

Theological Dialogue with Other Christian Church Bodies

“There is one body and one Spirit” (Eph 4:4)—one Body of Christ, the Father’s only-begotten Son, created by the gracious work of the one Holy Spirit. This one Body is the Church, that is, all who in baptismal faith are bound to Christ and to one another (see 1 Cor 1:2). Together with all those through the ages who confess their faith in the Blessed Trinity, we confess our faith “in one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church.” We confess, as an article of *faith*, this one Church¹ (often referred to as the *Una Sancta*, based on the Latin version of the Nicene Creed). It is real and true, yet, since it includes only those who hold to Christ in true faith, it is also a reality that is fully known only to God who “knows the heart” (Acts 15:8). He alone knows its length and breadth in every age and locale. For this reason, we do not confess any particular earthly institution as “the Church” *per se* in this full and credal sense, even as we fully affirm the visible and “bodily” reality of the Church.² To claim that a particular institution alone is “the Church” would deny that salvation and incorporation into the Body of Christ occurs through faith and Baptism into Christ, for “we, though many, *are one body in Christ* and individually members one of another” (Rom 12:5). The Apology of the Augsburg Confession therefore explains:

[T]he church is not only an association of external ties and rites like other civic organizations, but it is principally an association of faith and the Holy Spirit in the hearts of persons. It nevertheless has its external marks so that it can be recognized, namely, the pure teaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments in harmony with the gospel of Christ.³

True unity of faith is thus given in Christ and is no human achievement. It is given by means of the proclamation of the one Gospel of Christ and that Gospel’s administration in the holy and efficacious Sacraments. Although the Church’s unity is a gift of God, it can be undermined and damaged by sin, so the apostle Paul urges the people of God to maintain this unity “in the bond of peace” (Eph 4:3). To do so involves both certain character traits (humility, gentleness, patience, and forbearance) and also a sober maturity that resists shifting doctrinal winds and speaks “the truth in love” (Eph 4:2, 13-15). One of the primary goals for the confessors at Augsburg was to seek to promote a greater measure of harmony so that the God-given unity of the Church might be lived out as fully as possible amid human divisions in the church on earth:

Inasmuch as we are all enlisted under one Christ, we are all to live together in one communion and one church.⁴

However, this understanding of the unity of the Church as the Body of Christ must not become the basis for false conclusions. One such falsely drawn conclusion is the notion that because there is but one Church, all churches should be organizationally united despite different beliefs. Much of the modern ecumenical movement has operated on this basis, with the inevitable result of either an ephemeral

¹ Herein we will mark the distinction between the Church in this sense of the *Una Sancta* fully known only to God by means of an upper case C. We will refer to the church in the sense of earthly gatherings of Christians (“institutions”) with a lower case c.

² This, of course, is worthy of much fuller treatment that cannot be offered in this brief document. Such a treatment would include discussion of such matters as the confessional apology against the Roman charge that Luther and the Reformers held to a platonic understanding of the church, the use of “visible” and “invisible” as adjectives to describe the Church, and Walther’s careful reference to the Evangelical Lutheran church as the “True Visible Church on Earth.”

³ Apology [Ap] VII/VIII, 5; Kolb-Wengert edition, *The Book of Concord* [KW] (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 174.

⁴ Augsburg Confession [AC] Preface, 4; KW 30.

“unity” between churches that in reality hold contradictory beliefs or a united church that disallows the convictions that formerly had kept the uniting churches apart.

Instead of such an understanding with its predictable results, the church throughout much of its history followed a much more difficult yet more appropriate course with respect to divisions among believers and churches. From the apostolic council in Acts 15 to the ecumenical councils (e.g., Nicaea, 325) to Reformation era discussions and debates at Augsburg to later efforts that led to the *Book of Concord* itself, Christians sought to resolve division by careful theological reflection and discussion, grounded in the Word of God. Only such a course refused to sacrifice either unity or truth.

In keeping with such an understanding, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) lists as its first objective that it shall

Conserve and promote the unity of the true faith (Eph. 4:3-6; 1 Cor. 1:10), work through its official structure toward fellowship with other Christian church bodies, and provide a united defense against schism, sectarianism, and heresy.⁵

One way the Synod has sought to “promote unity” and to defend “against schism, sectarianism, and heresy” has been to engage in conversation and dialogue with other Christian church bodies. The result has sometimes been the joyful recognition that we share a full and common understanding of Christian faith and life—full doctrinal agreement. In such cases we have joyfully affirmed this fellowship between our church and another and rejoiced in the opportunity to open our pulpits to each other’s pastors and to welcome one another freely at the Lord’s Table.

At other times the dialogues have not achieved doctrinal unity. Indeed, it would be contrary to the theology of the cross and to the hidden nature of the church in this world to expect that theological dialogue will always result in doctrinal agreement or structural accord.⁶ Nevertheless, even such “failed” dialogues have always served a beneficial purpose. Proverbs 27:17 reminds us that “Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another.” So also, discussions even with those who in the end disagree with us, compel us to search the Scriptures, to listen carefully and honestly, and to sharpen and clarify our confession. Such failures to achieve theological unity are painful and sometimes have resulted in even greater misunderstanding, especially when those who have strongly upheld the necessity of doctrinal agreement are accused of having a loveless or proud heart toward other Christians or when the failure to achieve full agreement blinds participants to whatever measure of unity has been reached. Walther, in his “Duties of an Evangelical Lutheran Synod,” referred to the example of discussions between Luther and Bucer in an attempt to resolve differences over the doctrine of the Lord’s Supper. Their dialogue failed to achieve complete agreement. Luther could not compromise the truth as he understood it. Despite the failure, Luther urged against any action that would result in ““even more

⁵ *2010 Handbook: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod*, Constitution, Article III, 1, p. 13.

⁶ The Church never ceases to be a “little flock” (Luke 12:32) in the world, hidden by all that is so impressive and successful. See Luther’s comments on the Cain and Abel narrative in Gen. 4 (e.g., *Luther’s Works*, American Edition [AE], 1:253). Again, noting Abraham’s fear of Abimelech, Luther reminds us that God “nevertheless has His little church, even though it is small and hidden” (AE, 3:345).

uproar and offense” and appealed to Bucer to “keep the peace [resulting from] the degree [of unity] that has been reached.”⁷

The Synod’s first priority in theological conversation and dialogue has been with other Lutherans. Dialogues with other Lutheran church bodies were typically focused on a goal of establishing church fellowship. Shared Lutheran heritage and subscription—at least on some level—to the Lutheran Confessions heightened the expectation that church fellowship would be a likely outcome. However, the Synod has also engaged in theological dialogues with non-Lutheran Christians on numerous occasions. In such cases, discussions began with the recognition of deep, historical divisions between our respective church bodies—divisions based on significantly different understandings of the Gospel and biblical teaching and practice. Because of such historical divisions, some have questioned the legitimacy and value of the LCMS engaging in theological dialogues with such church bodies, since there seems to be little or no hope of reaching the full doctrinal agreement that would enable altar and pulpit fellowship.

In reply to that concern, several basic points should be considered:

1) The first objective of the Synod listed in Article III of the Constitution is to “work through its official structure toward fellowship with other Christian church bodies, and provide a united defense against schism, sectarianism, and heresy.” This objective points in two directions—“toward fellowship” and away from “schism, sectarianism, and heresy.”

While conversations with a non-Lutheran church body are less likely to result in altar and pulpit fellowship than those with a like-minded Lutheran church body, they may nevertheless help to provide a defense against sectarianism since the talks can reveal and emphasize areas that the LCMS and that church body hold in common. A shared confession of the creeds, for example, stands as an important testimony against many forms of heresy, even if it does not result in the full agreement necessary for altar and pulpit fellowship.

2) The bylaws of the LCMS are quite general in giving guidance to the Synod on matters of church relations when it comes to the role of the President, as chief ecumenical officer, and to that of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR) in its responsibility to assist the President as he carries out his duties in this area. Obviously, constraints of wisdom, prioritization, and budget always apply to what the Synod will do ecumenically (or in any endeavor), but there is no Synod or CTCR policy that would restrict or discourage the sort of talks mentioned above.

3) The ecumenical dialogue section of CTCR reports to conventions (as well as many resolutions) indicate that the Synod has a long-standing commitment to participation in ecumenical discussions and dialogs. For example, the LCMS has participated in most Lutheran bi-lateral dialogs (e.g., Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Episcopal, Reformed).⁸

⁷ Essay delivered to “First Iowa District Convention, St. Paul’s Church, Fort Dodge, Iowa, beginning Aug. 20, 1879,” in C. F. W. Walther, *Essays for the Church*, Vol. 2, 1877-1886 (St. Louis: CPH, 1992), p. 23. Brackets in the original, emphasis added. Walther is referring to a letter from Luther to Bucer, but does not provide full documentation.

⁸ The exceptions were when the LCMS was not invited to participate or when the goal of the dialog involved presuppositions/expectations which it could not accept.

4) The CTCR's report, *A Lutheran Stance Toward Ecumenism (LSTE)*, has some helpful guidance in this regard. The first two principles set forth in this report are:

- A. Lutherans recognize and rejoice in their oneness with all Christians in the *Una Sancta* and regard this unity as the presupposition for continuing ecumenical endeavors throughout Christendom.
- B. Lutherans deplore doctrinal disagreements, religious disputes, and dissensions among Christians and will not omit doing anything, in so far as God and conscience allow, that may serve the cause of Christian concord. (AC Preface, 13; FC SD XI, 95)⁹

These two confessional references are significant. In the Augsburg Confession's Preface, the confessors recognize that their efforts to resolve the theological differences in 1530 might "bear no fruit." Nevertheless, such an eventuality would not negate the significance of such efforts, but would instead "give testimony that we are not neglecting anything that can in any way serve the cause of reconciled Christian harmony, insofar as it can be done with God and a good conscience."¹⁰ Similarly, a half century later the confessors in the Formula of Concord Solid Declaration declare that they have no desire for any superficial unity, "Rather we have a deep yearning and desire for true unity and on our part have set our hearts and desires on promoting this kind of unity to our utmost ability."¹¹

In both cases theological discussion and study involving divided Christians is viewed from a principled, not pragmatic viewpoint. In the case of the confessors at Augsburg, mutual discussion was inherently important as a testimony to the importance of Christian unity in itself, despite the fact that there was no resolution of differences. In the second case, where a visible unity was achieved, it was important for the confessors in 1580 to stress that their efforts were based on a deep desire to uphold the honor of God and the purity of the Gospel. "Reconciled Christian harmony" and "true unity" call for our highest effort, even where it does not result in full fellowship at the altar and pulpit.

LSTE provides not only such an important rationale for all ecumenical endeavors, but this document also gives practical direction in terms of ecumenical priorities (pp. 13-14):

In initiating conversations and dialogue with other church bodies, the Synod will be careful to do so on terms that are consonant with sound Lutheran theology so as not to give occasion for offense and jeopardize fellowship relations that already exist. The Synod will avail itself of all opportunities to engage in conversation with other Christians so long as this can be done without compromising our confessional position, as would be the case, for instance, were the Synod to be invited to participate in dialogue on the condition that it recognize the legitimacy of a method of Biblical interpretation that is incompatible with the Lutheran view of the authority of the Holy Scriptures. Fruitful dialogue is difficult, if not impossible, unless participants share the same understanding of the authority of Scripture or unless conversations are held for the purpose of reaching agreement about Biblical authority as a first step toward discussion of other areas of doctrine.

⁹ CTCR, 1974, p. 12.

¹⁰ KW §13, p. 33.

¹¹ KW, p. 655.

It remains a basic principle for the Synod that the unity in the church which we seek is not an external unification imposed from without by the adoption of common polities and by organizational affiliation or by united endeavors in worthy causes, but the unity in the church which results from confessional unanimity, that is, genuine concord or agreement in doctrine. In relation to other church bodies and agencies the Synod will gladly cooperate in externals, that is, participate in projects which do not involve joint worship or the spiritual ministry of the church. In line with this principle the Synod will continually examine the propriety of present affiliations and will carefully weigh proposals to enter new alliances.¹²

The reference in *LSTE* to "cooperation in externals" here is significant. The concept appears in an earlier CTCR report, *Theology of Fellowship*, which states:

Our Synod should clearly recognize that, in the case of necessary work on the local, national, or international level, where the faith and confession of the church are not compromised, and where it appears essential that the churches of various denominations should cooperate or at least not work at cross purposes, our churches ought to cooperate willingly to the extent that the Word of God and conscience will allow.¹³

This has implications for dialogue opportunities where theological conversation with another Christian church will most likely not result in altar-pulpit fellowship because of substantial, continuing theological differences. Such discussions should not be viewed as failures if they enable a clearer understanding of our convictions and our differences, as well as those teachings we hold in common. The discovery of common ground with other Christians may well provide the opportunity to explore possible areas of cooperative work in such matters as relief efforts in times of disaster and joint responses to particular moral or ethical questions.

The LCMS has been able, in past years, to engage in joint efforts with the ELCA and its predecessor church bodies because, despite differences, there were also shared convictions that enabled the LCMS and various LCMS entities to engage in that work without doctrinal compromise. More recently, the level of disagreement between our church bodies has grown, not diminished, with the result that more and more joint work is threatened. One outcome is that, as unlikely as it may seem, there are increasing numbers of situations in which the position and practice of the LCMS on certain significant issues has more in common with some non-Lutheran groups than it has with the ELCA.¹⁴

Presently, the Synod has two specific opportunities to engage in theological dialogue with non-Lutheran churches. The LCMS recently began a series of theological conversations/dialogues with the Anglican Church in North America (ACNA) and has recently discussed the possibility of some formal doctrinal discussions on specific questions of doctrine and practice with representatives of the Roman Catholic Church (RCC). In both cases—one actual and one hypothetical—the dialogues would not involve an expectation of entering into altar and pulpit fellowship. Prior to any formal discussions with the ACNA

¹² *LSTE*, p. 14.

¹³ CTCR (1965), p. 28.

¹⁴ LCMS 2010 Res. 3-03 required the LCMS Praesidium to report to the Synod on the current state of cooperative work with the ELCA. A link to the Praesidium's report may be found at www.lcms.org/ctcr, together with a link to the CTCR's "Principles for 'Cooperation in Externals' with Theological Integrity." The latter document provides the theological basis for the Praesidium's memo to the Synod.

and in the dialogue itself, LCMS representatives consistently tried to avoid any inaccurate public perception of the purpose and meaning of the dialogue or any misunderstanding on the part of the church bodies with whom we have the opportunity to engage in discussions. For example, we emphasized to ACNA representatives that we would not consider altar-pulpit fellowship as a potential fruit of the dialogues at the present time because of the different understandings of our churches regarding the Lord's Supper and apostolic succession as well as other issues. Nonetheless, we expressed an interest because of the perception—shared by both churches—that we do share important common concerns such as the importance of upholding scriptural authority and the traditional Christian understanding of human sexuality and marriage. It is hoped that the dialogue will result in one or more statements of common conviction, for example, regarding ecclesial or societal issues such as biblical understandings regarding the ordination of those engaging in homosexual acts and the doctrine of marriage.

The invitation to engage in direct theological discussions with the RCC presents a similar case. There are significant differences between Lutherans and Roman Catholics in numerous doctrinal issues, including such primary matters as authority in the church and the doctrine of justification. The LCMS could not join in mutual declarations between the ELCA (or predecessor bodies) and RCC representatives, most notably in the case of the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*.¹⁵ Today, with the ELCA having made significant changes in its position on matters of sexual morality and qualifications for ordination, RCC representatives have shared with LCMS leaders their desire for discussions with our church on societal issues as well as on the specific question of the ordination of women to the pastoral ministry/priesthood. They have expressed appreciation for the willingness of the LCMS to continue to emphasize certain biblical and traditional Christian teachings. It is important to recognize that—given challenges to traditional Christian teaching in matters of sexual ethics as well as changing ecclesial practices—now may be a particularly opportune moment for discussions with the RCC. Once again, the goal would not be altar and pulpit fellowship (much less structural union of any sort), but the possibility of statements of Christian truth that may be affirmed by Christians from different theological traditions.

The level of societal, cultural, and ecclesial upheaval on moral issues and changes of long-standing church practices at the present time compel us to consider the importance of a united Christian voice on specific issues, wherever that is possible without compromise in other areas of doctrine and life. Where Christians from varying traditions share a common truth, the strength of their voice is clearer and stronger if they speak together. This invites us to consider theological discussions that would allow us to study and address various issues with other Christians, including those with whom we have marked and substantial theological disagreements in other areas. It is also very possible that such discussions will facilitate joint efforts together with other Christians to uphold biblical standards of morality, to respond to crises and catastrophes, and to participate in certain legal actions and activities.

At no point, however, should dialogue with other Christians be allowed to deny or to gloss over areas of theological disagreement. Authentic ecumenical dialogue must always be in the service of the truth of God's Word, centered in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The Church has no higher treasure.

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¹⁵ See *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification in Confessional Lutheran Perspective*, www.lcms.org/ctcr.