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A Study on God's Word and Our Lutheran Confessions

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Church Fellowship

By Rev. Professor Kurt Marquart

In English the word “fellowship” suggests sociability, camaraderie, perhaps a friendly romp with balloons and donuts in the parish “fellowship hall.” Church fellowship then becomes a particular case, a kind of “religious version,” of the general category of friendly togetherness.

Actually, that would be a deep misunderstanding. Church fellowship is not a particular form of “fellowship” in general. And it is not first of all about relations among people. Church fellowship is the fellowship peculiar to the church. Another word for it is “communion.” Churches (and therefore their individual members) either are or are not in communion or in fellowship with each other. What does this mean?

Everything here depends on how one thinks about the church. Is she basically a visible organization, or hierarchy, a God-given chain of command? Then church fellowship will depend largely on joint bureaucratic structures—for example, the so-called “historic episcopate” (the line of bishops stretching, without any breaks supposedly, from the present all the way back to the first century apostles). Or is the church a direct Spirit-to-spirit affair, without real outward means of grace? In that case, her presence can only be guessed at wherever people seem to be especially “spiritual.” Then the “visible church” is the outward company of the “obedient,” but has no necessary connection to the “real” or “invisible” church.

Our Lutheran Church accepts neither of these extremes. Her *Augsburg Confession*, Article Seven, has the distinction of being the first dogmatic definition of the church in the history of the church. Until 1530, the church had been content to confess, with the Nicene Creed, that there is “one holy catholic and apostolic church.” At Augsburg the Lutherans had to make a new start, because all structural, bureaucratic attempts to secure the unity of the church and the truthfulness of her proclamation had broken down. (A century before Luther there were three popes. The Council of Constance in 1516 replaced them all with a fourth). Article Seven goes to the heart of the matter when it defines the church as “the assembly of saints (believers), in which the Gospel is purely taught and the sacraments are rightly administered.” Here, just as in the New Testa-

Because there is only one Christ, there is only one church, which is His body. By faith alone people are in Christ and are thereby members of His body. The branches are in communion with each other only because they are first of all in communion with the Vine Himself, the Source of all spiritual life (St. John 15:1-8).

ment itself, the whole People of God are joined to His whole saving truth.

Because there is only one Christ, there is only one church, which is His body. By faith alone people are in Christ and are thereby members of His body. The branches are in communion with each other only because they are first of all in communion with the Vine Himself, the Source of all spiritual life (St. John 15:1-8). This one church and fellowship, or communion, in Christ has two aspects: an inner and an outer:

“the church is not **only** an association of outward [things] 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” (*Apology of the Augsburg Confession*, Kolb-Wengert translation, p. 174, note boldface, supplied).

The means of grace (the preached and sacramental forms of the Gospel) keep the two aspects of the church from breaking apart into separate “visible” and “invisible” churches. The church is an inner fellowship of faith and the Holy Spirit; but faith and the Holy Spirit come only through the outward means: preaching, Baptism, Absolution, Lord’s Supper. The church is an article of faith. We cannot see, but must believe the one “holy Temple in the Lord” (Eph. 2:21). But we can clearly “see” or locate the foundation—the teaching and sacraments of “the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the Chief Corner-stone” (v. 20).

We can now answer the two vital questions: (1) What is church fellowship? and (2) What are its basis and limits?

The Greek “*koinoonia*” (fellowship, communion) means sharing, participating in common treasures, culminating in the communion of the Lord’s Body and Blood (I Cor. 10:16). Only God can see the inner unity of all Christians in Christ. Church fellowship is about what *we* can see and know: joint administration and participation in the treasures of the Gospel by which the church comes into being and by which alone she is preserved. That means that church fellowship is essentially pulpit and altar fellowship, which then expresses itself in various concrete ways, such as joint services, mission work, and the like.

And what is the proper basis for God-pleasing church fellowship? There can be only one answer—all the more necessary in the age of the modern ecumenical confusion: “For this is enough for the true unity of the Christian church, that the Gospel be unanimously preached there according to its pure understanding, and the sacraments be administered in accord with the divine Word. And it is not necessary for the true unity of the Christian church, that everywhere uniform ceremonies, instituted by men, be observed . . .” (*Augsburg Confession*, VII, 2, 3, my translation of the German). This is the distinctively evangelical contribution of our Lutheran confession. Nothing less than the pure doctrine and sacraments of the Gospel—but also nothing more than that is required for true unity and therefore for church fellowship. Human traditions—like the “historic episcopate” so beloved of modern ecumenical diplomacy—are neither here nor there.

The purely-preached Gospel of *Augsburg Confession* VII is exactly the same thing as “the doctrine and . . . all its articles” in *Formula of Concord*, S.D. X, 31. Agreement in all the articles of faith, and in the holy sacraments, that is the Evangelical Lutheran ecumenical platform, because it is that of the New Testament (see Acts 2:42, Rom. 16:17, Gal. 1:8,9, and the like). Churches that teach or practice contrary to the revealed

apostolic doctrine of Holy Scripture, thereby stamp themselves as sectarian bodies, with which those who confess apostolic teaching may not practice fellowship.

This does not mean that there are not genuine Christians in sectarian bodies. On the contrary: There are fine Christians by the millions, for instance, in Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Baptist, and other Trinitarian churches (those that confess the Holy Trinity as the only true God). But faithfully opposing all official regimes of false doctrine (false, sectarian churches as such), and refusing to make common cause with them in church fellowship, does not mean hating or despising the dear people of God who are hidden and oppressed under the false teachers! Our Confessions understand themselves as guarding the apostolic truth of the Gospel on two fronts: salvation by grace alone through faith alone against the works-righteousness of Roman Catholicism on the one hand, and the holy means of grace, especially the true body and blood of the Lord in His Sacrament, against the denials of the various followers of Zwingli and Calvin, on the other.

An even deeper division has opened up among the churches in recent centuries, when the inspiration and authority of Holy Scripture as the Word of God have been given up in most Protestant churches. That is also the sad state of much of today's "world Lutheranism," represented by the "Lutheran" World Federation. See the realistic picture of some of the formerly Lutheran churches of Europe, painted by Pastor Jan Bygstad in the July, 2000 *Concordia Theological Quarterly*). When lesbian "bishopsesses" impose lesbian "pastoressees" on congregations in their power, it is difficult to envisage any deeper degradations of such "churches."

Church fellowship is the practice of the church's immune system. Where the clear Word of God no longer determines the basis and limits of fellowship, but where opposition to that Word is, in principle, allowed or even welcomed, a spiritual counterpart of "AIDS" results, which robs the church in question of its ability to defend itself against any and all deadly infections (see Eph. 4:14). The Bible has much to say about "earnestly [contending, fighting] for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints" (Jude 3, see also Eph. 6:10-18). That is not popular in an age that sneers at the whole idea of absolute truth. The church, however, clings to the Lord's truth, not for the sake of pedantic "correctness," but because His teaching alone is lifegiving and liberates from sin, death, and the devil (St. John 6:63.68; 8:31.32).

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