

“The Church Together in the Spirit”—Colossians 2:5

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

Over the past six months we have experienced some changes in our lives, not by choice but by necessity. A pandemic forces people to act and even live differently in an effort to protect each other from experiencing a serious illness which could even be fatal. It was strange to have schools, businesses, activities and even churches refrain from public gatherings, and even though we've started to gather again to some extent, it still feels strange. People were forced to work and play at home, a dynamic which can produce both joys and challenges emotionally.

Since we are created for relationships on many levels one of the most challenging dynamics for many people was not getting to be in the physical presence of family and friends. If we are in someone's presence we are told to stay at least six feet away from them with no physical contact. This is a difficult adjustment since shaking hands and hugs are important to us. Even though the Lord has provided wonderful ways to talk **and see** each other through technology, it still cannot replace the physical presence.

For Christians this actually is nothing new. Ephesians 4:3-6 says that

Christians all over the world have a *unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace* (i.e. in the forgiveness of sins through faith in Jesus Christ alone). *There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call— one Lord* (it's Jesus, not the pandemic), *one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, Who is over all and through all and in all* Christians. Paul wrote these words because he was distanced from his fellow brothers and sisters in Christ and desired so much to be with them in person.

Many times in Paul's letters to the churches he expressed the desire to see his fellow Christians to encourage and strengthen one another in their *one faith* given by the *one Spirit* (i.e. Holy Spirit) in their *one baptism*. It was in such *unity of the Spirit* that Paul could say in Colossians 2:5 → *Though I am absent in body, yet I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good order and the firmness of your faith in Christ*. When he said he was with them *in spirit* even though not physically present, he referred to their unity they share in the Holy Spirit because of their *one baptism* in Christ Jesus.

At the same time, this unity displayed itself in a very real way in Paul's life. From a distance Paul could talk about rejoicing that the Christians are in *good order* and firm in their *faith in Christ*. In Ephesians 1:16 it displayed itself as he did *not cease to give thanks for them, remembering them in his prayers*. He, however, did not have the

wonderful opportunities we have to communicate with one another and be uplifted through direct, instant communication. Most of the New Testament makes up his letters in an effort to encourage them in their *good order and . . . firmness of . . . faith in Christ.*

Thus, we are striving to encourage each other in our *one faith* through multimedia efforts such as video Bible studies and teaching, our website and live streaming over the internet and in good ol' phone conversations. Because of our unity in the Spirit we do not stop being the Church because we are socially distanced from one another. You are the Church in all the various relationships and vocations of your life, no matter where you are at a given moment.

While Jesus promises that He is *with you always, to the end of the age* in His omnipresence (cf. Matthew 28:20), He also says, *where two or three are gathered in My name, there am I among them* (cf. Matthew 18:20). Thus, the Church will be moved by the Holy Spirit to meet together physically as the body of Christ to dispense and receive His forgiveness of sins through His presence, both spiritually and physically. Throughout the history of the Christian Church, Christians in various places and under persecuting circumstances have been forced to kind of “social distance” (i.e. avoid meeting in person publicly) at threat of life. They would meet in small groups or families in homes or maybe in a safe place.

Unfortunately, circumstances can serve as a catalyst for the sinful nature and the devil to put forth a wrong identity as the Church. People can give into the temptation to look at their faith as their own private business and eventually disconnect themselves from the “communion of saints,” even when they are physically able to meet in worship with other Christians. Such sinful behavior thinks they don’t need the other members of the body of Christ and thus don’t need to meet together in person to worship Jesus together and receive the forgiveness of sins through the means of grace dispensed there physically. It was this sinful attitude behind God’s exhortation in Hebrews 10:25 → *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 (i.e. Judgment Day) approaching* (NIV).

As the possibilities open up for Christians in various places to meet together for worship again, our *unity of the Spirit* which crosses all physical boundaries will draw us to express our *unity of the Spirit* by meeting together physically to experience *the bond of peace* which comes in the forgiveness of sins through faith in Jesus Christ alone and distributed by “the communion of saints” in the means of grace (i.e. Baptism, the Lord’s Supper, the Absolution, the Gospel).

When Paul wrote to the Christians in Colossae stating that he rejoiced *to see their good order and the firmness of their faith in Christ*

even though he was not physically present among them (cf. Colossians 2:5), he was confident that they were still living in obedience to Christ Jesus their Lord, not using their circumstances to create a “new normal” of sinful disobedience. A firm faith in Christ will continue to use whatever opportunities in a “shut-in” situation to *grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ* (cf. 2 Peter 3:18), even if they are “virtual” **for a time**. Such a faith continues to be the Church no matter where you are, displaying *good order and the firmness of faith in Christ* together with the Church in the Holy Spirit as baptized children of God in the world. Pray with me:

Almighty God, grant to Your Church Your Holy Spirit and the wisdom that comes down from above, that Your Word may not be bound but have free course and be preached to the joy and edifying of Christ’s holy people, that in steadfast faith we may serve You and, in the confession of Your name, abide unto the end; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen. (Lutheran Service Book: Pew Edition, © 2006 Concordia Publishing House: St. Louis, MO, p. 305)

*Therefore encourage one another and build one another up,  
just as you are doing.*

(1 Thessalonians 5:11)

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