

True Christian Fellowship?

An Examination of Koinonia & 4 False Views

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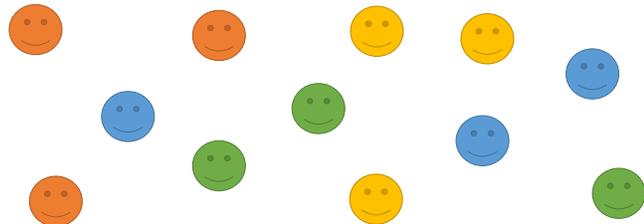
Introduction: Unity in a Fragmented World

In an age increasingly marked by disunity—ecclesiastically, culturally, and even personally—American society in particular is deeply fractured: political polarization divides communities and families; conflicting ideologies on gender and identity spark heated debates; and even geography—urban versus rural—contributes to cultural estrangement. Amid such turmoil, the Church offers a vision of unity not founded on human consensus but rooted in something far more enduring.

At the heart of this fellowship is the Greek word *koinonia*, a term that speaks not merely of sentiment or social compatibility but of spiritual participation and unity in Christ.

The apostle Paul addresses this reality with remarkable clarity: “The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a [*koinonia*] in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a [*koinonia*] in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread” (1 Cor. 10:16-17).

Fragmented World



This essay seeks to explore the depths of this passage and others, not merely to describe the mechanics of Christian life together, but to magnify the theological and ecclesiological implications of *koinonia* as it pertains to the life of the Church. We will examine what *koinonia* truly means in its scriptural context (Acts 2:42; 1 John 1:3; 1 Cor. 1:9), contrast it with popular yet false notions of fellowship, and explore the implications for doctrine, pastoral practice, and the unity of the Church (AC V).

I. The Meaning and Substance of Koinonia

The word koinonia is often translated as fellowship, communion, or participation. In its biblical usage, however, it always refers to a bond created by sharing in something objective and real. In secular Greek, koinonia could describe the partnership in a business venture, the holding of things in common, or the act of sharing a common burden. In the New Testament, its meaning is elevated to describe the sharing of something sacred—namely, participation in Christ Himself (Phil. 1:5; 2 Cor. 13:13).

And so, koinonia is not mere friendship. It is not merely being “together” or feeling a sense of warmth. Rather, koinonia is the divine act by which believers are united to Christ and one another through participation in His gifts, particularly Word and Sacrament (Acts 2:42; 1 Cor. 10:16-17). It is a kind of unity that is vertical before it is horizontal. Unity among believers arises first from a common reception of Christ—not from mutual agreement to be in a relationship. It is unity from a shared reception of the same Lord in the same means of grace (SA III.V.1-3).

This vertical establishment is critical. The Church does not create koinonia by her own efforts; rather, members of the church are gathered into unity by the gracious work of God (1 Cor. 1:9; Eph. 4:4-6). We are not the hosts of this fellowship. We are guests. Christ is the host who offers Himself, and it is in receiving Him that we are bound together as various people (Ap VII/VIII.5).

This truth underscores the Reformation insight that the true Church is not identified by external unity alone but by the marks of the Church—namely, the pure preaching of the Gospel and the right administration of the Sacraments (AC VII). It is the presence of Christ through these means, not institutional or social cohesion, which defines and unites the Church.

II. False Views of Koinonia

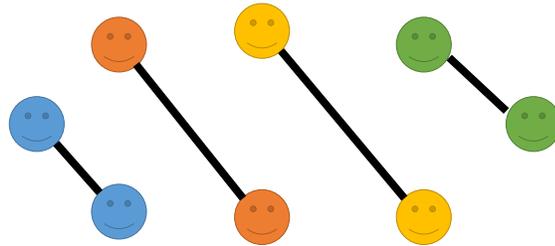
In the modern Church, koinonia is often misunderstood and misrepresented in ways that obscure its true meaning. Four common distortions have emerged: (1) koinonia as mere sentimental fellowship; (2) koinonia as institutional gathering; (3) koinonia as ecumenical celebration without doctrinal agreement; and (4) koinonia as a ritualistic work centered on human performance rather than Christ’s gift. These errors compromise the biblical and confessional understanding of fellowship by disconnecting it from its foundation in Christ and His means of grace.

1. Koinonia as Sentimental Fellowship?

One of the most common misunderstandings equates koinonia with friendly association. In this conception, fellowship is little more than Christians spending time together in social settings—whether chatting after church services, sharing meals, or enjoying one another’s company in recreational activities. While these are wholesome expressions of Christian love (Rom. 12:10; Gal. 6:2), they do not constitute the biblical reality of koinonia.

This view has no shared object at its center. Instead of fellowship rooted in a common reception of Christ and His gifts, it becomes a horizontal connection between individuals based on mutual interests. Churches that uphold this model of fellowship often attempt to link people and families based on shared life stages, vocations, personalities, or recreational preferences. The result is a social koinonia without anything sacred or objective uniting it—a fellowship between people, but not through Christ.

Koinonia as Fellowship



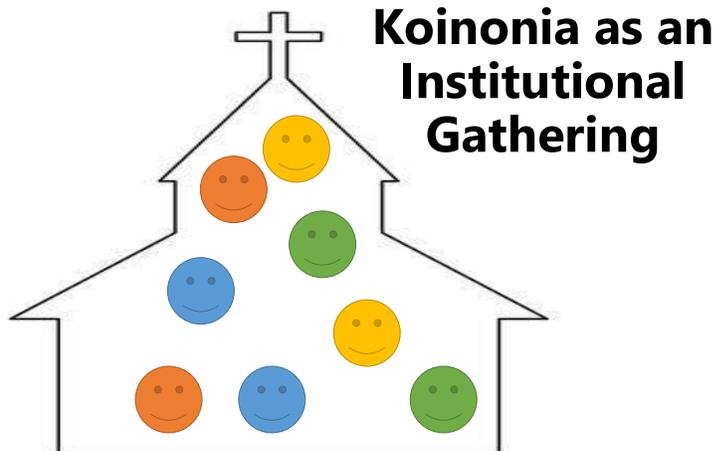
This perspective shifts the foundation of unity away from Christ and onto shared interests, personalities, and human affinities. In such settings, fellowship is sustained not by Christ’s Word and Sacraments, but by mutual preference and sociability. Consequently, when disagreements or interpersonal conflicts arise, the veneer of fellowship quickly fractures because it lacks the deeper, sacramental foundation (1 Cor. 1:10).

Moreover, this view can lead to the dangerous assumption that the Church is no different than any other social group or club—a country club with a steeple. The Church is not defined by her ability to foster pleasant relationships but by her possession of Christ and His gifts (1 Cor. 11:26; AC VII). True koinonia, in contrast, unites people of differing backgrounds, interests, and personalities precisely because it is grounded in a shared reception of the crucified and risen Lord (Gal. 3:28).

2. Koinonia as Institutional Gathering

Another erroneous understanding is the conflation of koinonia with the mere act of being gathered together in institutional or organizational settings. Under this model, fellowship is assumed to exist simply because individuals are members of the same congregation, denomination, or ecclesial body.

This error often arises in formalized church settings where attendance and membership are mistaken for spiritual unity. But as Scripture clearly teaches, proximity is not participation. Judas Iscariot's presence at the Last Supper is a sobering reminder that one can be physically near Christ and His disciples while being spiritually alienated (Matt. 26:23-25; John 13:26-27).



True fellowship is not defined by organizational charts, denominational titles, or attendance records but by mutual participation in the gifts of Christ (1 Cor. 10:16; Ap VII/VIII.5). One may serve faithfully in a congregation or claim generational ties to a denomination, yet lack true koinonia if they harbor doctrinal error, support strange teachings, or merely give lip service to their

church's confession. Likewise, even being a fourth-generation LCMS Lutheran does not ensure genuine koinonia if one does not personally know, uphold, and confess what the LCMS believes and teaches according to Scripture. Giving denominational allegiance without personal conviction is disingenuous. No amount of committee service, financial contribution, ecclesiastical pedigree, or heritage can substitute for a steadfast confession.

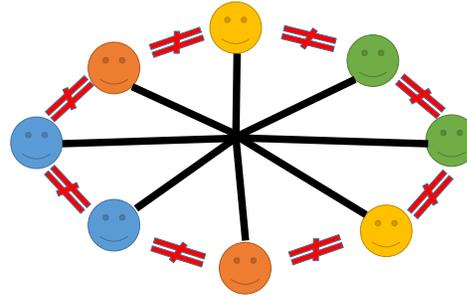
Furthermore, full agreement with a church body's doctrine means little if that church body is itself in doctrinal error. In such cases, one's unity is not with Christ but with falsehood. Agreement with error is not harmless—it creates a counterfeit koinonia, binding individuals together not in the truth of Christ, but in false teaching. Real fellowship can only exist where Christ's truth is believed, confessed, and practiced.

3. Koinonia as Ecumenical Celebration

A third distortion presents koinonia as an ecumenical event or spiritual celebration that strives to bridge denominational divides without addressing doctrinal differences. The driving impulse is not to examine or affirm doctrine, but to avoid it entirely so that a visible and sentimental unity can be displayed. The goal becomes an appearance of harmony—a happy gathering of diverse groups under the banner of "love"—regardless of what each actually believes, teaches, or confesses.

This mindset frequently appears in joint worship services, intercommunion practices, and pan-denominational events where participants are encouraged to set aside theological convictions for the sake of visible unity. The result is a kind of “celebratory koinonia” in which unity itself is idolized, and anyone who raises doctrinal concerns is viewed as divisive or unloving. If someone dares to bring up disagreement—particularly over serious theological error—they are often marginalized or rebuked for spoiling the mood.

Koinonia as Celebration



This kind of unity is not real unity at all. It resembles a family reunion where feuding relatives are told to smile for the group photo to keep Grandma happy. The image of peace is preserved, but the underlying reality is fractured. So too, in these ecumenical celebrations, visible unity is staged for comfort or sentiment, while true agreement in the faith is absent.

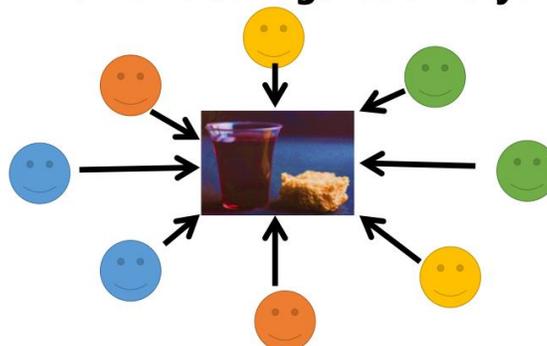
When unity is pursued apart from the truth of the Gospel and the clarity of the Lutheran Confessions, it ceases to be Christian unity at all (AC VII; Ap VII/VIII.5-6).

4. Koinonia in Welch’s and Works

A further distortion of koinonia reduces the Lord’s Supper to a ritual of human devotion, centered not in the gift of Christ’s body and blood, but in the participants’ symbolic gesture of commitment. This version of koinonia does have something tangible at the center—namely, grape juice and sweetheart bread—but what matters most is not what is given, but what is done.

In this view, the grape juice and sweetheart bread become a destination to reach, a goal toward which the worshipers must move. The emphasis is not on Christ’s Word or His promise, but on the participant’s approach, sincerity, and

Koinonia as Legalistic Piety?



outward display of piety. The elements are not received as gifts but approached as a ritual checkpoint.

As a result, the presence of Christ's body and blood in, with, and under the bread and wine is not acknowledged as the source of true koinonia. Instead, the sacrament is stripped of its divine content and becomes a demonstration of one's sincerity in religion. The central focus is no longer Christ coming to the sinner with forgiveness, but the sinner coming forward to prove devotion.

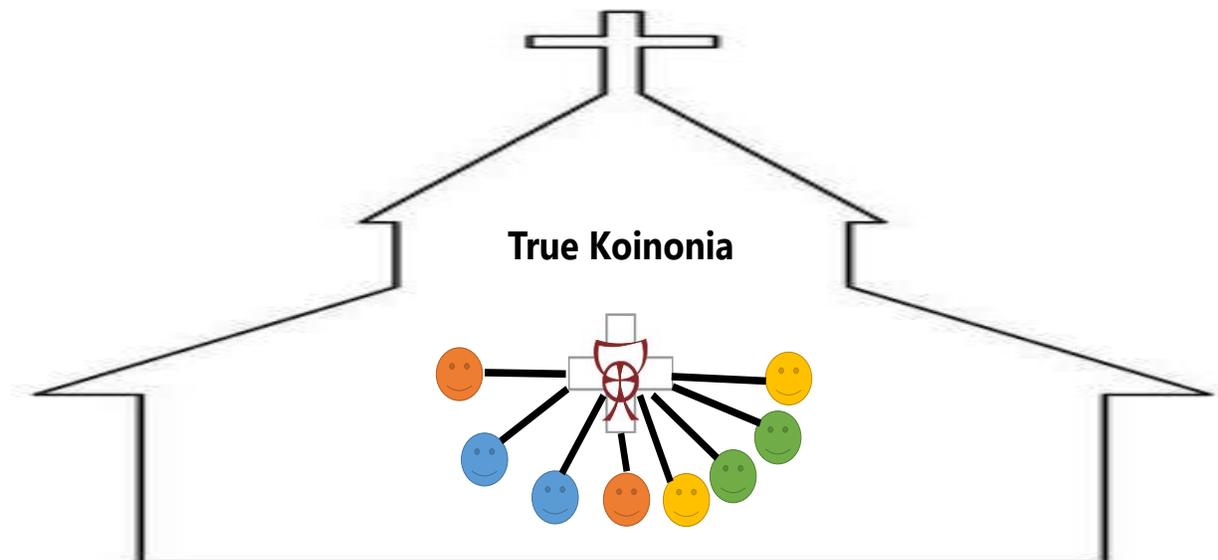
Thus, the Lord's Supper is transformed from Gospel into Law. What was instituted as a gift for sinners becomes a test of worthiness. The comfort and assurance of Christ's presence are replaced with the pressure of personal performance. The divine mystery is lost, and with it, true koinonia—for fellowship grounded in human effort cannot bind the Church in Christ's grace.

III. The Reality of True Koinonia

In contrast to these false views—whether rooted in sentimentality, institutional belonging, ecumenical celebration, or ritualistic performance—true koinonia is something entirely different. It is not a horizontal unity based on preferences, structures, emotions, or religious exertion. Nor is it a fabricated peace built on suppressing doctrine for the sake of unity. True koinonia is grounded in Christ alone, received through the means He has instituted.

Whereas false koinonia arises from human will and effort, true koinonia flows from divine action. It is created and sustained by God through His Word and Sacraments. Unlike the sentimental fellowship of shared interests, true koinonia is anchored in objective gifts. Unlike the institutional model, it is not enough to claim membership or heritage—confession matters. Unlike the ecumenical celebration, it does not bypass truth for the sake of emotional unity. And unlike the ritualistic performance model—centered around Welch's grape juice and sweetheart bread—it does not exalt man's sincerity over Christ's promise.

True koinonia is the miraculous communion of saints brought about through participation in the Lord's Supper. It is not merely human fellowship or relational closeness. Koinonia



is not something that happens directly between people on the basis of shared interests or personal decisions. Rather, it happens through something—namely, through our common participation in Christ and His gifts (1 Cor. 10:16; Ap VII/VIII.5).

This koinonia joins people together into a common thing: the body and blood of the Lord, given and shed for the forgiveness of sins (Matt. 26:28; Luke 22:19-20). It is grounded in the Word of Christ, who declares, “This is My body... This is My blood.” Without this Word, there is no Sacrament, and thus no Christian koinonia—only a human gathering (LC V.10).

Where Christ’s Word is absent, the meal may still create fellowship, but it is not communion in the biblical and sacramental sense. Koinonia does not originate from our decisions, planning, or the act of simply assembling a crowd. It is not created horizontally by human will but vertically by divine action. The Lord Himself gathers His people. He is both host and gift-giver (John 6:44; 1 Pet. 2:9; SC III Explanation).

True koinonia is created by God as He calls His Church to the Table. It is not a celebration of human achievement or unity at any cost. It does not arise from getting everyone together regardless of confession or doctrinal differences. Rather, it flows from the unity of faith already shared through the pure preaching of the Gospel and the right administration of the Sacraments (AC VII; Ap VII/VIII.5-6).

As the Formula of Concord affirms, “We believe, teach, and confess also that at a properly instituted Lord’s Supper, Christ’s body and blood are truly and essentially present, and they are truly distributed and received with the bread and wine” (FC Ep VII.6).

This participation is real and objective. Christ is truly present in the Sacrament. His body and blood are given for you for the forgiveness of sins (Matt. 26:28). Through this giving and receiving, the Church is made one. “Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread” (1 Cor. 10:17).

This unity is not sentimental or symbolic. It is not sociological. It is sacramental. And because it is sacramental, it is both profoundly inclusive and exclusive: inclusive, in that all who repent and believe are invited to the Table; exclusive, in that only those who share the same confession of faith can rightly commune together (1 Cor. 11:19-22).

We do not have koinonia in our obedience or in our ability to organize a successful communal event. This is not our Supper, but the Lord’s Supper. He gives it, and in giving, He creates true unity—true koinonia—in Himself.

IV. The Necessity of Doctrinal Unity: Closed Communion

Is closed communion necessary? That question depends entirely on one’s understanding of koinonia.

If koinonia is merely sentimental fellowship—warm feelings of connection or friendliness—then closed communion appears not only unnecessary but even contrary to the spirit of unity. After all, in this model, the Lord’s Supper is treated as an optional tradition, celebrated sporadically—perhaps monthly or even quarterly—and valued less as a divine gift than as a symbolic gesture of community. In such churches, a robust practice of the Sacrament is largely absent because koinonia is understood to be already present through social bonds.

If koinonia is understood as an institutional gathering, then closed communion might still be practiced, but for the wrong reasons. Instead of serving the unity of faith and confession, it can become a mere badge of group membership—guarding access to a denominational club rather than preserving the integrity of Christ’s gifts. In this view, communion is a rite of passage into the local church’s social network, and the altar rail becomes a place not of confession, but of tribal belonging.

If koinonia is seen as an ecumenical celebration, then closed communion becomes outright offensive. The goal of this view is to display unity through diversity, especially at the Lord’s Table. Here, doctrinal differences are downplayed or dismissed, and those who uphold confessional boundaries are accused of being unloving or divisive. Closed

communion is perceived as a disruption of the “happy picture” of harmony, much like the honest sibling at a family reunion who won’t pretend all is well for Grandma’s sake.

If koinonia is defined by Welch’s and works—centered around symbolic acts of religious devotion—then closed communion is again offensive, as it hinders someone’s opportunity to perform their visible act of sincerity. In this case, the elements on the altar are viewed not as divine gifts to receive, but as ritual destinations to reach. Denying someone access is therefore interpreted as denying them the chance to demonstrate faithfulness.

But if koinonia is what Scripture teaches—a real participation in Christ through His body and blood—then closed communion is not only appropriate, but necessary. True koinonia is grounded in shared faith and confession, flowing from the pure preaching of the Gospel and the right administration of the Sacraments. To commune together is to confess together (1 Cor. 10:17; 11:26). The altar is not a tool of exclusion, but a place of integrity, where unity in Christ is honored and protected.

Closed communion, rightly practiced, is an act of pastoral care. It ensures that those who receive the Sacrament do so in faith, repentance, and unity of confession. It guards against spiritual harm, both to the individual and to the Church. It is not inhospitable—it is faithful: faithful to Christ, who commands us to teach all things He has given (Matt. 28:20); faithful to the communicant, who should not receive the Supper to their judgment (1 Cor. 11:27-29); and faithful to the Church, which must remain a people gathered around the truth of God’s Word (1 Pet. 2:9; Eph. 4:11-16).

Thus, in the light of true koinonia, closed communion is not a boundary of rejection, but a boundary of confession. It upholds the sacredness of the Table and the unity that Christ Himself creates through His Word and gifts.

V. Living Out Koinonia in the Life of the Church

This section provides a brief, non-exhaustive look at how the reality of koinonia shapes the daily and corporate life of the Church. It has far-reaching implications for how we view membership, catechesis, discipline, and mutual support. Koinonia calls us to a deeper communion not only at the altar, but also in the everyday life of the body of Christ.

A. Membership and Catechesis

Entering into koinonia is not something casual or automatic. It requires instruction, confession, and commitment. The Church must be diligent in catechizing new members,

ensuring that they understand the faith into which they are being welcomed (SC Preface; LC I.1–6).

Yet in our day, many churches attempt to dumb down or contemporize theology in an effort to be more palatable or relevant. This impulse is rarely found elsewhere in life. In sports, for example, we expect new players to learn the vocabulary and rules—no one demands that we update “birdie,” “bogey,” or “first down” for modern ears. Fans of football or golf are expected to be catechized into the language of the game. Why, then, should the Church be expected to shy away from words like “justified,” “sanctified,” and “atonement”? If the world can be taught the technical language of sports, it can surely be taught the sacred language of the faith.

Moreover, while the Church certainly desires to reach the lost and welcomes numerical growth, she must also think generationally. A pastor who thoroughly catechizes a young man today is not merely teaching one soul. He may be equipping a future father of four—who will go on to catechize his own children, who in turn will teach the next generation. Through faithful catechesis of one, twenty-one souls may be reached in time. This is the long view of discipleship: deep roots that bear fruit for generations to come.

In an age of religious consumerism, where churches are chosen based on preferences rather than doctrine, we must resist the temptation to prioritize popularity over truth. Better to have a small number rightly catechized than a crowd that does not discern the body (1 Cor. 11:29).

B. Fellowship and Discipline

True koinonia is not based on common hobbies, shared interests, or similar backgrounds. It does not require people to enjoy the same music, food, politics, or recreational activities. In fact, one of the strengths of true koinonia is that it does not necessitate common interests at all. An urban tech professional and a rural hillbilly can enjoy full fellowship in Christ, even if they have virtually nothing in common in terms of personality or taste. Koinonia cuts through social, economic, and cultural differences because it is not rooted in the things of man, but in the eternal Christ.

Because we are united in Christ through Word and Sacrament, koinonia is not an abstract idea or emotional sentiment—it is a real, lived fellowship with practical implications. This unity binds believers together in mutual responsibility and accountability (Gal. 6:1-2; 1 Cor. 12:25-27).

One such expression of this accountability is church discipline. When rightly practiced, discipline is not exclusionary or harsh, but a necessary act of love. Calling a brother or

sister to repentance is to take their spiritual well-being seriously. It acknowledges that true fellowship includes not only encouragement but also correction (Matt. 18:15–17). When a member persists in unrepentant sin or clings to false teaching, church discipline preserves the purity of koinonia while aiming at repentance and restoration—not punishment.

Likewise, koinonia calls believers to bear one another’s burdens—not just in moments of crisis, but in our daily walk through the vale of tears. This includes forgiving one another, praying for one another, and walking in the light of God’s Word together (Col. 3:12–14; James 5:16). The unity that is created and sustained at the altar is lived out within the congregation—in the pews, at home, and throughout the entire life of the Church.

C. Vocation and Witness

Koinonia not only unites us in doctrine and worship—it also equips us to live faithfully in our various callings. The Church’s unity in Word and Sacrament shapes the Christian’s life in the world. This communion, rooted in Christ, strengthens believers to serve their neighbor and bear witness to the Gospel.

The visible harmony of a congregation grounded in true koinonia becomes a compelling testimony to the world. Jesus prayed that His followers would be one, so that the world might believe (John 17:21–23). In a fractured and divided age, the Church offers a unity not based on trends, politics, or shared demographics, but on the unchanging truth of God’s Word.

This unity also sends Christians into their vocations—not as isolated individuals, but as those bound to a larger communion that spans cultures and generations. Whether one is a parent, employee, student, or citizen, the Christian’s vocation is lived out with confidence, knowing that Christ is present and working through His people for the good of the world (1 Pet. 2:9–10; Phil. 2:1–4).

VI. Conclusion: One Bread, One Body

In a world fragmented by ideology, geography, gender, class, and politics, the Church of Christ offers something profoundly different. It does not offer a fellowship based merely on friendships, institutional membership, emotional ecumenism, or legalistic ritualism. Rather, the Church offers a fellowship that is created by God through His Word and Sacraments and received by faith.

Koinonia is not a human achievement but a divine gift. It is participation in Christ Himself and, through Him, a participation with all who are joined to Him in faith. It is a reality both sacramental and confessional, inclusive of all who believe and exclusive toward error for the sake of truth. It does not ignore division but confronts it with the clarity of God's Word and the charity of Christ's love.

Therefore, this koinonia must be guarded and cherished. It must be lived not only in Sunday worship but in daily vocation, doctrine, and discipline. In one bread, we who are many are one body—united in Christ, bound by truth, and preserved in grace (1 Cor. 10:17; Rom. 12:4–5; 1 Cor. 12:12–13).

Amen.