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Theological Observer

An Appeal for Charity with Clarity: Observations and Questions on Terms and Phrases in Need of Clarification

The ongoing theological discussions in synod will benefit from a close look at key words in two documents and a related synodical resolution. When the stakes are as high as they have become, we do well to pay careful attention to the words we use and to remember that charity and truth are still closely related. The documents referred to in this essay are (1) a CTCR study, "The Lutheran Understanding of Church Fellowship" (hereafter TLUoCF) in *Convention Workbook: Reports and Overtures, 61st Regular Convention, LCMS, 375-387*; (2) a subsequent report (also called "response"), which summarizes discussions of the study at the district level and is titled "The Lutheran Understanding of Church Fellowship: A Report on Synodical Discussions" (hereafter "Report") in *Workbook, 48-51*; and (3) Resolution 3-07A of the 2001 synodical convention in *Convention Proceedings: 61st Regular Convention, LCMS, 137-138*.¹ In this essay, selected passages from the documents are excerpted and related to comments and questions regarding the meaning of key terms.

The Terms: Their Contexts, Meanings, and Implications

A critical term in the discussions is "fellowship." The documents leave no question about its meaning: "Historical doctrinal differences among Lutheran, Reformed, and Roman Catholic churches remain and tragically go to the very heart of the Gospel that creates and preserves church unity" ("Report." *Workbook, 50; IV. B., paragraph 1*). "... LCMS pastors and congregations agree as a condition of membership in the Synod not to take part in the services and sacramental rites of heterodox congregations or of those of mixed confessions" ("Report." *Workbook, 50; V. A., paragraph 1*).

It is clear that "fellowship" refers to engaging in religious activity with others who profess a Christian faith. The "Report" makes no reference to participating in any kind of religious event with those outside that body, for example, Jews, Unitarians, Muslims. "Fellowship" is always understood in this way, as *church* fellowship in an inter-Christian context. "TLUoCF" is even more explicit:

¹All documents are also available on the LCMS Web page. Page numbers refer to printed documents; section numbers/letters should be used to locate citations in the PDF Web documents. Addresses of documents on LCMS Web page (or access from pull-down menu on the home page): "The Lutheran Understanding of Church Fellowship" ("the study") at www.lcms.org/ctcr/docs/pdf/flwshp2k.pdf; "TLUoCF: a Report on Synodical Discussions" at www.lcms.org/ctcr/docs/pdf/chfellfinal.pdf; 2001 LCMS Convention—list of resolutions (see 3-07A on 42 of 155) at www.lcms.org/convention/2001finalres.pdf.

“‘fellowship’ describes a wide range of activities among Christians” (TLUoCF. Workbook, 375; paragraph 1).

“Worship” is also a key term in that it denotes a public religious act. It is defined in “historic LCMS understanding” as “any occasion in which the Word of God is preached and prayer is made to Him by a fully authorized church worship leader” (Report. *Workbook*, 50; V. A., paragraph 2). Clearly, an “occasion” sponsored by a civic entity can include worship activities, in which case the kingdom of the left intrudes into the Kingdom of the Right. Thus, if a civic event is publicized as a worship service, includes religious acts (prayer, spiritual songs, and/or homiletical content), and features worship leaders who are not or do not consider themselves Christian, “fellowship” guidelines do not apply; that is, Christians do not participate. The First Commandment is clear on such matters, as are other biblical mandates (see also below).

In regard to the question of participating in a pastoral capacity in a civic event with non-Christians, some confusion has arisen about the implications of the following statement: “Without such a restriction [i.e., a directive not to mention Jesus in a prayer], a Lutheran pastor may for valid and good reason participate in civic affairs such as an inauguration, a graduation, or a right-to-life activity” (“Report.” *Workbook*, 50; V. B., paragraph 2).

Mention in the fellowship “Report” of a “restriction” on using the name of Jesus in a prayer does not at all imply that a Christian (layman or pastor) would participate in prayer or worship on a platform with those who call on false gods as long as there is no restriction on using the name of Jesus. Such a restriction might well occur in any civic context in which sponsors of an event perceive that mention of Jesus’ name might offend non-Christians in attendance, for example, a political gathering to which the organizers invite a pastor to offer a prayer or invocation but do not want to risk alienating any political supporters, or a high school graduation at which the principal or school board is concerned that the name of Jesus would offend some students or parents.

It is important to note that, commonly, a pastor (not several pastors) is asked to serve as the spiritual representative at an event. (Even civic leaders can be sensitive to “fellowship” issues.) Note also the typical “civic affairs” cited; the religious act (a prayer or invocation) is incidental to the primary agenda.

Several of the most contentious terms in the continuing crisis are “cases of discretion,” “once-in-a-lifetime situations,” and “exceptions.” In the “Report” (“Cases of Discretion”) we read, “We do not want to fall into the trap of case-law rigidity by setting down rules for every conceivable situation. At the same time, the exception should not become the rule, lest the truth of the Gospel be compromised” (“Report.” *Workbook*, 51; V. B., paragraph 4).

Such an observation suggests that we would like to have it both ways, but the second statement raises serious questions. An exception assumes a standard. If the gospel is “compromised,” is it not the “exception” that does just that (indeed,

may be anticipated to do so)? Wherein does the “compromise” lie if not in the “exceptional” participation, pastorally justified as a “case of discretion” in an “exceptional” context? If participating *more* than once can compromise the gospel, is not that precisely why one does not participate in the “exceptional” event in the first place? If the gospel can be compromised in a fellowship context, in an inter-religious context—civic or otherwise—the risk is unthinkable high and is to be avoided; a Christian does not participate. It is also important to note that in the “Report,” “once-in-a-lifetime situations”² is an expression referring to fellowship, specifically to “pastors . . . equally committed to LCMS *fellowship* principles [emphasis mine]” (“Report.” *Workbook*, 50; V. B., paragraph 3). It does not apply to participation in inter-religious events.

What is the implication of the phrase “case-law rigidity”? Does it preclude the use of helpful, typical examples for guiding practice? Similarly, the term “proof-texting” has been used pejoratively in related discussions. Yet, is not a matrix of relevant passages, for instance, Romans 16:17, 1 Corinthians 10:14 and following, 2 Corinthians 6:14-18, and others cited in the document the foundation for practice in worship relationships? On what is pastoral judgment based if not on clear scriptural mandates such as these? While “consultations” with counselors and presidents may be helpful and “on-the-spot decisions” occasionally necessary, they do not obviate the need for the counsel of Scripture, nor can they be in contradiction to Scripture.

Furthermore, we read that a “pastor may question even his own decision and wish he had taken another course of action” (“Report.” *Workbook*, Part V. B., “Cases of Discretion,” paragraph 5). To be sure. If one has sinned against the First Commandment, does any amount of “consultation” or, in rare cases, the fact that it required a pastoral “on-the-spot decision” justify the offense? What is needed then is an attitude of humility and contrition and a readiness to admit poor judgment, despite one’s good intentions, and to ask forgiveness for the offense. Even more to the point, given the high risk of ambiguous or false witness inherent in many “exceptional” public circumstances, is the trusty saw: When in doubt, just say no. Red flags are red for good reason. A conscience formed from Scripture is a reliable guide; first concerns and initial hesitations are often “spot on” and most useful for “on-the-spot” decisions, especially in regard to public pastoral acts that give public witness. If charity is to prevail, we first acknowledge that love for God (Matthew 22:37-38) precedes and is the source of charity toward the brother and the neighbor.

²Even in the context of fellowship, the potential for the “Gospel [to] be compromised” can be considerable when a nebulous “once-in-a-lifetime” situation is multiplied by some 6-7000 active pastors.

Resolution 3-07A

Probably most debated is the intent of the fourth Resolved in Resolution 3-07A: "commend for use and guidance to build that unity where it is still lacking." Speaking directly to this Resolved are the closing paragraphs of the "Report":

The desire of some for a *more detailed examination* of scriptural and confessional passages cited in the [study] . . . is a positive sign. Obviously LCMS members want the Synod's fellowship principles and practices to be firmly grounded on their biblical and confessional foundations. Encouraging *continued study* does not mean that the LCMS has no position on fellowship. . . . For the sake of our unity in the pure doctrine of Christ, we ask God to bless our church *as we continue to study this issue* [emphases mine] ("Report." *Workbook*, 51; A concluding word on the responses).

The full Resolved reads as follows: "Resolved that we commend this study³ and response⁴ for continued use and guidance to build that unity where it is still lacking" (*Proceedings*, 137).

We see that the "Report" closes with a clear emphasis on "*more detailed examination*" and "*continued study*," even imploring God's blessing "*as we continue to study this issue* [emphases mine]." The verbal context is quite clear. Thus, the fourth Resolved of Resolution 3-07A "commend[ing]" the study and response for "use and guidance" — given also the unresolved questions cited in the "Report" — is best understood as "use and guidance" for "*continued study*," as the "Report" itself urges. That is to say: Disagreements have been noted, summarized, and even responded to in some degree; now there is need for further study aimed at accord (concord). We are not yet (no longer) "walking together" in fellowship doctrine and practice. Do we need further evidence than the sad events of the past two years? Indeed, we regretfully observe that using a proof text — "once-in-a-lifetime situations" — from the "Report" as a guide for practice has resulted in greater disunity within the synod. It is fair to ask if those who claim that the resolution "commends" both documents as guides for practice also endorse using

³The Lutheran Understanding of Church Fellowship (Office of the President and CTCR of the LCMS).

⁴The Lutheran Understanding of Church Fellowship: A Report on Synodical Discussions.

"Study" refers to this initial CTCR document (a term it uses of itself), although in other Resolveds and Whereases the "study" is generally referred to as the "document." In the third Resolved, "study" refers to the "document"; yet in the second Resolved, "study" refers to the act of studying the "document." Also, the term "Report" is part of the title of the "Response," i.e., the account of discussions, rather than of the title of the more formal document, which, as noted above, is called the "study." Inconsistent and counter-intuitive language is not helpful in important documents and resolutions.

a phrase from the "Report" on district discussions on fellowship to defend participation in inter-faith events sponsored by either civic or religious entities.

It is true that a resolution to recommit "TLUoCF" (the "study") to the CTCR and synod at large for additional study failed. (Take note that the "Report"/response document was not included in this motion.) However, even a cursory reading of the defeated resolution (*Proceedings*, 138) reveals the intent of its framers and the reason for its defeat. The Whereases take issue with the content of the CTCR study, stating, for example, that "numerous questions and concerns remain unresolved, . . . including the study's own commitment to a genuinely Lutheran understanding of church fellowship." Demonstrating their disagreement with this judgment, the delegates defeated the resolution to recommit and, with their negative votes, supported "TLUoCF" (the "study"). It is no leap of logic to conclude that the delegates who subsequently passed Resolution 3-07A understood their action as again endorsing "TLUoCF" and that the inclusion of the "Report" ("response"), in the fourth Resolved was hardly given passing notice. If one were to judge the intent of Resolution 3-07A fairly *in the context of the defeated motion*, that intent would be to endorse "TLUoCF." Thus, if any document might be understood as commended to guide practice, it would be "TLUoCF" (the "study"), not the "Report on Synodical Discussions."

In effect, ultimately, Resolution 3-07A paired a comprehensive CTCR study on fellowship (with its exhaustive scriptural and confessional apparatus) with a less formal summary of responses to and discussions of that study—a mix of documents most unusual for a church body to adopt (or even "commend") as a basis for practice, truly an "odd coupling." There is much that is useful and informative in the "Report"; a goodly portion of it, however, is simply descriptive of fellowship concerns in the post-modern cultural milieu. Thus, by its very nature and purpose, it lacks the characteristics, style, and tone of a document framed to guide practice. In any case, the "Report" also deals only with fellowship, that is, religious activities with other Christians. As noted above, the section entitled "Cases of Discretion" has already been misapplied to worship activities outside that context and has proven to be far more open to misinterpretation than the framers or delegates could have foreseen. The devil is in such details.

Finally, one might reasonably ask what "commend," as opposed to "adopt," means in the context of scriptural and confessional practice. Do we not "commend" for study and "adopt" for practice? Or did "commend" here simply mean that there was not agreement enough to "adopt"? Precision in language is critical. We dare not jeopardize the unity that we have in Christ by sounding an uncertain or tentative trumpet in these crucial matters. In the midst of such uncertainty, as the Resolved itself notes "unity . . . is still lacking" (an accurate observation), but unity is not likely to be attained by premature application or misapplication of statements or guidelines on which consensus is lacking.

What Does This Mean? (A Theological/Practical Postscript)

In the sea of relativism that is our pluralistic American culture, we take seriously the charge to “make disciples . . . , teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.” Even as the message of the gospel includes (is directed to) all people, just as surely it excludes those who exclude themselves by rejecting its unique and distinctive saving message. Jesus Christ, in His particularity and revealed fullness, is, and will remain, an offense to many (see John 15:18-21 and Matthew 5:10-12). We can expect nothing different. These words of Jesus remind us of the futility of engaging in “public relations” in well-intentioned efforts to make the message of sin and grace, of law and gospel, culturally acceptable or attractive. By the same token, despite what we might consider good intentions, we avoid giving the public impression that Christians are but another branch of one (more-alike-than-different) multi-religious family of sincere believers. The pressures to adjust the message of the gospel to the culture are subtle, and we are not always aware when we succumb to them. In our personal relationships with others we attempt to be “all things to all men . . . for the sake of the gospel, that [we] may share its blessings” (1 Corinthians 9:22-23). In pluralistic public circumstances, however, love is best expressed by not obscuring important distinctions—or the saving message of the gospel—by “once-in-a-lifetime” or “exceptional” public displays that imply or give witness to believers and unbelievers alike a unity (or an equality or approval of beliefs) that does not exist. For the only unity we have is grounded in “one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who rules over us all and works through us all, and lives in us all” (Ephesians 4:4-5).

Addendum:

Since this essay was written and submitted for publication, the CTCR has responded to a question posed by a dispute resolution panel regarding the practical application of the documents commended by Resolution 3-07A.

Panel Question: “Would offering a prayer by an LCMS pastor in a ‘civic event’ in which prayers would also be offered by representatives of non-Christian religions be in and of itself a violation of the paragraph under ‘Section V point B. Cases of Discretion’ in the CTCR document ‘The Lutheran Understanding of Church Fellowship,’ a document adopted by the 2001 Convention of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod ‘for continued use and guidance?’” [Take note that the document referred to is the “report” of district discussions of the “study.” As noted above, it was “commended,” not adopted, by Resolution 3-07A.]

CTCR Answer: “No. Section V, B. does not explicitly address the issue of ‘offering a prayer by an LCMS pastor in a “civic event” in which prayers would also be offered by representatives of non-Christian religions.’” The CTCR is presently considering assignments with respect to this issue, including the formulation of guidelines for participation in civic events and the definition of ‘civic event.’” (Adopted February 18, 2003.)

That is, the CTCR clearly states that the paragraph in the document commended by Resolution 3-07A does *not* apply to such a situation. Even more important than the one-word answer is the reason given. In essence, the CTCR said: No, the document does not prohibit such participation because the document is not relevant to events which include non-Christian participants. In other words, the "cases of discretion" clause cannot be used either to prohibit *or to permit* participation in such events. "Cases of discretion" may relate to fellowship among Christians, but not to offering a prayer in an event involving non-Christians.

David O. Berger

Why Are There Small Churches?

A widespread way of thinking is that some churches are small because they do not want to grow. The argument usually goes, a church is not going to grow unless its members want to grow, plan to grow, and work to grow. Churches that are small year after year are churches that do not want to grow. That is one way of thinking, though I do not subscribe to it.

Jesus did not say "grow churches" to the Eleven, but they were to make disciples of all nations by baptizing and teaching. Some hold that if a congregation is baptizing and teaching, it will grow. Then they conclude that if a congregation is not growing, it is not doing the Lord's work. There are several fallacies in this argument.

First, growth is not to be used as a measure by which to judge a pastor or a congregation. The Bible does not say a servant of God is judged by the number of new converts or members. However, God does hold ministers accountable for how and why they teach. God will not judge one on the basis of the results (Ezekiel 3:16-19). God judges His servant by what he does, not the results.

The second fallacy is thinking that growth in numbers is an assured result of faithfully proclaiming the gospel. This is simply not so. Jesus told the parable of the farmer who went out to sow his seed. The crowds did not understand the parables. Jesus says as much, "This is why I speak to them in parables: 'Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand.' In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: 'You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving. For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes'" (Matthew 13:13-15). Jesus told his disciples not to be disheartened when many people would be indifferent or even reject their preaching (Matthew 13:18-22).

Even after we have sown the good seed of the gospel, there are times when it does not bear fruit. We should not think that gospel is not powerful or that we have failed in our sowing. The gospel is "the power of God for the salvation of

everyone who believes" (Romans 1:16), but not everyone believes. Jesus ends the explanation of this parable with the assurance that some will hear and bear much fruit (Matthew 13:23). Still, the harsh reality is that most people will reject God's word outright or will fall away soon after hearing it. We are commanded to continue to preach (2 Timothy 4:2-5).

Numerical growth is not the measure of a good and faithful pastor. Faithful ministry does not always produce growth. Churches that are proclaiming the gospel to their community may reach a few new people each year and not grow, simply because people are moving out of the community. Some churches, faithful in reaching out with the gospel, may not even gain one new member in some years.

Apart from the results, we must be more earnest in preparing for our sermons, Bible studies, and personal evangelism. However, our expectations must be more realistic. We should spend our time preparing ourselves to be good witnesses and not worrying about the growth. God can handle that very well on His own. Growth is not bad. The love of growth is the root of unrealistic expectations. Unrealistic expectations lead to self-incrimination and the temptation to take short cuts by reducing time for instruction or avoiding controversial topics. These same expectations can lead to burnout or even the loss of one's own faith.

The third fallacy is thinking that by human techniques we can make the church grow. The word "church" can be understood in two ways. It can mean the body of all believers, all those with the Holy Spirit who put their faith in Christ's atonement for sins. "Church" can also mean all those who are connected with a Christian congregation. Human techniques can make the number of people connected with a Christian congregation increase, but only God can make a person a believer. Is it possible that by making the worship more entertaining more people will come? Yes, certain people will be attracted, and as long as their expectations are met, they will remain. If the gospel is preached, a few of them might become believers, but many will not. In the Philippines, the missionaries helped poor families, many of whom attended church for that reason, but only a few became believers. They were called "rice Christians." They were willing workers and regular in attendance, but some never appreciated the gospel.

The pastor's responsibility is to be a faithful proclaimer of God's word and that should be foremost in worship. The service is not the time to show everyone how clever or humorous one is. It is a time to bring people to the knowledge of their sin and point them to Christ the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. Through God's word, He will make the church grow.

The Apostle Paul recognized that it is God alone who makes the church grow. He wrote "What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe—as the Lord has assigned to each his task. I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow" (1 Corinthians 3:5-6). God's ministers will be judged and rewarded for their efforts and not by the results.

There is no comfort here for those who neglect their calling as a minister of the gospel. What must be emphasized is that pastors of churches that do not grow are not necessarily guilty of neglecting their calling.

Why, then, are there small congregations? My answer is that there are people who are separated from larger flocks by distance, language, or culture. There are small churches because these people are not served by the larger congregations. Paul McCain, in a letter from Concordia Publishing House, quoted J. R. R. Tolkien in *The Fellowship of the Rings*, "Such is oft the course of deeds that move the wheels of the world: small hands do them because they must, while the eyes of the great are elsewhere." "The eyes of the great" are focused on large numbers, leaving "small hands" to serve small congregations. By our standards, a congregation of four hundred members seems more important than a congregation of forty. But the Lord does not think that way (Matthew 18:12-14). The Lord wants every individual to be served with His word. We are called by God to serve those who are in remote areas or separated for other reasons.

We should not be ashamed because we serve small churches. We are doing the Lord's work. If it is the Lord's work, we dare not consider it less than important and noble. It deserves our best effort. Here is a small church pastor who has a heavenly view of his work. He said, "When I am asked, 'How many attend worship at your church?' I answer, 'Well, let's see. There were angels, and archangels, and all the company of heaven and some of our members too . . . I'd say it is in the millions.'"

There are many small congregations without resident pastors. This does not mean that they are not being served. Some are part of a dual parish, but the pastor does not live in their community. In other cases, they are vacant. Their pastor has taken a call to another parish, retired, or passed away. I know it is not always possible, but it is important for every congregation to have a resident pastor. I wish I could support this statement with verified studies and statistics, but I do not know of any study that has examined the effect of not having a resident pastor in the community. I have noticed some things from my own experience of serving three vacancies in New Hampshire—one of them for fourteen months—and dual parishes in the Philippines and in New Mexico for a total of ten years.

The absence of a resident pastor has resulted in some lay leaders becoming more active and taking responsibility for some work in the church. The active members are also more appreciative of the pastor and his work. The members who suffer most are the youth and the weaker members on the fringe of the church. It is much harder to instruct and assimilate new members into the church. The church without a resident pastor has far less influence in the community, especially if the pastor is a long distance away. Before entering the seminary, I worked at a mine in Climax, Colorado. Our little congregation in Leadville was served by a pastor who lived in Salida, sixty miles down the Arkansas valley. Generally, he came to Leadville on Friday afternoon and left at 9:00 A.M. Sunday,

after worship. That was the only time he was in town. I remember the night I was called to the hospital to baptize a premature baby. I did not feel at all prepared for the task. This is the way it is in many communities without a resident pastor. The members do their best, but it is not a good situation.

There will always be small churches. They will be a source of frustration for church leaders, because they are not as efficient as large self-sustaining churches. They seem to sap manpower and funds from more promising mission fields. Sometimes the larger churches just do not want to be bothered with small church problems. I cannot blame them for that. This makes it important for those serving small churches to make a special effort to encourage and support other small church pastors. Small church ministry is a specialized ministry. It is different. It requires more ingenuity and self-reliance. We cannot expect all those who have served larger churches and risen to leadership in our church to understand the challenges of those in small congregations.

But we must also work with our brothers and sisters in the larger churches. Matt Andersen used this analogy: The Synod is like concrete, made up of rock, smaller gravel, and sand all bound together with cement. The strength of the concrete would be sacrificed if any element were to be left out. Churches in smaller communities train the youth who will later move to larger cities and churches. Smaller churches are generally more interested and cooperative in joint circuit projects, like summer camps, Reformation and mission rallies, and workshops.

Why are there small churches? Maybe it is because the Lord can accomplish things in small churches that He cannot do in larger churches. The family atmosphere of the small church provides more support for the family structure. It is easier to apply God's word to specific situations, rather than being more general. There are greater opportunities to know and address the problems people are having.

Let us rejoice that God has called some of us to serve small churches!

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