

Indiana District Convention – June 23, 24, 2000

Discussion of “The Lutheran Understanding of Church Fellowship”

Introduction

At the 1998 convention of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, some of the more interesting – and hotly contested resolutions – had to do with the question of “church fellowship.” This was certainly not the first time that our synod had dealt with this question. In fact, over the course of the last century it would be difficult to find a convention that had **not** dealt with issues related to “church fellowship.” Nonetheless, at the ‘98 convention the sense of the delegates was that there was a growing problem in our church regarding the understanding and practice of church fellowship; and therefore, it resolved that the synod’s Commission on Theology and Church Relations should prepare a study document regarding fellowship principles and practices for consideration by the district conventions of our church in the year 2000.

To that end, therefore, we have set aside the first hour of each day of this convention for consideration of the Commission’s document, “The Lutheran Understanding of Church Fellowship,” which I trust all delegates have received in their pre-convention mailings and which they have brought with them this morning. In case you have not, there is an outline of the document in Today’s Business.

If you have your document with you, I would like you to turn for a moment to the last few pages, beginning with p. 35, “Questions for Discussion,” so that everyone can see that the Commission on Theology and Church Relations designed the document as an instrument for study. The bulk of the document consists of material related to the question of church fellowship from the Bible, the Lutheran Confessions, and church

history. But beginning with page 35, it provides “Questions for Discussion” regarding the material presented, case studies or typical situations in which principles of church fellowship need to be applied, and finally on the back cover, a “Discussion Reporting Instrument” for you to give your own reaction to the document and the issues covered here regarding church fellowship.

At the end of **tomorrow’s** opening hour, not today’s but tomorrow’s, we are going to ask everyone to fill out the reporting instrument. These will be collected here at the convention and sent in to the Commission on Theology and Church Relations.

My purpose, both today and tomorrow, is simply to provide some background information and to highlight some of the more important aspects of the document in order to facilitate your discussion of church fellowship; so let’s begin.

I. Introduction

First of all, it’s important that everyone knows what we’re talking about when we refer to “church fellowship.” As the outline indicates, when we talk about “church fellowship,” we are talking about “altar and pulpit fellowship” and that, in turn, refers to who can preach in our pulpits and who can take communion at our altars. When church bodies enjoy church fellowship, for example, the Lutheran Church – Canada and the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, pastors of one church body may preach and celebrate holy communion in the churches of the other church body and members of one church body may receive holy communion in the congregations of the other church body. Pastors and members may belong to different church organizations but if they enjoy

“church fellowship” they form one church as far as exchanging pulpits and going to communion are concerned.

I. “Fellowship in the Scriptures”

A second point to be clear about at the beginning is that our practice of “church fellowship” needs to be based on the Scriptures, not the traditions of our church and not the social realities in which we find ourselves. So the first part of the document has to do with “Fellowship in the Scriptures.” Basing itself on the Bible, then, the document makes a number of important points about “Church fellowship.”

The first of these points is that the activities that we are discussing, preaching the Word together and communing together, presuppose spiritual togetherness, i.e., being one in our Christian faith, one in our relationship to the Triune God in Christ. Sin, of course, separates us from God and from one another, it mars even the best of relationships. But through His redemptive work, our Lord Jesus Christ has reconstructed a right relationship between us and God and also with one another. We are all the children of God, we are brothers and sisters of one another, we form the body of Christ, we are the Church.

This unity is not something that we create but something that God gives. Through the proclamation of the Gospel, God calls us into communion with Himself by creating in us faith in Jesus. And through that common faith, we become one with each other, as the apostle John has written, “We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ” (1 John 1:3). By first uniting us with Himself and with the Father,

therefore, our Lord unites us with each other, as St. Paul says, “In Christ, we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others” (Rom. 12:5).

Outwardly, we do not see this unity and can experience it only imperfectly. What we see are differences and divisions, not unity. For God alone knows who are His. We don’t, at least, not for sure. Therefore we confess in the Creed, “**I believe** in one, holy Christian and apostolic Church.” “I believe,” not “I see.” Accordingly, the unity of the Church is an article of faith, not an empirical reality.

However, besides the internal unity of the Church that is known only to God, the Scriptures also recognize a visible, external unity, as was evident from the earliest days of the Church after Pentecost, for we read regarding the new believers that “they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching, and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer” (Acts 2:42). Through such visible activities – studying the Word, praying, breaking of bread, i.e., communion - the first Christians signified their God-given unity. And note particularly that they “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching,” for the apostles were Christ’s specially chosen witnesses to His own life, death, and resurrection. Their witness was the divinely sanctioned witness to the Gospel; and therefore, unity in Christ necessitated being united in the apostles’ teachings.

It did not take long, however, in the early church for false teachers to arise as Jesus Himself had predicted and regarding whom He had warned, “Beware of false prophets.” And so too, we find the apostles in their own writings denouncing those who taught false doctrine and announcing that the adherents of such were not in fellowship with the apostolic churches as, for example, the Nicolaitans who are mentioned in the letters with which the book of Revelation begins, “But you [the church in Ephesus] have

this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate....Nevertheless, I have a few things against you [the church in Pergamum]....you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth” (Rev. 2:6, 14, 15).

The point then is this. At the very beginning of the Christian era, the visible church was divided into parties and factions – or what we would call “denominations” – on the basis of different doctrines. But the New Testament holds forth as the antidote to such factionalism not indifference to the differences but adherence to the apostles’ doctrine, God’s own means for bringing to people the story and significance of Christ the Savior. New Testament unity is unity in the true doctrine.

But adherence to the truth also involves confessing the truth as St. Paul admonishes, “If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For man believes with his heart and so is justified, and he confesses with his lips and so is saved” (Rom. 10:9-10). To distinguish true from false teaching and for the sake of authentic church unity, this confession must be made.

Of course, we all recognize that such a commitment to the truth cuts against the grain of contemporary society in which the prevailing idea is that there is no such thing as “truth” – relative truth, maybe, something that shifts and turns as society progresses; but absolute truth? Something that is true at all times and places and for all people? Well, such a notion is very difficult for people to accept. So here Christians must simply be different from the world. We are in the world but not of world, and nowhere is that more

evident today than in our commitment to the truth of God's Word. For the Scriptures insist that there is an absolute truth about the relationship between God and man in Christ, and that truth is the means by which the Holy Spirit creates and preserves saving faith, as Jesus Himself indicated, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:31,32).

Therefore, throughout the New Testament, the sacred penmen confess what is true and reject what is false, for the sake of preserving saving faith. St Paul, for example, told Titus in no uncertain terms regarding his ministry in Crete, "For there are many rebellious people, mere talkers and deceivers....They must be silenced, because they are ruining whole households by teaching things they ought not to teach....Therefore, rebuke them sharply, so that they will be sound in the faith and will pay no attention to Jewish myths or to the commands of those who reject the truth" (Titus 1:10-14).

Obviously, then, persevering in the truth of God's Word requires correction of error and ultimately separation from those who persist in their errors. Church fellowship cannot exist where false doctrine triumphs. Paul's words, "A little yeast leavens the whole lump" (Gal. 5:9), allow no deviation from the Word. True doctrine is the mark of a faithful church and separates it from any church in which false teachings are tolerated.

Moreover, the concern for God's truth also affects our practice of holy communion, for this sacrament which is preeminently the application of the gospel to a poor sinner is also a confession of unity in the faith by those who commune together. Indeed, it is the most intimate form of fellowship that we enjoy in the church both with Christ and with one another, "Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in

the body of Christ? Because there is one loaf, we who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf” (1 Cor. 10:16-17).

Once more, however, false doctrine threatens our unity. Recall again the example of the first Christians. Their communing together was coupled with their adherence to the apostles’ doctrine, “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer” (Acts 2:42). But when that adherence to the apostles’ doctrine is missing and instead false doctrine is being presented as the truth, it and its proponents must be rejected, “I urge you brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them” (Rom. 16:17).

Thus, the New Testament contains many clear and severe condemnations of false teachers and their churches, and these still apply. True enough, the Scriptures recognize that some false teachers may be saved if underneath their worthless false teachings, there remains a solid foundation of Gospel truth. Nevertheless, their false doctrine excludes them from fellowship with those churches that adhere faithfully to God’s Word. When we preach the Word or when we confess the Word in holy communion, the Word itself directs us to do so in truth and purity.

Now, that in summary fashion is the argument of the CTCR statement on “The Lutheran Understanding of Church Fellowship” from the standpoint of “Fellowship in the Scriptures.” At this point in our proceedings, we want you to begin reacting to the document by dividing up into small groups and starting to work through the discussion questions at the end of the booklet on page 35. The first three questions have to do

especially with this morning's topic, "fellowship in the Scriptures." If you complete that discussion, we ask you to turn your attention to the Case Studies and page 37 and start working your way through those as well.

So, divide yourselves up into groups of four or five; choose one person to keep the process going; and begin discussing.

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Discussion of “The Lutheran Understanding of Church Fellowship” – Part 2

II. Fellowship in the Lutheran Confessions

Yesterday, we had an opportunity to consider the biblical teaching regarding church fellowship. Today, we will spend just a few minutes considering our specifically Lutheran understanding of this question as it has been expressed in our Lutheran Confessions in the Book of Concord. These Confessions are not, of course, the same as the Bible; but as members of the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod, we have all pledged ourselves to preach and teach according to these Confessions **because** they agree with the Word of God. Their authority is derivative but it is nonetheless real authority because it rests upon the Scriptures. In the words of the Confessions themselves, they form the “single, universally accepted, certain, and common form of doctrine to which all our Evangelical churches subscribe and from which and according to which, because it is drawn from the Word of God, all other writings are to be approved and accepted, judged and regulated” (FC SD, Rule and Norm, 10).

For the question of church fellowship, the Confessions are best approached by way of the doctrine of the Church. Although it had not been Luther’s goal to create a new church, his expulsion along with that of his followers from the church of Rome forced the first Lutherans to consider the nature of the Church. If they were no longer under the pope, were they still a part of Christ’s Church? To answer this question, they included a definition of the Church in the Augsburg Confession, “The church is the assembly of saints in which the Gospel is taught purely and the sacraments are administered rightly “ (Augsburg Confession VII, 1). In his own inimitable style, Luther

himself said of the Church, “A seven-year-old child knows what the church is, namely, holy believers and sheep who hear the voice of their Shepherd.” (Smalcald Articles III, xii, 2). In other words, the Church is not a hierarchy or any kind of organization; it is instead believers who are recognized as such because they gather around the means of grace. Wherever the Gospel is preached and the sacraments are administered, the Holy Spirit is present to create and sustain faith in the hearts of believers or, to put it another way, to create and sustain the Church.

Thus, the means of grace are also called the marks of the Church. We cannot see into the hearts of people to determine if they have faith or not, but we can recognize those groups in which the Word and sacraments are present and know that there is the Church because the Spirit is there creating faith, as our Confessions attest, “The Church is not merely an association of outward things and rites, like other governments, but it is mainly an association of faith and of the Holy Spirit in the hearts, which however has outward marks, so that it can be recognized, namely, the pure teaching of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments in accord with the Gospel of Christ.” (Apology VII/VIII, 5).

For Lutherans, therefore, the external unity of the Church consists of agreement regarding the “pure teaching of the gospel” and “the administration of the sacraments in accord with the Gospel of Christ.” Other groups may define unity in terms of organization (they all recognize the same head) or in terms of church government (they all have the same form) or in terms of worship (they all use the same book), but not Lutherans. As far as we are concerned, “For true unity of the church it is enough to agree concerning the teaching of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments.

Nor is it necessary that human traditions or rites and ceremonies instituted by men be everywhere alike, as Paul says: one faith, one Baptism, one God and Father of all, etc.” (Augsburg Confession VII, 2-3).

As Lutherans, we can have different forms of church government, we can worship from different hymnals. We can have church fellowship without agreement in externals; but we cannot dispense with pure doctrine. Our Confessions tell us, “Churches will not condemn each other because of a difference in ceremonies, when in Christian liberty one uses fewer or more of them, as long as they are otherwise agreed in doctrine and in all its articles and are also agreed concerning the right use of the holy sacraments.” (Formula of Concord, SD X, 31)

Since what is taught or preached in a church either presents or hinders the Good News of Jesus Christ, we condemn false teachers and their proponents and refuse to have fellowship with them. Our Confessions are filled with such condemnations, not out of a sense of arrogant self-righteousness but out of concern to be faithful in preaching and teaching for the sake of the hearers. To engage in church fellowship – to exchange pulpits or to commune together – with those who oppose the teachings of the Lutheran Church is at best an unthinking disregard for those teachings and ultimately a denial of them; but denying the doctrine of the gospel undermines the gospel and so jeopardizes faith.

III. The Historic Christian and Lutheran Consensus on Church Fellowship

This is the position of the Lutheran Church as defined by her confessions, and it is also the position of the Lutheran Church in history. Today, however, things are much

different. For whether we look at the Lutheran Church at home or abroad, we find Lutherans routinely and regularly engaging in altar and pulpit fellowship with non-Lutherans. In our own country, for example, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, comprising approximately 2/3 of all American Lutherans, is in official church fellowship with a wide array of non-Lutheran churches such as the Episcopal Church, the Presbyterian Church, the Reformed Church in America, the Moravian Brethren, and the United Church of Christ – churches that do not subscribe to the Lutheran Confessions and whose historic creeds do not agree with the Lutheran faith!

But this has not always been the situation - not even for many Lutheran Church bodies that are the direct predecessors to the ELCA. That is why the study document includes a section, Part Three, on “The Historic Christian and Lutheran Consensus on Church Fellowship.” The attitude of the early Church, for example, was that doctrinal and confessional unity were prerequisites to church fellowship. With respect to holy communion, Werner Elert, the great Lutheran theologian of the 20th century has written, “The modern theory that anybody may be admitted ‘as a guest’ to the Sacrament in a church of a differing confession, that people may communicate to and fro in spite of the absence of full church fellowship, is unknown in the early church, indeed unthinkable.” Participating in the Lord’s body and blood together was viewed as a confession of faith; early Christians could not conceive of communing along side someone who confessed a different faith from their own.

So too at the time of the Reformation, at the Marburg Colloquy, Martin Luther refused church fellowship with Ulrich Zwingli, the reformer of Zurich, in spite of many areas of agreement; but there was also fundamental disagreement in the doctrine of the

sacraments, and so Luther could not extend the hand of fellowship. Later, Luther learned of a church in Frankfurt where both Lutherans and Reformed communed together and found it appalling that “at one and the same altar both sides should come for and receive of one and the same Sacrament, yet with the one side believing that it receives only bread and wine, while the other [believes] that it receives the true body and blood of Christ.” For Luther, like the early Church, required confessional agreement for church fellowship.

In this country, some of the first Lutherans in the midwest came to the United States precisely to escape church fellowship with the Reformed that was being forced upon them by the king of Prussia in the Prussian Union. These Lutherans preferred to lose their homeland rather than to surrender the body and blood of their Lord. At tremendous personal cost and risk, they made their way into the American wilderness and established churches in which the Gospel could be taught purely and the sacraments administered rightly.

Of course, not all 19th century American Lutherans sympathized with these new arrivals. Indeed, some, most notably Samuel Simon Schmucker, one of the founders of Gettysburg Seminary, declared his “common ground” with the Prussian Union and announced that “the distinctive doctrines which separate the Lutheran and the Reformed Churches we do not consider essential.” In particular, he wrote, “Luther’s peculiar views concerning the presence of the Lord’s Body in the Communion have long been abandoned by the majority of our ministers.” And this from a Lutheran seminary professor!

But Schmucker’s assessment of the fellowship views of his co-religionists in America may not have been entirely accurate; and his understanding of the sacraments

turned out to be no more typical of American Lutherans than they were consistent with the historic Lutheran position. For there were many other Lutherans in 19th century America whose fellowship practices were much closer to the Lutheran Confessions than Schmucker's. The General Council, for example, which was founded as an alternative to Schmucker's General Synod, adopted as a fellowship principle the so-called Galesburg Rule (1875): "Lutheran pulpits are for Lutheran ministers only; Lutheran altars are for Lutheran communicants only." Church fellowship with non-Lutherans was not a possibility for these American Lutherans.

Even well into the 20th century, most Lutheran church bodies in America attempted to practice church fellowship only with their fellow Lutherans. In 1930, for example, the old American Lutheran Church put the Galesburg Rule into their constitution; and in a doctrinal statement known as the Minneapolis Theses, they affirmed the necessity of doctrinal agreement for church fellowship: "Church fellowship, that is, mutual recognition, altar and pulpit fellowship, and eventually cooperation in the strictly essential work of the church, presupposes unanimity in the pure doctrine of the Gospel and of the confession of the same in word and deed. Where the establishment and maintenance of church fellowship ignores present doctrinal differences or declares them a matter of indifference, there is unionism, pretense of union which does not exist."

Indeed, as late as 1956, the president of the United Lutheran Church in America (usually regarded as the most liberal of the Lutheran church bodies in America at that times) would still admit that "insistence upon agreement in doctrine as a precondition for church fellowship is the distinguishing mark of Lutherans among all Protestants and should never be relaxed"; and, even to this day, the Wisconsin Synod still maintains this

position as do other smaller Lutheran church bodies around the world. It is only in relatively recent times, therefore, that Lutherans have departed en masse from the biblical and confessional practice of doctrinal agreement as the prerequisite for church fellowship.

IV. The Official Position of the LCMS on Church Fellowship

In this regard, therefore, the position of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod is actually the position of historic Lutheranism and Christianity. Since its founding in 1847, the LCMS has insisted on agreement in doctrine for altar and pulpit fellowship. In fact, it is probably worth noting, that many of the founding members of the Missouri Synod – people like F. C. D. Wyneken, Wilhem Sihler, and August Craemer, frontier pastors in Indiana and Michigan, had to leave other church bodies in order to found our synod. But why did they do so? Often, because these other church bodies were not following Lutheran practices regarding church fellowship. And that is why synod’s first constitution, like our present constitution, required as a condition of membership “renunciation of unionism and syncretism of every description,” including participation in the “sacramental rites of heterodox congregations or of congregations of mixed confession.” The first president of our church, C.F. W. Walther, was speaking not only for himself but for the entire synod and for historic Lutheranism when he maintained that “the Ev. Lutheran Church rejects all fraternal and churchly fellowship with those who reject its Confessions in whole or in part.”

Over the years, as the synod changed and its American context changed, questions regarding church fellowship often arose; but the synod has sought to provide answers to

the questions that are consistent with its historic position. In the 20th century, for instance, when the synod adopted “A Brief Statement” of its doctrinal position, first of all in 1932 but reaffirmed many times thereafter, it included a section “On Church-Fellowship,” and maintained that “all Christians are required by God to discriminate between orthodox and heterodox church-bodies,...to have church-fellowship only with orthodox church bodies, and, in case they have strayed into heterodox church-bodies, to leave them.”

Throughout her history, therefore, the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod has required doctrinal agreement for church fellowship, doctrinal agreement as the basis for exchanging pulpits and for communing together. It is the argument of the study document before you, “The Lutheran Understanding of Church Fellowship,” that the historic position of our Church is the biblical and confessional one and that faithfulness, not just to historic Lutheranism but faithfulness to the Word of God, requires a reaffirmation of the same principles in 21st century America even if most other Lutherans today do not. For just as the founders of our synod refused to be sidetracked from the truth by considerations of how this was going to affect them personally or professionally we also in our times must do the right thing, the faithful thing, even when it is not popular or easy.

Recall once again the basic argument of the document: our fellowship practices arise out of a concern for the truth of God’s Word and the sacraments; and this truth that we treasure is not any old truth but the saving truth of Jesus Christ. Church fellowship, therefore, is a matter of faithfully proclaiming the gospel; and as Missouri Synod Lutherans, indeed as Christians, we would never want to do anything less.

Now that in summary fashion is the document; and I hope that both this presentation and the document itself will help to build greater consensus among ourselves on the principles and practices of church fellowship. So now, like yesterday, I want to turn it over to you for discussion. As you did yesterday, please divide yourselves into small groups, choose a leader to facilitate discussion, and then consider discussion questions 4,5, & 6 on pages 35 and 36. Again, you may also want to consider the Case Studies on page 37.

Finally, by the end of the session please make sure that you fill out Discussion Reporting Instrument on both sides of the back cover. Remove it from the rest of the booklet and leave on the table in front of you from which it will be gathered and sent into the Commission on Theology and Church Relations and the President of Synod.