

# The Function of Doctrine <sup>14</sup> and Theology in Light of the Unity of the Church

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A Report  
Plus 15 Papers From an Official Study  
Conducted by the Division of Theological Studies,  
Lutheran Council in the USA,  
During 1972-77

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# Part 3

## Consensus in the Gospel as the Basis for Fellowship

# The Position of the LCMS on the Basis for Fellowship

By Ralph A. Bohlmann

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On October 21, 1971, the church council of the American Lutheran Church directed the ALC representatives on the ALC-LCMS Commission on Fellowship "to ask for a formal statement on the understanding of the basis for fellowship from the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod in order to ascertain whether or not the Missouri Synod has changed its position since the declaration in 1969."<sup>1</sup> Although this essay is not the "formal statement" requested by the ALC, it is intended to facilitate discussion and contribute to an understanding of the position of the LCMS on this important question.

The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod representatives on the commission agree with their colleagues from the American Lutheran Church that a common understanding of the basis for fellowship is essential to a good relationship between our church bodies. For that reason we submitted an essay on this subject to the initial meeting of the commission, and we will incorporate some thoughts from that essay in our comments below.

## **ALC CHURCH COUNCIL GUIDELINES**

The American Lutheran Church has asked the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod whether it has changed its position on the basis for fellowship since fellowship was declared in 1969. The same concern has also been raised in statements made by President Kent Knutson.<sup>2</sup>

Our first impulse is to reply that we do not understand what has occasioned this question, since it implies that the LCMS has taken some action or made some statement since 1969 that suggests a change. We are unaware of any such action or statement on our part. However, we understand that the ALC asked this question because of the resolution adopted by our Synod in 1971, particularly its concern with the action of the ALC in permitting the ordination of women to the office of the holy ministry. President J. A. O. Preus has written to the clergy of the Missouri Synod: "Your representatives on the Commission on Fellowship are unanimous in their conviction that our position on the ordination of women does not indicate any change in our under-

standing of the basis for fellowship, inasmuch as our Synod has never placed this matter in the freedom of the church. This point will require careful and serious consideration in our future meetings with the American Lutheran Church."<sup>3</sup>

A similar question could be posed by some members of the LCMS to the ALC. Recent statements made by President Knutson have given the impression that the American Lutheran Church is in altar and pulpit fellowship with all Lutheran churches in the world and regards these churches as sister churches.<sup>4</sup> Do such statements imply that the ALC counts as its sister churches also those Lutheran state churches of Europe which have a fellowship arrangement with Reformed churches? If the ALC considers itself to be in fellowship with all other Lutherans, does such fellowship exist on the same basis as its fellowship with the LCMS; namely, on the basis of agreement in doctrine and all its articles and in the right administration of the sacraments? One of the reasons we welcome a discussion of the ALC's question is because it promises to clarify such questions.

The October 1971 statement of the church council indicates that the ALC is willing to have fellowship with "any and all Lutheran churches which confess their adherence to the Holy Scriptures as the Word of God in all matters of faith and life and subscribe to the confessions of the Lutheran church."<sup>5</sup> Certainly this is a satisfactory statement of what the LCMS also considers a sufficient

basis for fellowship, provided both understand it the same way.

What, for example, is included in "adherence to the Holy Scriptures as the Word of God in all matters of faith and life?" Is the Apostle Paul's teaching on the relationship between man and woman included among the "matters of faith and life"? Does "adherence" include only proper doctrinal formulations or a practice that is commensurate with such formulations as well? Does "Holy Scriptures" include everything the Scriptures teach, or are there teachings of Holy Scripture which are not "matters of faith and life"? Questions such as these were certainly discussed by the commissioners of both church bodies prior to the establishment of fellowship, and we can assume that agreement was reached on them.

But the wording of the church council's guidelines does raise other important questions about the basis for fellowship. For example, what is the meaning of the assertion that questions of practice or interpretations of Scripture "not specified in the confessions" could remain as matters of continuing conversation without being divisive of fellowship? Does this suggest that the confessions somehow determine what is or is not included in the basis for fellowship, or that any doctrinal point not explicitly treated in the confessions is an open question?

We of the LCMS would have a serious problem with this understand-

ing of the basis for fellowship. We understand that our confessional base is only as broad as the Scriptures themselves. Nothing in the Holy Scriptures can be declared an open question, whether it is set forth in the Lutheran Confessions or not, unless the Scriptures themselves leave it open. Any practice that calls the authority of Holy Scripture into question thereby does a disservice to the gospel, the Scriptures, and subscription to the Lutheran Confessions. Such a practice would therefore have serious implications for fellowship.

We understand that the primary question posed by the American Lutheran Church in asking about the basis for fellowship is whether the ordination of women to the pastoral office should be included in the basis of fellowship between our church bodies. Our concern about this ALC action is primarily a concern about the authority of Holy Scripture. As our synodical resolutions on this question have stated, we believe that the Scriptures do not permit the ordination of women, and what the Scriptures do not permit cannot be considered an open question. Furthermore, the authority of Holy Scripture is surely a matter that is directly involved in any question about the proper basis for fellowship.

### **LCMS STATEMENTS ON THE BASIS FOR FELLOWSHIP**

Let us look at a number of statements from the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod which have a bearing on the ALC question.

**Brief Statement (1932), "Of the Church."** Of particular interest are paragraphs 28 and 29, which emphasize the importance of orthodoxy for fellowship, indicate that only the Word of God should be taught in the church, and stress the importance of actually teaching what is officially subscribed in the Confessions of the church. Although this doctrinal statement is 40 years old, recent synodical conventions have continued to ask our membership to honor and uphold its doctrinal content.

**Common Confession (1952), Part 2, VIII, "The Church and Church Fellowship."** This document was adopted by the American Lutheran Church and the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. Paragraph 4 of this section emphasizes the importance of not denying, contradicting, or ignoring any Word of God in the Holy Scriptures. Paragraph 5 stresses that overlooking divergences from the Word of God contributes to the disruption of the unity of the church. Of particular importance is paragraph 7, which stresses the primacy of the gospel. Notice how this paragraph emphasizes that a denial of any teaching of the Scriptures involves a mutilation of the complete gospel and states that "it is for this reason that a full and common obedience to the Holy Scriptures is an indispensable requisite for church fellowship." Many other statements in this document also have a bearing on the question at hand.

**"Theology of Fellowship" (1967).** This lengthy document, in preparation for several years, was received by the Synod in 1967 to guide it in its understanding and practice of fellowship. The document is characterized throughout by an emphasis on doctrinal agreement as the basis for fellowship. Of particular interest is section 2, page 18, where the doctrine of the gospel is described as "a doctrine composed of a number of articles of faith." The document's warning against the twin dangers of unionism and separatism is also significant, as is its insistence that subscription to the Lutheran Confessions must be implemented by corresponding public teaching in the public forums of the church.

**"The Doctrine of the Church in the Lutheran Confessions" (essay adopted by ALC and LCMS commissioners, 1967).** All of the essays adopted by the commissioners of our two church bodies prior to 1967 have a bearing on the topic we are considering. We mention particularly the essay on the church because of its more direct implications for the question of the basis for fellowship. For example, section 5 on the unity of the church defines the term "gospel" to include all articles of faith. The statement likewise recognizes the need to accept the Scriptures as the fountain and norm of all teaching and to correct all errors that may conflict with the pure proclamation of the gospel.

**1969 Synodical Resolution 3-15.** Our position is stated in the preamble of this resolution: "We understand that fellowship between church bodies is based on a com-

mon and mutual acceptance, understanding, and practice of the Gospel and the sacraments, understanding the term 'Gospel' as it is used in the Augsburg Confession, Article VII. . . . It is understood that the declaration of fellowship will not infringe upon or interfere with the rights of congregations and church bodies to determine their exercise of pastoral care and discipline." While the Scriptures themselves are not mentioned at this point, the resolution clearly takes commitment to them to be basic to its position, as an examination of the "whereases" reveals. The "fellowship in Christ and in the Gospel" of which the resolution speaks is one which is "according to the Scriptures." Augsburg Confession VII is of help and guidance "with respect to sound biblical and Lutheran principles for the establishment of pulpit and altar fellowship." The recommendation of the synodical president and council of presidents on ALC fellowship quoted in this preamble speaks of the conviction that the two church bodies are "in the tradition of true Lutherans who are committed to the Holy Scriptures and who subscribe to the Lutheran Confessions." In view of the many essays and statements which preceded this resolution emphasizing that both church bodies accepted everything in Holy Scripture as the Word of God, there can be no doubt that neither church body understood this resolution's references to the basis for fellowship in a minimalistic sense. To be sure, "pastoral care and discipline" are designated as areas which remain the determination of individual congregations and church bodies.

But “the pastoral care and discipline” could not have had reference to matters such as the ordination of women which lie within the scope of what the Scriptures teach.

**1971 Resolutions 3-21 and 3-26.** Presumably, Resolution 3-21 is what led the ALC church council to raise the question we are considering on the basis for fellowship. The second “resolved” of Resolution 3-26 spells out the procedures which the LCMS follows in the establishment of fellowship and the consideration of further cooperation. This resolution indicates that agreement in doctrine and practice is the requisite for such fellowship. Resolution 3-21, in its fifth “whereas,” reports the fact that the LCMS representatives on the commission were of the opinion that the ALC’s decision to ordain women is “a matter that involves the authority of Scripture.” The subsequent “resolved” reflects the conviction that the ordination of women was not merely a matter of “pastoral care and discipline” but something which touched upon the authority of Holy Scripture and was therefore involved in the basis for fellowship between our church bodies. In other words, if there has been any change since 1969 in Missouri’s thinking on the basis for fellowship, it would be the change from an attitude of conviction in 1969 that the ALC is “in the tradition of true Lutherans who are committed to the Holy Scriptures” to an attitude of uncertainty and concern in 1971 in this regard because of the ALC’s decision on the ordination of women. But the 1971 resolution does not indicate any change in our position on the basis for fellowship itself.

**“Our Commitment to the Gospel” (essay distributed to the ALC-LCMS Commission on Fellowship, 1970).** Unlike most of the items above, this essay is not an official statement of the Missouri Synod. It was presented to the commission at the invitation of the LCMS commissioners precisely so that a misunderstanding on this question would not develop. Although the commission’s crowded agenda did not permit a formal discussion of this paper, it was distributed to all members for personal study and reaction. The next two sections of this paper will look at the central theses of this essay at some length: the reasons for our commitment to Holy Scripture and how this commitment relates to the doctrine of the gospel and the question of fellowship.

### **SUBMISSION TO HOLY SCRIPTURE**

Although we recognize the many complexities involved, there is also an essential simplicity to the nature of our scriptural commitment: we submit to the Scriptures as the divinely authoritative Word because our commitment to Christ as Lord has led us to such submission. Let us explain.

Man’s search for acceptance by God is characterized by his desire to know not merely that God is but that he is **for** us. Instead of such a God, man finds only a God of condemnation and judgment, a God who never ceases to bring home to man his failure and inadequacy—indeed, his hostility and rebel-

lion against God. Man finds only a God before whom there can be no confidence, boasting, or pride, a God from whose verdict of condemnation there seems to be no escape.

But in the midst of this “primal experience” of God’s wrath, man hears from that very God a word that stands in total opposition to all that he can rightfully expect. This same God announces to us in the gospel that he accepts us for Christ’s sake. His “good news” is not merely that he will cover what is amiss in us or work to renew what is imperfect in us. It is an announcement that although he puts us to death with Christ, his love has not forsaken us but graciously restores us to life for Christ’s sake through faith.

There can be for us, then, no question of asking God to meet us on our terms. We know where that road ends. The new life in Christ is one of joyful obedience, trust, and submission in faith. It is a life determined and shaped by the radical nature of God’s creative gift in Christ. Within the sphere of that new life our commitment to Scripture arises. This commitment is for us not so much a matter of decision and proof as of submission, for it is part and parcel of the new life which gives up all pride and boasting. The Christ in whom we have found new life is the Christ of the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures, the Christ who bids us to observe whatever he has commanded through his prophets and apostles. We have no other Christ, we know no other, and indeed we seek no other. We accept him

through the words of those who bear witness to him by the special inspiration of his Spirit. In accepting him, we accept the testimony **about** him that is Holy Scripture, and we also accept what that testimony says about itself; namely, that it is the very Word of God for our faith and life.

Our acceptance of Holy Scripture as God's authoritative Word is essential to our ministry of proclamation. For, since it is the Christ of the Scriptures whom we proclaim, anything less than a total commitment to the truth of those Scriptures may come to endanger our proclamation.

Please note carefully what we are **not** claiming here. We do not claim that such total commitment to Holy Scripture is necessary for saving faith to exist, nor do we identify saving faith and the acceptance of Holy Scripture. We do not claim that such total commitment will inevitably result in the pure preaching of the gospel and the correct administration of the sacraments, for we know that is not always the case.

What we claim is that a less-than-complete commitment to the Scriptures, an uncertainty about their truthfulness, a hesitancy or disagreement with regard to some of their contents, or a way of interpreting them that makes open questions out of apostolic teachings, will endanger the proclamation of the gospel. For the Scriptures are the epistemological foundation (i.e., the formal principle)

on which our proclamation rests. We do not claim that to deny the truthfulness of the Scriptures on certain points will inevitably lead one to ask the specifically existential question: "How then can I believe anything which they tell me?" although this has often happened. But we maintain that it must of necessity lead the church to ask the epistemological question: "What Christ, then, do we proclaim?"

Our complete commitment to the Scriptures is not, therefore, intended to provide a false certainty for faith. Rather, it is to provide our answer to the question that all efforts to achieve external unity in the church must treat: "Who is this Christ whom we proclaim?" In the realm of personal, existential faith we have, know, and seek no other Christ than the Christ of the Scriptures. In the realm of our public proclamation we have, know, and seek no gospel other than the gospel to which the Scriptures bear witness and which they norm. Thus, our commitment to the Scriptures is not only the direct result of faith in Christ but also an integral part of our ecumenical concern for the whole church and indeed for all mankind. We are concerned that the Christ whom we proclaim is neither a figment of our imaginations nor a result of selective picking and choosing but simply the Christ to whom the prophets and apostles bear witness. The Scriptures are the foundation of our proclamation. Anything less than total commitment to them may well be a reflection of man's perennial tendency to repeat the Tempter's question, "Yea, hath God said?"—a question that

always jeopardizes the proclamation of the gospel to which God has called us.

## SCRIPTURE, GOSPEL, AND FELLOWSHIP

What is the relationship of this scriptural commitment to the doctrine of the gospel in fellowship concerns? As we pointed out above, the very resolution by which fellowship with the ALC was declared by the LCMS in 1969 affirmed, both implicitly and explicitly, a strong commitment to Scripture.

In order that there may be no misunderstanding, however, we will seek to make clear what is entailed by this commitment. We will begin with Article VII of the Augsburg Confession: "For it is sufficient for the true unity of the Christian church that the Gospel be preached in conformity with a pure understanding of it and that the sacraments be administered in accordance with the divine Word. It is not necessary for the true unity of the Christian church that ceremonies, instituted by men, should be observed uniformly in all places." Although this passage was surely intended primarily to affirm that the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church was present among the Lutherans rather than to serve as a program for establishing denominational fellowship, it does have important implications for the latter concern. The antithesis to the doc-



trine of the gospel and all its articles (the gospel *late dicta*) is not some content of Scripture which happens not to be part of the gospel and its articles. Rather, the antithesis is “ceremonies instituted by men.” Neither Article VII nor our use of it in the preamble of Resolution 3-15 were intended to minimize the importance of the Scriptures in the quest for the external manifestation of the unity which the one church of Christ possesses. In fact, the Augsburg Confession and all our confessions make quite clear that the only judge and norm for the “pure” and “recte” of AC VII is Holy Scripture—precisely because Scripture is God’s own Word.

The LCMS is committed to the Scriptures as the only judge, rule, and touchstone by which all doctrines are to be judged (FC, Epitome, Rule and Norm, 7). This means that our commitment to Scripture functions in an extremely important, though somewhat indirect, way in our fellowship concerns. Our search for a united commitment to Scripture is not an end in itself; our true goal is unity in the pure preaching of the gospel and right administration of the sacraments. But the gospel in all its articles is normed by the Scriptures. Therefore, all subjective selectiveness with regard to the content of the Scriptures cannot but call into question the epistemological foundation of the gospel itself.

This is the reason that all the content of the Bible is important. We do not insist that every statement in the Scriptures be understood as an article of faith. But we do expect the truthfulness and authority

of every statement in the Scriptures to be acknowledged, since it is the very Word of God.

This is scarcely a new understanding in our circles. C. F. W. Walther stated it well: “We indeed know how to distinguish between articles of faith and doctrines of Scripture which are not articles of faith. On the one hand, we permit no one to turn a clear doctrine of Scripture, whether it may seem great or small, into an ‘open question’ for us. We consider it necessary to contend to the utmost for every article of faith (on every one of which our faith and hope depend), to condemn the contrary error, and to deny the hand of fellowship to those who contradict stubbornly. On the other hand, we by no means consider it necessary under all circumstances to fight to the utmost for such Scripture doctrines which are not articles of faith, much less to pronounce the anathema on the opposing error (although we reject it) and to deny the hand of fellowship to those who err in this matter. If, in a doctrinal controversy, the dispute is about doctrines which do not belong to the articles of faith, everything depends for us on whether those who contradict show that they do so because they do not want to submit to the Word of God, and therefore on whether, while appearing to let the basic doctrines of the Word of God stand, they nevertheless overthrow the very foundation upon which all these doctrines rest: the Word of God.”<sup>6</sup>

That is a clear statement of the role which commitment to Scripture plays in our fellowship concerns. We begin with the gospel and its articles, rather than with teachings in Scripture which are not articles of faith. To be sure, the latter are never unimportant, nor may they ever be ignored, denied, or compromised. They become especially important when we are given reason to fear that brethren, in rejecting such teachings, are calling into question the authority of the Word of God itself—however unintentional that might be.

We may illustrate this with several examples. There are teachings of Scripture—and important ones—which we do not usually term articles of faith. For example, the Scriptures clearly teach that humanity has been given dominion over the rest of creation, a teaching which most would probably not consider part of the doctrine of the gospel, but which is of great significance for a proper understanding of humanity (and of events such as our current ecological crisis). On biblical warrant, we believe that humanity is to be understood in this manner, and we would have to question seriously the acceptance of any scientific or philosophical viewpoint which denied this significant relationship between human and other biological life. We might point to the order of marriage as another example. Here again we have a highly significant teaching of Scripture which is not usually considered an article of faith. In fellowship concerns, to be sure, we do not begin by discussing the order of marriage. But it would become signifi-

cant for such discussions if brethren appear to espouse a view which calls into question the biblical understanding of this order. If such is the case, we must ask the scriptural warrant for such views. And there again, no utilitarian or historical considerations will suffice. A third illustration of this point would be various biblical statements which in themselves are not articles of faith, such as Jesus' references to himself as the Son of Man. We accept such references without question. But if others question Jesus' identification of himself as the Son of Man, we should have to question whether such an approach to Scripture is consistent with the proper recognition of its authority. In such cases, our commitment to Scripture plays an important role in fellowship concerns.

What we seek for a God-pleasing fellowship is unity in the gospel and all its articles on the basis of Holy Scripture. But we do not regard our submission to the authority of his Word to be limited to the gospel itself. **All** of Scripture is God's Word, which we accept in obedience to our Lord. Whatever calls into question anything God teaches there calls into question the epistemological foundation of our proclamation; namely, the authority of God's Word. That is not to say, of course, that the Bible contains no material which is no longer binding in our day, for the Bible itself indicates that some of

its contents was intended to have only temporary significance (for example, the ceremonial law). What we are claiming is that whatever Scripture teaches as part of God's revealed will or as a matter of truth or fact, whether or not it is directly and explicitly a part of the gospel and all its articles, has validity in all ages and times, and we cannot properly choose to set it aside.

When any scriptural teachings, whether articles of faith or not, are denied or ignored, we must ask for the scriptural warrant for such action. Matters taught in the Scriptures can never be regarded as open questions. To point out that Scripture appears to talk in different ways or point in different directions (a fact which might be claimed as easily for the doctrine of justification as for any other scriptural teaching) is never sufficient. Simply to provide **pro** and **con** positions on the basis of apparent scriptural evidence is not to provide scriptural warrant. Nor is it sufficient to point to historical or cultural factors which appear to make one affirmation more acceptable than the other. For something to be an open question, what must be shown is that Scripture itself points to no resolution of the difficulty and that there is no more reason (on the basis of Scripture) to

espouse one position than the other. Nor are we permitted to make facile distinctions between, for example, what Paul taught **then** and what we should teach **now**. Only if there is no clear scriptural evidence as to what Paul taught **then** may we speak of a lack of scriptural warrant for determining present-day teaching.

To reiterate: What we seek as the basis of fellowship is mutual agreement in the doctrine of the gospel and all its articles and in the proper administration of the sacraments on the basis of Holy Scripture and in keeping with the Lutheran Confessions as a true exposition of Holy Scripture. Non-fundamental articles are not open questions, to use the language of our fathers. We become especially concerned about the somewhat secondary teachings of Holy Scripture particularly when they are denied, treated indifferently, or forgotten, lest this be evidence of undermining the authority of God's Word—an act which always endangers the proclamation of the gospel itself. At that point, we do not feel that God's Word permits any compromise.

## CONCLUSION

The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod has not changed its position that commitment to the Scriptures is a vital part of the proper basis for fellowship. Our concern with the American Lutheran Church's position on the ordination of wom-

en centers in the implications of that position for the ALC's attitude toward the authority of Holy Scripture. Reiteration of a formal commitment to the Scriptures is not our concern. We have not criticized official ALC statements on the Scriptures. Our concern has arisen precisely because we fear that on the issue of the ordination of women such formal commitment has not, in fact, affected the actual practice of the ALC, however unintentional this may be. This is the fact that has caused the major change in our position toward the American Lutheran Church since 1969—the change from an official attitude of conviction with regard to the ALC's commitment to the authority of the Word to an official attitude of uncertainty and concern in this respect.

The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod does indeed seek to manifest a God-pleasing unity with the American Lutheran Church and all other Christians. As one of our theologians has written, "We take no particular pleasure in the role of 'His Majesty's loyal opposition' which current ecclesiastical history seems to have thrust upon us; and we would assure all men that we seek unity not on our terms but on our Lord's, and that is an act of love."<sup>7</sup> We do not pretend that God judges only others and somehow overlooks our failings. Rather, we espouse our position because we

know that he does bring us under judgment and because we also know that for Christ's sake he graciously overturns that judgment. Because we seek to hold out to all people the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ, we contend for a total acceptance of the authority of Holy Scripture. No, we have not changed our understanding of the basis for fellowship since 1969. But we earnestly covet a satisfactory explanation as to how we can reconcile the 1970 decision on the ordination of women with what we had both pledged each other as a vital part of our basis for fellowship; namely, our complete acceptance of the authority of Holy Scripture.

- 1 This statement bears the title, "Fellowship With the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod: Guidelines for Development (A Statement Adopted by the Church Council of The American Lutheran Church, Oct. 21, 1971)." It was distributed to the ALC as a supplement to the December 1971 issue of **Commentator** and to the LCMS in the Epiphany 1972 issue of **Brother to Brother**.
- 2 See, for example, his remarks in the September 1971 **Commentator** and in his opening address to the October 1971 meeting of the ALC church council.
- 3 **Brother to Brother**, Epiphany 1972, p. 4.
- 4 See, for example, President Knutson's article in the September 1971 issue of **The Lutheran Standard**.
- 5 See paragraph 3 of the guidelines adopted by the church council October 21, 1971.
- 6 Quoted in "A Review of the Question, 'What Is Doctrine?'" **1969 Convention Workbook**, p. 505, note 25.
- 7 Martin Franzmann, "The Nature of the Unity We Seek," **Concordia Theological Monthly**, XXVIII (November, 1957), 809.