

For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.⁵ May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus,⁶ so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. (Romans 15:4-6)

Glorify God Together

When I was growing up in the WELS, my pastors regularly told us that the word “synod” is Greek for “walking together.” I grew up with a very clear identity that I was a member of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod – even though I had never lived in Wisconsin and don’t root for their football team. I understood that I “walked together” with people all over America who believed what my congregations in suburban Indianapolis and small town in West Michigan taught and believed. But I was confirmed more than thirty years ago. Has our church body changed? I find today in catechism class, sometimes I have to explain what “WELS” means. This morning, we’re celebrating the fact that we do walk together with like-minded Christians from all over the world. We want to answer God’s call to work together and walk together. And we want to do it in a way that gives all glory to God. So it’s not about us. It’s not about what we can or cannot accomplish. It’s about reflecting God’s love back to him and giving him glory. And according to God’s plan, we Christians don’t do that alone. We do it together. My friends, **glorify God together.**

I.

How is it possible for us to do that? How can we walk together in unity of purpose and belief? There’s an old joke that whenever you put two people together you have three opinions. And I’ve heard that joke applied to many different church bodies. Of course, that’s true about us, too, right? We all have opinions. And if you have an opinion, you probably think you’re right. In many areas, we can agree to disagree. But sometimes, our opinions can get us into trouble. Doctors give medical opinions, and getting the right opinion can make the difference between living and dying. When it comes to our faith, it is not just a matter of opinion. God speaks to us in his word and tells us what positions we are supposed to hold. Listening to him is the key to unity and to honoring him. **Glorify God together, blessed by the Scripture.**

St. Paul said, “**For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.**” When I was growing up, one of my pastors used to repeat these words every Sunday after he read the Old Testament lesson. Of course, the Old Testament is what Paul was talking about. He points out that God wrote those Old Testament books *for us*. Of course, God gave them first of all to the Old Testament people of Israel and they speak directly to Israel’s situation. Yet, God wrote also them for us. He built into them a dual purpose because he always planned to send Jesus and then begin the New Testament era. So every word of the Old Testament really does belong to us, by God’s design.

Why did he give us that Old Testament? “So that through the endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.” You know what endurance is, right? A hundred yard dash is not an endurance race. But a marathon is. Life here is a marathon. We have to endure our years here. And it’s not always easy. We live in a world where pain and sorrow challenge our faith and where unbelievers attack it. In fact, that’s one of the primary reasons God gathers us into congregations. We need to work together to stand up against the forces out there that try to pull down our faith and against the forces in our own sinful hearts that resist all that God has said. We need to endure until we reach heaven.

Where does that endurance come from? Paul says that through the encouragement of the Scriptures we have hope. The Holy Spirit works through the word to encourage us. God knows what life is like for us here and he tells us that he will never leave us or forsake us. God tells us that he sees the guilt in our hearts and the grief that we inflict upon ourselves and he forgives us for Jesus’ sake. God shows us that in every hurt and sorrow of this life, he is working behind the scenes to bless us and he promises that he will carry us through this life of sorrow and he will bring us home to heaven. All that is encouragement. And through all that gospel encouragement God gives us hope.

We need hope. But not fairy tale, wishful thinking hope. Not, “maybe things will get better” hope. Sometimes, that’s just foolish. If your house is burning down, you don’t sit in the living room hoping that somehow the fire will go out. You get to safety and you hope and pray that God protects you in the process and you trust – you hope – that he will provide for you afterward. Hope is depending on God’s promises for a better future. We hope for God’s blessings here because he promises to give them. But the greatest hope that God gives us is the hope of a new and better life to come. It’s the certainty that when we have endured all that his life can throw at us, we will stand with him and rejoice. We will be free from sin and sorrow and we will spend eternity with Christ our Savior.

That’s what our unity is all about. We walk together to encourage each other. We don’t just do it in here. We don’t just depend on our pastor or our teachers to get that job done. Every time your child or your spouse or your friend gets kicked in the teeth by life, God calls you to encourage them with his promises so that they have hope. And that is the reason that pastors make calls. When you’re in the hospital, when you have surgery, when you lose someone you love, if I know about it, I will come to you. My goal will be to point you to Jesus and his promises and give you hope.

And we do that also in places where you and I can never go. That’s why we have a synod. Through our fellowship, we support local efforts to encourage and give hope: think of Huron Valley Lutheran High School or the Spanish mission in Detroit, or the pregnancy counseling center or the Lutheran radio ministry. We walk together in those efforts to bring hope. And we do it on a much wider scale, too. Our synod operates four ministry training schools to prepare men and women to be pastors and teachers. It sends missionaries throughout the United States and into more than twenty countries around the world. We walk together in those ministries when we support them with our prayers and our offerings and our time. Those gifts to the Lord make us a part of the work he does. So your offering makes you share in all those calls I make and in all the efforts our teachers make to encourage and give endurance and hope. Your offerings of time and prayer and finances make you a part of the work of HVL and the Spanish mission and the radio hour. They make you a part of the work of those ministry training schools and of the mission work done all over the world. Every hour of every day, you are sharing in giving endurance and encouragement and hope because you support that work.

II.

God calls us to speak his words and to support that preaching, but he does the giving of hope. St. Paul says, **“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.”** Do you see what happens when God gives us hope? He also makes us one. **Glorify God together, unified in Christ alone.**

God gives endurance because God himself endures our sin and unbelief. God gives us encouragement because he loves us and love always builds up the one it loves. And all that leads to the one true source of unity: Christ. Paul says, “May God give you a spirit of unity among yourselves.” God doesn’t want us to be divided. He doesn’t want us to bicker and fight amongst ourselves. Think how many times you’ve been angry at someone in this church or at someone in our fellowship – a teacher at a school, another pastor in the area, whoever. The devil loves it when we tear each other down. But God works to give us a spirit of unity. That begins when we forgive each other because we recognize that we’re sinners, too. We have sinned against each other over and over again but God forgave us. So we forgive. That is a crucial step to a spirit of unity, a spirit that sees each other as a family of faith under God.

A spirit of unity is first and foremost a spirit that follows Christ. In fact the Greek here literally says, *“May the God of endurance and encouragement give to you thinking the same thing among one another according to Christ Jesus.”* Notice “the spirit of unity” is literally “thinking the same thing.” And it’s simply “according to Christ Jesus.” God cares what opinions we have when it comes to his word. A spirit of unity is thinking the same things about God. It’s doctrine. And being united in doctrine is only possible if we are thinking in line with Christ. What God tells in the Bible is the only source of true unity. And even then, it’s more than just analyzing the truth and seeing what God teaches. It’s also a miracle of faith in which the Holy Spirit takes captive our every thought through the word so that we think the way that God speaks.

Many people today don’t believe you can have “the truth” when it comes to God. They point to all the different Christian denominations and say, “Why can’t they agree?” Logically, it would seem that if there was a truth to be found in the Scripture, after two thousand years, Christians would agree on what it is. Don’t be

fooled by that argument. It doesn't match our experience in life. There is no issue in the world in which all people agree. And it doesn't take into account the reality of sin. There is an unbeliever lurking inside of every one of us. His pride corrupts the way we hear the word. He trips us up and twists our understanding. So the problem is not with the word of God. The problem is with the human heart. But the word of God is the only cure. God gives us the truth. God works through that truth. He calls us to study it, discover it and trust it and confess it.

That confession, too, is the purpose of our congregation and our synod. That, too, is walking together. It means we can't walk with those who will not confess all that God's Word says. But that is a temporary reality. It's necessary in this world. But when we get to heaven, all the sin in our hearts will be gone. We will all hear God and understand him perfectly. We will all be one in faith and doctrine and we will all think the same thing according to Jesus.

Until we get there, the church will be divided here. But that doesn't mean that we stop trying. Unity is our goal, even here. There is only one way to get it: by lining our thoughts up with Christ. When we hear the word, the Spirit works. The more we grow, the more we understand, the more we follow Jesus, the more united we are. Paul says that we will with one heart and mouth glorify God. That's what unity does. It confesses one truth. And it praises God. You know what? Those two things are really the same thing. True praising of God isn't just saying, "God I love you" or "God I praise you." That's part of it, but not all of it. True praise of God is confessing what Jesus has done and what that means. We praise God when we point to the cross and the empty tomb. We praise God when we give thanks for all his promises and all the ways that he keeps us and watches over us. We praise God when we acknowledge the great things he has done for us and we join together to confess that with our lips and with our lives.

Unity is not optional. God commands it on the basis of his word. We join with those who hear that command and match their confession and their praise to what God says. But unity is not something we can achieve on our own. We commit ourselves to it because we believe. But only the Holy Spirit can make it happen. Only he can take every thought captive to the word of God. Only he can give us one heart and one voice to praise our God.

Our congregation and our synod are efforts to proclaim that word. The word is eternal. It belongs to God. And the power is his. But in the synod and in the congregation when we use his power we are walking together and building unity. We are giving glory to God. That's why we support our work here. That's why we support the work of our synod. My friends, treasure that gift of God and work for that unity. Hear the word and submit to it. And support that work. Amen.