

**Holy Trinity Lutheran Church  
Des Moines, WA  
April 21, 2013**

**Church Fellowship sermon series – #1**

**Where Is God's Church?**

- 1. It is the Church**
- 2. Which is detected in churches**

**Hymns: 155 – 449 – Distribution: 529, 154 –  
Closing: 293**

All Scripture quotations from NIV 1984

**Romans 10:9-13 –**

**<sup>9</sup> If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.**

**<sup>10</sup> For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved. <sup>11</sup> As Scripture says, "Anyone who believes in him will never be put to shame." <sup>12</sup> For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, <sup>13</sup> for, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."**

If you looked in the Yellow Pages to find out how many churches there are, how many would you find? Quite a few! In fact, I looked online in the Yellow Pages and found that our small city of Des Moines has 24 churches, Federal Way has 78 churches, and Kent has 94 churches. That's a lot of different religious groups that a person could join!

Seeing that many churches raises some questions in a person's mind:

- Why are there so many?
- What do all these churches teach?

- Where is God's church? Is it the Wisconsin Synod Lutheran churches? Or more conservative churches in general? Or churches that would term themselves Christian?
- Where will we find believers?
- What is our church's relationship to these other groups, many of which we would acknowledge have believers in them?
- How might we interact with them and their members?

Today we are beginning a new sermon series that addresses such questions. This four-week sermon series, called **"Church Fellowship: Our Blessed Partnership in Christ,"** will explore the partnership and relationship that as personal people and as a church called Holy Trinity we have with other Christians and churches. **Today we begin with a simple question: "Where Is God's Church?"**

As we begin this sermon series, we could summarize the concept of Church Fellowship with two points:

- Church Fellowship involves sharing a close relationship that believers have in a congregation and with certain other churches in the world.
- Church Fellowship involves remaining separate from certain religious groups in the world.

Why is this a topic worthy of our study in a sermon series?

1. Because this is a Scriptural doctrine. The Bible gives very clear commands about the two concepts of Church Fellowship.
2. It is necessary to know and follow this doctrine of Scripture because it serves to preserve other doctrines of Scripture.
3. The doctrine of Church Fellowship has had to be applied many times in the history of our Wisconsin Synod, due to

circumstances and situations that have arisen in the past 150 years. For those of you who have been in our synod or other Lutheran synods, you might remember such scenarios.

4. The doctrine of Church Fellowship is a teaching of the Bible that is not understood by many Christian churches today. Even worse, it has come under attack from some churches who are hostile to this Scriptural teaching.
5. It is a doctrine that often causes emotional reactions in members and visitors alike, because it often affects their relationship with family and friends.

Therefore, may God bless our study of Scripture as we examine the doctrine of Church Fellowship, and may he bless our lives through it!

## 1. It is the Holy Christian Church!

Returning to our question of the day: Where is God's Church? Your first reaction to that question might be that he doesn't really have one. There is not a listing in the Yellow Pages titled "Jehovah's Church," which every Christian should have an interest in joining.

Yet God does have a church! In fact, the Scriptures speak often about God's Church. Listen to a couple verses that define what God's Church is:

- *Revelation 7 – "After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: 'Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.'*"

These verses describe God's Church gathered for worship. It is a picture of heaven, where all those there have a common, uniting confession. They believe and confess that their salvation has come from God the Father through the Lamb, who is the Son of God, Jesus Christ.

- *Romans 10:9-13 – If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved. As Scripture says, "Anyone who believes in him will never be put to shame." For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."*

These verses clearly describe who is saved, and therefore, who is in God's Church. It is all those of all time who believe in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior! It's interesting that when we use the term "church" today, most people are referring to a building or a room. The Scriptures look at God's Church as people.

God's Church even does have a name. In fact, it has a few names. The most common name for it comes from certain Scripture verses:

- *Ephesians 5 – Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word.*

**HOLY** – Through faith in Christ, the members of God's Church are holy. To tie it together with the word "sanctify," which means to make holy, they are saints. "Saints" is not a term that refers only to believers in heaven who have

died. It is not a category of super-believers who have achieved a high level of piety. All members of God's Church are saints!

- *Ephesians 2 – ...built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.*

**CHRISTIAN** – Christ is the foundation of God's Church. Many of you might know the importance of a solid foundation on a house. Have any of you seen the results of a house or building that had a cracking, crumbling foundation? If the foundation is shot, there is a major problem! Christ is the foundation of the Church. Christ is the only reason that we could ever be a member of this Church. He suffered and died to pay the price for the sin of the world. And he is the only way that anyone could ever have the hope of heaven.

- *1 Peter 2 – You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.*

**CHURCH** – From this verse we get the word "church." The Greek word for "called out" is the word for a "church" in the Greek language. Those in the Church have been called out of this world of darkness to a life of faith in the family of God.

**Where is God's Church? It is the Holy Christian Church! It includes all believers of all time, from the Old Testament and the New Testament, who have put their faith in Jesus Christ their Savior.**

Incidentally, there are two other terms for this Church. Who knows who is in it? Only God himself. How come? As it says in 1 Samuel 16, "Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart." Only God can see

faith in the heart. Only he knows who is in his family of believers in the Holy Christian Church and who is not. Therefore, another name for this Church is the **Invisible Church**, not because you're not supposed to see it in action in the world, but because only God knows its members.

One other name for this gathering of believers is the **Communion of Saints**. The group is referred to as the body of Christ in the Bible, the gathering – or communion – of God's holy believers.

Obviously, this Church is not gathered together in one place. Will it ever be? Will it ever enjoy perfect Church Fellowship together? In the verses from Revelation 7 that we read before, we see that the Holy Christian Church – made up of many nationalities and skin shades – will only enjoy perfect, unadulterated Church Fellowship in heaven. Only there will the body of Christ be together as one group to praise their Savior.

What is our reaction to all of this so far? The most fitting reaction is to praise God today that you can be a part of it. Have you ever heard about a party that happened and that you were not invited to, perhaps even by someone you thought was a close friend? Maybe it came as quite a surprise that you didn't get an invitation. You were shut out!

**Today, we praise God that despite your sins and guilt he provided an invitation to his home in heaven. He provided a way for you to be saved. He fulfilled his promises to send a Messiah and carried them out. Through faith in Christ you are a member of God's Church, the Holy Christian Church, and you will experience it in its fulfillment one day in heaven!**

## **2. Which is detected in visible Christian churches**

However, we have some questions to answer yet today, don't we? In the realm of the doctrine of Church Fellowship, we're not in heaven yet. We are in an imperfect world. The realities of the phone book are still real. Can we say any more than this on where God's Church

is found right now, and the fellowship that we can share with it?

We can. We certainly look among the visible churches that are in our world today. Believers certainly have gathered together in such groups all throughout world history. Noah and Abraham had formal worship of our Lord early in the Old Testament. Jesus himself acknowledged that *“where two or three gather together in my name, there I am with them.”* (Matthew 18:20) It is natural for those who share faith in Jesus to gather together. We see this concept in action for those in our world who have simple common interests - Seahawk fans get together to watch the game. People who have the same hobbies get together. And so do believers in Jesus.

Not only that, but it is God-pleasing for believers to do this. Hebrews 10 says, *“Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”* We “remember the Sabbath Day” in our New Testament times and continue to gather for worship and fellowship. Perhaps this is a good place to note the difference between the word Church and the word church. The capital C “Church” is the Holy Christian Church, the sum of all true believers in Christ. The small c “church” is the word used for a visible group or organization that gathers together.

Where will we find true believers in these groups of visible churches? Isaiah 55 says, *“As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish... so is my word that goes out from my mouth: it will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.”* God’s Word is like the water that washes over the earth. Wherever water waters our earth, there will be growth. How much? We don’t know, but it always has results and plants grow. In the same way, wherever the Word “waters” people there will be results. There will be some who believe and are saved. How many? We don’t know, but we know there will

be results. The same holds true for God operating in the sacraments – Holy Baptism and Holy Communion – that he has given to his Church. So we can say that wherever God’s Word and his sacraments are, there will be believers.

Why are there so many visible churches? Certainly geography has something to do with this. Also, ethnic origin can play a part. But the biggest divider of Christian churches today has to do with their teachings. Unfortunately, the devil has had a chance to introduce innumerable false teachings into the world today. These have served to split the Christian world more and more as time has gone on.

With all of these visible churches that we can see, we can recognize some facts:

1. **It is our wish and prayer that there would be true unity among visible Christian churches today.** After all, Jesus prayed in the Upper Room in John 17, *“I pray also for those who will believe in me... 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. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one—I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity.”* Now please note that I said true unity among visible churches. This includes unity in teachings, not a false, outward show of unity that is not based on the Word of God. This true unity is something that we wish for and pray for!
2. **Hypocrites exist in every visible church.** There is no church in this world that does not have them, as Jesus describes in his Parable of the Weeds among the Wheat in Matthew 13. Jesus says in his parable that the weeds and the wheat will be growing together until the end of time when the world is judged. Every church of every Christian denomination, including Holy Trinity, has hypocrites in it.

3. **Yet for those who use the Scriptures and the sacraments, there will be believers.** If we ever are directed by Scripture not to be in Church Fellowship with another visible Christian church, it is not a judgment on the hearts of the individual people there. After all, we cannot make those judgments on which individuals are in the Holy Christian Church.

You can see what questions these thoughts lead to:

- So, what does this mean for our church's interaction with other churches, even those who have true believers in Christ in them?
- What relationship can we have with them?
- And how can we enjoy and enhance the Church Fellowship we have in our congregation?

I'm glad you asked this! For these are the questions we will move into in the coming weeks.

Today, may we simply rejoice in what we have learned, which is the foundation of Church Fellowship. God has brought us into his family, his Holy Christian Church. All this is only possible through Jesus our Savior. And he has brought us into a blessed fellowship in a visible church for our benefit.

Praise God for this! And may God bless us in the Sundays ahead as we learn more about Church Fellowship. Amen.