one in purpose, and one in service.*

†Soli Deo gloria†

²² Centering is also a common feature in the Old Testament Scriptures. For example, the high point, main point, or “center” of:

- the Pentateuch is the great Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16)
- the Song of Songs is the marriage (Song of Songs 4:16-5:1a)
- the Isaiah 40-66 is Isaiah 53
- many Psalms (e.g. Ps 23, 25, 23, 92, and the Songs of Ascent 120-134).

²³ Paul said: “I am a Jew, born in Tarsus of Cilicia, but brought up in this city. I ... was thoroughly trained in the law of our ancestors” (Acts 22:3).