

For the

LIFE of the WORLD

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A Study on God's Word and Our Lutheran Confessions

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By the Rev. Dr. William C. Weinrich, Academic Dean and Professor of Historical Theology, Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Ind; Third Vice President of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod

Strictly speaking, the church has “fellowship” only in one place, and that is in the Lord’s Supper. The fellowship that exists in the eucharistic participation is so tight and intimate that, in that fellowship, we may no longer regard ourselves as individual persons who “have fellowship” with other persons. We are all defined by Christ because we have become one, not with Him, but *in* Him.

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By the Rev. Prof. Kurt Marquart, Associate Professor of Systematic Theology, Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Ind.

In English, the word “fellowship” suggests sociability, camaraderie, perhaps a friendly romp with balloons and doughnuts in the parish “fellowship hall.” The Greek, “*koinoonia*” (fellowship, communion) means sharing, participating in common treasures, culminating in *the* communion of the Lord’s Body and Blood.

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Fellowship in Christ is the Church and Salvation


By the Rev. Dr. William C. Weinrich

Some time ago I attended a reception at a nearby church. The reception was held in the “Fellowship Hall” of the church. It was really quite nice: good friends, good conversation, good food, good drink—outside, even good cigars. However, exactly wherein did the “fellowship” take place, or exactly of what did the “fellowship” consist? In one sense, the fellowship consisted in having a good time with the friends, the talking, the food, and drink serving as context for having a good

Strictly speaking, the church has “fellowship” only in one place, and that is in the Lord’s Supper. Listen to St. Paul: “The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a participation 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).

time. So I could go home saying, “There was good fellowship this evening.” In another sense there was fellowship by a common eating and drinking. We all ate cake, and we all drank punch (a good wine punch!). But, as I noticed throughout the evening, the cake became smaller as we ate of it, and eventually the cake was gone. The common eating of the cake resulted in the “dismemberment” of the cake, so that the one cake became many pieces, in many places. We might then say that we had fellowship in the eating of the cake, but we cannot say that we had fellowship in the cake.

Of course, there is nothing wrong with saying that I enjoyed an evening of “fellowship” with friends and others. At the same time,



this fellowship was based on a mutual friendship and a social invitation. And, as the above story indicates, such fellowship may well exist also with the life of a congregation. The church may be a place in which such fellowship takes place. However, such fellowship *is* not the church, nor does the church live and have its being *in* such fellowship. The church could well exist even were there no receptions.

Strictly speaking, the church has “fellowship” only in one place, and that is in the Lord’s Supper. Listen to St. Paul: “The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a participation 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). The fellowship (koinonia) of which Paul speaks is very different than that fellowship I enjoyed at the reception. There the cake that we ate became “dismembered” and eventually disappeared. Here Paul

speaks of those who are many, namely those who eat the bread, becoming one body. We who eat the one bread become “embodied” in that Body that the bread is, that is, the Body of Christ. This fellowship is a participation in one, common thing, namely, in the one bread and in the one cup. While at the reception, the cake that was eaten disappeared into those who ate it, in the Lord’s Supper, those who eat of the one bread and drink of the one cup “disappear” into the one Body of Christ: “we who are many are one body.” The fellowship that exists in the eucharistic participation is so tight and intimate that, in that fellowship, we may no longer regard ourselves as individual persons who “have fellowship” with other persons. In the eucharistic fellowship, we are all defined by Christ because we have become one, not with Him, but one *in* Him. We have fellowship with each other because we are all together *in* Christ as the oneness of His Body. Paul speaks the language of realism and of identity: “we who are many *are* one body.” Might I be allowed to put this in a provocative manner: when we eat the consecrated bread, we become ourselves that bread, which is the Body of Christ; when we drink the consecrated wine, we become ourselves that wine, which is the Blood of Christ. This realism of Paul continues in the early Fathers. For example, Leo I (+ c. 455) proclaims in one of his paschal sermons: “For nothing other is brought about by the partaking of the Body and Blood of Christ than that we pass into that which we then take” (*Serm.* 63; see also along these same lines, Luther, *LW* 37.132).

The fellowship that exists in the eucharistic participation is so tight and intimate that, in that fellowship, we may no longer regard ourselves as individual persons who “have fellowship” with other persons. In the eucharistic fellowship, we are all defined by Christ because we have become one, not with Him, but one *in* Him. We have fellowship with each other because we are all together *in* Christ as the oneness of His Body.



Participation in the Body and Blood of Christ is fellowship with one another. Note how John Chrysostom (+ 407) conjoins the two realities of fellowship in Christ and fellowship with one another:

“What do they become who partake of the Body of Christ? The Body of Christ: not many bodies but one body. Many grains are made into one bread so that the grains appear no more at all, though they are still there. In their joined state their diversity is no longer discernible. In the same way we are also bound up with one another and with Christ. You are not nourished from one body and the next man from a different body, but all from one and the same body. For this reason [Paul] adds, ‘We have all partaken of one bread. If of one and the same bread, then we are all become the same thing’” (*Hom. In 1 Cor. 24.4*).

The realism of St. Paul does not allow us to ‘spiritualize’ our fellowship with Christ and with one another. It is not the unity of spirit, or of soul, or of hospitality, or of friendship. It is the unity of body and of blood. The claim of the “real presence” demands this understanding. The bread and the wine have become the Body and the Blood of Christ, and this fleshly reality is given and received in the eating and the drinking by both believer and unbeliever alike. When received in faith, one becomes Body of Christ, not merely spiritually but indeed also bodily. “We are one body.”

Often, today, it is claimed that all must be admitted to the sacrament who acknowledge the “real presence.” And this is asserted even in the midst of confessional diversity. Paul’s claim that “we who are many are one body” makes this claim impossible to sustain. For if we are one body, then there is, as it were, also only one

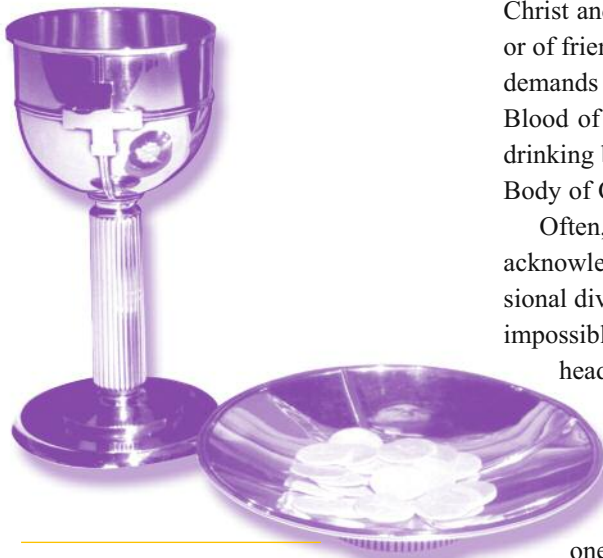
head and one mouth. One body proclaims the same thing and confesses the same thing. Fellowship *in* the Body and Blood of Christ demands and presupposes unity of confession. This fellowship is not the body of many, but the body of one. It is not the fellowship of a group that consists of many individuals who may have different ideas, but the fellowship of an identity of one, namely, that of the one and only Christ. If in any way the reality of Christ

and His work is not confessed, the unity of the Body that exists in the participation in the one bread and the one cup is compromised. For the acknowledgement of the “real presence” is not merely the acknowledgement of what happens to be “there” in the bread and the wine. It is the acknowledgement of that physical Body and Blood that those who partake are themselves to become, so that in the confession of the Faith all who partake confess the same thing with one voice.

Not coincidentally “The Agnus Dei” is sung upon recitation of the words of consecration. In those words we hear Jesus say, “This is my Body, given for you,” and “This is my Blood, shed for you.” Then the congregation responds in song addressed to Christ, Who in His Body and Blood is upon the altar: “O Christ, Thou Lamb of God, that takest away the sin of the world, have mercy upon us.” The realism of St. Paul—“we are one body”—demands that we acknowledge that the Body (bread) that we eat and the Blood (wine) that we drink are the very vehicles for the forgiveness of our sins and the promise of the resurrection of the flesh. Now we can confess the “one and holy” Church, for in this Supper the many who are sinners have become one in Him who is the Saint. Fellowship in Christ is the Church and Salvation.

You do not experience anything like that at a reception, even if in the “Fellowship Hall.”

The Rev. Dr. William C. Weinrich is Academic Dean and Professor of Historical Theology at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Ind and Third Vice President of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.



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