

Concordia Theological Quarterly



Volume 73:4

October 2009

Table of Contents

Editorial	290
Agreement and Disagreement about Justification: Ten Years after the <i>Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification</i>	
Reinhard Slenczka	291
The Consensus of Sandomierz: An Early Attempt to Create a Unified Protestant Church in 16th Century Poland and Lithuania	
Darius Petkunas	317
Relating to Other Christians Charitably and Confessionally	
Samuel H. Nafzger	347
Theological Observer	364
How Did We Come to This?	
The Lutheran Church in Lithuania Today	
365 Days with Calvin	
Book Reviews	374
Indices for Volume 73 (2009)	382

Relating to Other Christians Charitably and Confessionally

Samuel H. Nafzger

“Church Fellowship,” “Inter-Church Relations,” and “Inter-Christian Relationships” are not synonymous terms. They overlap, but are not identical. Right at the outset, my understanding is that I have been invited to talk to you about inter-Christian relationships in the broadest sense of this designation and not in the first instance, at least, about church fellowship or inter-church relations. The focus of my comments in this presentation, therefore, will be on “Relating,” on relating “Charitably,” and on relating “Confessionally” with other Christians. Of course, inter-church relations and altar and pulpit fellowship are forms of inter-Christian relationships, but when we talk about inter-Christian relationships, we are talking about so much more than church fellowship. I should also like to say right at the beginning that it is also my contention that it is not possible to talk helpfully about “relationships” between Christians without saying something about what the church is. Only when we do this can we profitably talk about “Relating to Other Christians Charitably and Confessionally,” (i.e., in faithfulness to God’s Word, the Holy Scriptures, and the Lutheran Confessions). First of all, therefore, I want to say a few words about the Lutheran understanding of the doctrine of the church. Then, on this basis, I shall present five general theses on “Relating to Other Christians Charitably and Confessionally.”

I. The Church

“Thank God,” says Martin Luther in the Smalcald Articles, “a seven-year old child knows what the church is” (SA III, XII, 2). This may have been true in Luther’s day, but one would never come to this conclusion on the basis of the way the term “church” is used today in our society at large, in Christendom, or even on the basis of the many different ways this word is frequently used in our own Missouri Synod circles. The *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, for example, published an article a few years ago titled “The Gospel According to Hollywood” by Sara Miller. In this article, Ms. Miller presented a review of Mel Gibson’s “The Passion of the Christ.” She writes:

This film and Gibson have been taken up enthusiastically by evangelical and fundamentalist Christians which is interesting in view of Gibson’s view. They’re not going to heaven. “There is no salvation for those outside

Samuel H. Nafzger is Director of Church Relations, Assistant to the President, The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, St. Louis, Missouri.

the (Roman Catholic) Church," (Gibson) told an interviewer for *The New Yorker*, adding that his own wife wouldn't be saved because she's an Episcopalian. "That is a pronouncement from the chair. I go with it," said Gibson.¹

Gibson, to be fair, is not quite accurate here with respect to what he says about the position of the Roman Catholic Church, although it is understandable how he could come to the conclusion that "that is a pronouncement from the chair. I go with it." While the Roman Catholic Church concedes that non-Catholics may be saved, Rome does identify the church properly speaking with itself. Karl Rahner, writing in 1963, states:

Since the visibleness and visible unity of the church are constituted by the sacramental and juridical authority of the church (which later includes in its turn the teaching and ruling authority of the church), all and only those belong to the Church as members who are visibly, i.e., in the external forum, subject to these two powers of the church. And everyone who, on the social plane, is cut or has withdrawn himself from one or both of these powers, is not a member of the Church.²

This claim for the Roman Catholic Church was reaffirmed in *Dominus Iesus: On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Churches*, issued by the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith:

. . . the ecclesial communities which have not preserved the valid Episcopate and the genuine integral substance of the Eucharistic mystery are not churches in the proper sense (par. 17).³

This view, of course, excludes Lutherans from the church "in the proper sense." This position was reaffirmed by Pope Benedict XVI in 2007 when he stated that "Christ established here on earth only one Church," the Catholic Church. Other communities, this statement continued, "can not be called 'churches' in the proper sense" because they do not have apostolic succession. As Pope John Paul stated in *Lumen Gentium*,

. . . the one Church of Christ subsists in the Catholic Church. The Decree of Ecumenism emphasizes the presence in her of the fullness ("plentitudo") of the means of salvation. Full unity comes about when all share in the fullness of the means of salvation entrusted by Christ to his Church (par. 86).⁴

¹ *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, February 29, 2004.

² Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, Vol II, 1963, 17.

³ Declaration "Dominus Iesus" on the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Churches, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000806_dominus-iesus_en.html.

⁴ *Ut unim sint*, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/

On July 11, 2007, the day after Pope Benedict XVI issued his statement, titled "Responses to Some Questioning Regarding Certain Aspects of the Doctrine of the Church," Cardinal Kasper, President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, issued this clarification:

The document does not say that the Protestant churches are not churches, but that they are not churches in the precise sense, that is, they are not churches in the way that the Catholic church uses the term church.⁵

Kasper continued, saying all Christians must recognize that:

at the basis of dialogue there is not just that which divides us, but that which unites us and that is greater than what divides. For that reason, one should not skim over what the declaration affirms in a positive way about the Protestant churches, and that is that Jesus Christ is effectively present in them for the salvation of their members. This document renders a service to clarity ...

But does it really contribute to clarity? What Kasper seems to be saying here is that Protestants are Christians and they will go to heaven—but that they are not members of the church, precisely speaking, here on earth, which is the Roman Catholic Church.

This is exactly what was implied in the service bulletin for the ecumenical service led by Pope Benedict XVI in April 2008 in the Church of Saint Joseph in New York City with the inclusion of the following quotation:

Among Christians, fraternity is not just a vague sentiment . . . it is grounded in the supernatural reality of the one Baptism which makes us all members of the one Body of Christ.⁶

This statement seems to indicate that the baptized are all members of the Body of Christ, yet they are not all members of the church, properly speaking. But does this then mean that there is salvation outside of the church? One thing is clear, however. According to Rome's official teaching, the church properly speaking is to be identified only with the Roman Catholic Church.

documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25051995_ut-unum-sint_en.html.

⁵ Quoted in the *National Catholic Reporter* in "Protestants Shrug at 'One True Church' Statement," July 20, 2007.

⁶ Pope Benedict XVI, Ecumenical Meeting, XX World Youth Day, 2005.

When I noted this point in my October 2003 article, "Syncretism and Unionism" in *Concordia Journal* (July 2003), I received an e-mail from a well-known LCMS professor which stated:

. . . I read and profited from your piece on *Ut Unum Sint*, just out in the *Concordia Journal*. But here's a question for you that I've wondered about on occasion and was triggered for me again by your concluding critique: could not roughly the same critique be offered of our church's belief that it is "the true visible church"? I've wondered about this over the years. I'd say that the LCMS ecclesiology is very analogous to Roman Catholic ecclesiology—except, of course, that it's a little easier to pull off when you're their size than when you're ours!⁷

But this is not what Walther and The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) say, as I wrote back to him. Walther clearly recognizes that heterodox church bodies such as the Reformed churches are true visible churches, albeit in a qualified sense.⁸ I have been a member of the National Council of Churches Faith and Order Commission for the past 25 years, at the request of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR). I am a member of its Standing Committee on Full Communion. In the course of a most interesting session a couple of years ago on recognition of ministries and sacramental acts, the dean of St. Vladimir's Seminary, informed our committee that the (Russian) Orthodox Church recognized as valid only those baptisms administered by "the church," i.e., the Orthodox Church. "Does this mean," I asked, "should I as a Lutheran decide to join the Russian Orthodox Church that I would have to be re-baptized?" "No," he responded, "You would have to be baptized!"

Later, during the break, he shared with me the elation at St. Vladimir's Seminary to have former Missouri Synod Lutheran pastor and theologian, Jaroslav Pelikan, serving in their midst. Upon being told this, I could not resist the temptation to ask him how Professor Pelikan's baptism had gone. His response was: "In his case, we chose to recognize his baptism on the basis of what we refer to as the principle of *economia*, although we would not normally do this." Like the Roman Catholic Church, Eastern Orthodoxy identifies the church, properly speaking, with a visible institution, the Orthodox Church.

The least we can say about such views is that this is not relating to other Christians "Charitably and Confessionally" as Lutherans understand these terms. If we Missouri Synod Lutherans are going to relate to other

⁷ Letter on file.

⁸ C.F.W. Walther, "Communion Fellowship," in *Essays for the Church*, 1, (St. Louis: Concordia, 1992), 203.

Christians “Charitably and Confessionally,” then we need to take a look at what the Lutheran Confessions, which we accept *because (quia)* they correctly interpret the Holy Scriptures, have to say about the doctrine of the church. It is on the basis of what the church is that we must talk about what it means to relate to other Christians charitably and confessionally.

What is the understanding of the church as presented in the *Book of Concord*? The “one Holy Christian church,” says Melancthon, is “the assembly of all believers” (German), “the assembly of saints” (Latin, AC VII, 1). It is “a spiritual people . . . reborn by the Holy Spirit” (Ap VII & VIII, 14). Martin Luther writes that the church is “a little holy flock or community of pure saints under one head, Christ” (LC II, 51), that it is “holy believers and sheep who hear the voice of their shepherd (SA III, XII, 2). In so describing the church, the Lutheran Confessions seek to be faithful to the understanding of the church confessed in the Apostles’ Creed as “the holy Christian church, the communion of saints,” and in the Nicene Creed as “one holy, Christian and apostolic Church.” There is only one church, if we speak precisely, and it can not be identified with **any** external institution.

To make this clear, the Lutheran Confessions also say what the church is not. Unlike the Roman Catholic understanding of the church, the Reformers expressly reject the understanding of the church as consisting of those who professed the Christian faith and who were also under the rule of legitimate pastors and the Roman Pope; in other words, they rejected the traditional Roman Catholic view that the church is essentially a visible, tangible, entity. Seventeenth century Roman Catholic theologian Robert Bellarmine, for example, writes in his influential *Disputationes de Controversiis Christianae* (1615): “The church is an assembly of men, an assembly which is visible and perceptible to the senses just like an assembly of the Roman citizenry, or the kingdom of France or the Republic of Venice.”⁹

The Lutheran confessors disagreed with this understanding of the nature of the church. They argue that arrogant people and hypocrites, while in the church, are *not* in actuality a genuine part of it. This conviction leads them to make a **critically important distinction between the church properly speaking (*proprie dicta*) and the church broadly speaking (*late***

⁹ Bellarmino, Roberto Francesco Romolo, and Vitus Erbermann, *Roberti Bellarmini ... Disputationes de controversiis christianae fidei adversus hujus temporis haereticos: accedunt Viti Erbermanni ... Vindiciae Bellarminianae contra Guilielmum Amesium & Joannem Gerhardum* (Moguntiae: Sumptibus Kirchemii, Schotti & Thielmanni, 1842), 982.

dicta). Melanchthon, responding to the *Confutation's* condemnation of AC VII and its identification of the church as the assembly of saints, writes:

We concede that in this life hypocrites and evil men are mingled with the church and are members of the church according to the outward associations of the church's marks—that is, Word, confession, and sacraments. The sacraments do not lose their efficacy when they are administered by evil men (Ap VII and VIII, 3).

This does not mean, Melanchthon continues, that “the church is merely an association of outward ties and rites like other civic governments.” On the contrary, the church, he continues, “is mainly an association of faith and of the Holy Spirit *in men's hearts*” (Ap VII and VIII, 5). Referring to the Apostles' Creed, Melanchthon says:

Certainly the wicked are not a holy church! The following phrase, “the communion of saints,” seems to have been added to explain what “church” means, namely, the assembly of saints who share the association of the same Gospel or teaching and of the same Holy Spirit, who renews, consecrates, and governs their hearts (Ap VII and VIII, 8).

Lest he be misunderstood, he repeats:

Hypocrites and evil men are indeed associated with the true church as far as outward ceremonies are concerned. But when we come to define the church, we must define that which is the living body of Christ and is the church in fact as well as in name. We must understand what it is that chiefly makes us members, and living members of the church. If we were to define the church as only an outward organization embracing both the good and the wicked, then men would not understand that the kingdom of Christ is the righteousness of the heart and the gift of the Holy Spirit but would think of it as only the outward observance of certain devotions and rituals (Ap VII and VIII, 12-13).

In other words, Melanchthon clearly rejects the identification of the church with an external institution. He distinguishes between the *una sancta*, which is the church properly speaking, and the local and territorial entities with their rites, orders, and external membership, which is the church broadly speaking. Martin Luther makes the same distinction when he says: “Just as the rock [Christ] is without sin, invisible and spiritual, so the church which is without sin, must be invisible and spiritual, and is grasped only by faith” (WA, 710).

This does not mean, however, that the Lutheran confessors regarded the church as some kind of Platonic republic: “This church actually exists,” says Melanchthon in the Apology. It is “made up of true believers and righteous men scattered throughout the world.” And while this church, properly speaking, is hidden from human eyes, we know where it is to be

found because of the “marks” of the church, namely, “the pure teaching of the Gospel and the sacraments” (Ap VII and VIII, 20). God’s Word, we can be absolutely certain, never returns void. The church, properly speaking, will always be present wherever the gospel is preached and the sacraments are administered. Baptism, we Lutherans confess, makes us members of the one holy Christian church on earth, members of the Body of Christ, and we recognize the validity of baptisms performed in other Christian churches, such as, the Roman Catholic, Orthodox and even Baptist churches.

This understanding of the church has enormous implications for how we are to understand the topic of inter-Christian relationships. As we have seen, the Lutheran Confessions distinguish between the church properly speaking and the church broadly speaking. This is a critically important presupposition for how we are to go about relating to other Christians “Charitably and Confessionally.” The true sphere of inter-Christian relationships is the church in the proper sense. But since the church in the strict sense has not yet been revealed (Ap VII and VIII), it is within the external, visible structures of the church in the broad sense as it actually exists in the world that inter-Christian relationships actually take place.

This fundamental distinction between the church properly speaking and the understanding of the church broadly speaking, which is so clearly articulated by the Lutheran Confessions, is succinctly summarized in *The Lutheran Understanding of Church Fellowship*¹⁰ in these words:

While the church’s internal unity is perfect and known only to God (Eph. 1:4), the limits of external fellowship are determined by whether the Gospel is preached purely and the sacraments are administered according to Christ’s institution. The Gospel and the Sacraments are in themselves always pure. In this way they create and preserve the church in her hidden unity throughout the world. Yet, when church bodies make public confession of the Gospel and the sacraments, tragically some obscure or explicitly contradict the teachings of the Gospel and the proper administration of the sacraments.¹¹

The Lutheran Understanding of Church Fellowship describes such a situation:

¹⁰ It was prepared by the CTCR and President Barry and commended by the 2001 Synodical Convention for “continued use and guidance” in the Synod.

¹¹ The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod Commission on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR), *The Lutheran Understanding of Church Fellowship* (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 2000), 5

When a person receives a trinitarian Baptism in a Reformed congregation (such as a Baptist church), that Baptism is valid and true. Tragically, however, Baptist doctrine explicitly rejects the biblical teaching that Baptism brings the Holy Spirit and the forgiveness of sins.¹²

As Robert Preus has pointed out, "The Word does not cease being a mark when it is for some reason not taught in its truth and purity. . . . This seems to be what Melanchthon is saying throughout [CA] Article VII."¹³

The one, holy, Christian church as it manifests itself in this world in time is frequently divided, rent by division and schism. This fundamental distinction about the understanding of the nature of the church lies at the heart of the understanding of the doctrine of the church in the Lutheran Confessions, and it is important that we keep it in view as we talk about the topic of relating to other Christians "Charitably and Confessionally." What is important for us here today is that the understanding of the church presented in the Lutheran Confessions clearly means that inter-Christian relationships exist beyond the confines of what we refer to as church fellowship (altar and pulpit fellowship). This is precisely the topic I have been asked to address at this convocation. All those who have been made members of the one Body of Christ by word and sacrament are related to one another.

There are, according to the most recent accounts of demographers, a little over six billion people on planet earth as we begin the 21st century. Approximately one-third of these people may be classified in some sense as Christian, as belonging to the church broadly speaking. Of these 2 billion Christians, 51.5% (1.03 billion) belong to the Roman Catholic Church and 11.2% (240 million) belong to the Orthodox communion. Anglicans (75 million) and Lutherans (69.7 million) each claim 3%. The remaining 31% of the world's Christians, at least according to David Barrett's 2001 edition of his *World Christian Encyclopedia*, belong to 34,000+ different Christian denominations. This figure represents a 39% increase in new church bodies during the past 20 years. According to these figures, 660 new churches come into existence every year or about two per day.

Christians today find themselves in a variety of inter-Christian relationships: relationships between churches in church fellowship, inter-church relationships, and inter-Christian relationships. Church fellowship

¹² CTCR, *The Lutheran Understanding of Church Fellowship*, 17, n 5.

¹³ Robert Preus, "The Basis for Concord" in *Formula of Concord: Essays* (St. Louis: Commission on Theology and Church Relations, The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, 1977), 18, n 11.

is one—and only one—very important relationship between Christian churches in doctrinal agreement with each other, but there are also relationships between Christian denominations not in complete confessional agreement, and also relationships within and between Christians belonging to such churches.

II. Five Theses on Relating to Other Christians Charitably and Confessionally

The principles of fellowship presented in the Scriptures and confessed in the *Book of Concord* are normative for confessional Lutherans as they relate to other Christians. There is not one set of scriptural principles for church fellowship, another set of scriptural principles for inter-church relations, and another for inter-Christian relationships.¹⁴ In what follows, I shall present five theses focusing on what the scriptural principles of fellowship have to say about inter-Christian relationships in general.

1. The Scriptures teach that Christians are to relate to one another charitably and confessionally.

The CTCR, in its 1981 report, *The Nature and Implications of the Concept of Fellowship*, lists nine "Scriptural Principles of Fellowship." Principles four and five discuss the relationship that exists between "charitably" and "confessionally" under the terms "the truth principle" and "the love principle."

On the one hand, justification comes before sanctification. As the CTCR puts it:

Apart from faith in the Gospel, there can be no good works. But when the Holy Spirit is given through faith, the heart is moved to do good works. In the same way that faith precedes good works, it is proper and necessary to speak of the priority of the truth of the Gospel over love.

In other words, when it comes to relating to other Christians, there is a sense in which "confessionally" helps to define "charitably." It is *never charitable* to relate to other Christians at the expense of the truth of the gospel. It is never "loving" to relate to other Christians if this involves a compromise of the gospel, whether it be relationships between "church bodies" or relationships between individual Christians, whether it be between individual Christians within one denomination, between

¹⁴ The Commission on Theology and Church Relations list nine such principles in its 1981 report *The Nature and Implications of the concept of Fellowship*, 13-16.

Christians belonging to different church bodies in altar and pulpit fellowship with each other, or between Christians belonging to church bodies not in agreement in doctrine. Compromising the truth of the gospel can never be called "charitable."

At the same time, as the CTCR says in Principle five, love heads the list of "the fruit of the Spirit. Love always seeks the edification of the members of the Body of Christ." The Commission continues:

Love, which is a response to the Gospel, stands uppermost in the realm of sanctification (1 Cor. 13). But because love always seeks the edification of the members of Christ's body, it manifests itself in a variety of ways, depending on the situation and need. At one time it shows itself in tears, at another time in rejoicing, at yet another time is admonition, but never by compromising the means by which the spiritual unity of the church comes into being.

Just as Christians are not relating to one another charitably if they compromise the truth of the gospel, so they can never relate to one another confessionally if they forfeit the love principle which seeks the edification of fellow members of the Body of Christ, no matter where they are to be found. It is never possible for truth loving Christians, for example, to "burn at the stake" fellow Christians with whom they have confessional disagreement, and to justify such an action in the name of "love for the truth." Francis Pieper writes in an essay he delivered at the 12th convention of The Lutheran Synodical-Conference of North America in 1888:

If we wish to preserve unity in faith, we dare not surrender any article of revealed doctrine. But it is also to be noted that the apostle says in Eph. 4:3, "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace." The unity of the Spirit can only be preserved through the bond of peace. If those who stand in unity of faith are not truly peaceable but quarrelsome, if they do not allow love to govern in everything that does not pertain to faith, then unity of faith will not long remain. Luther: "Where there is no love, doctrine cannot remain pure."¹⁵

2. Church fellowship has as its necessary basis complete agreement in doctrine and practice.

Church fellowship is one form of inter-Christian relationship between two autonomous church bodies. The Formula of Concord states that "churches are not to condemn one another because of differences in

¹⁵ Francis Pieper, "Von der Einigkeit im Glauben," in *Verhandlungen der zwölften Versammlung der Evang.-luth.Synodalkonferenz von Nord-Amerika* (St. Louis: Luth. Concordia-Verlog, 1888).

ceremonies when in Christian freedom one has fewer or more than another, as long as they are otherwise united in teaching and in all the articles of faith as well as in the proper use of the holy sacraments" (FC SD X, 31). Church fellowship means "agreement in doctrine and practice."¹⁶ But since this is true, then there can be no "levels of church fellowship," for there can be no levels of "complete agreement." Either agreement (complete) in the confession of the gospel exists or it does not exist. Where there is agreement in the confession of the gospel, it would be separatistic for church bodies not to commune together, to exchange pulpits, to lead public worship services together (i.e., to remain apart from one another). But where there is disagreement in doctrine, the basis for church fellowship as the church has defined this term throughout its existence, does not exist.¹⁷ But there most certainly are inter-church relationships

¹⁶ See "The Lutheran Understanding of Church Fellowship," Office of the President and Commission on Theology and Church Relations of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, February 2000, for a good summary statement of what Church Fellowship entails.

¹⁷ In 1969 the LCMS declared itself to be in altar and pulpit fellowship with the American Lutheran Church. But in the years following this action, it became obvious that the two churches were not in complete doctrinal agreement. The Missouri Synod sent representatives for discussion with the ALC reported to the Synod in 1981: "... the two church bodies have quite different convictions about the implications of our doctrinal differences for church fellowship. For the ALC, fellowship between Lutheran church bodies is a rather basic relationship reflecting a somewhat minimal agreement in the Gospel and the sacraments; in this view, doctrinal differences are to be tolerated both within and between Lutheran church bodies and are therefore not divisive or disruptive of altar and pulpit fellowship. However, for the LCMS (and traditionally, for other Lutheran church bodies as well) altar and pulpit fellowship between church bodies is the deepest and closest possible relationship precisely because it is based on comprehensive agreement in the Biblical and confessional doctrine of the Gospel, in all its articles, and in the right administration of the holy sacraments. In the LCMS view, doctrinal differences cannot be tolerated either within or between church bodies and are by their very nature disruptive and divisive of altar and pulpit fellowship" (*Convention Workbook*, 1981, 151). In its report *The Nature and Implications of the Concept of Fellowship*, the CTCR evaluates four models for "external unity in the church"—conciliarity (the model of the WCC), reconciled diversity (the model of the LWF), selective fellowship, and ecclesiastical declarations of altar and pulpit fellowship. After reviewing and evaluating each of these models on the basis of the Scriptural Principles of Fellowship, the Commission concludes: "Three of these models have been shown to conflict in one way or another with certain aspects of the nature of fellowship as it is presented in the Holy Scriptures. Conciliarity, reconciled diversity, and selective fellowship all violate at least some of the principles of fellowship and cannot therefore be regarded as viable models for inter-church relations at the church body level. Of those models for external unity in the church which have been examined in this report, only ecclesiastical declarations of altar and pulpit fellowship offer at least the possibility for being able to

between such Christian church bodies, and there are inter-Christian relationships between Christians belonging to church bodies not in church fellowship.

3. Inter-Christian relationships are not a matter of "all or nothing."

While there can be no "levels of church fellowship," the unity that binds all Christians together in the Body of Christ may be expressed in a variety of ways. The LCMS does not hold to what some refer to as "the unit concept of fellowship." Walther participated in worship and prayer with individuals not in altar and pulpit fellowship with the LCMS. Up until 1944, the terms "prayer fellowship" and "joint fellowship" were used synonymously by the LCMS to refer to praying together with Christians not in doctrinal agreement with one another. The 1943 Catechism (Question 216), as well as the 1986 Catechism (Question 206), say with reference to the Lord's Prayer: "In Jesus all believers are children of the one Father and should pray with and for one another." Christians cannot pray with non-Christians, but believers in Jesus may pray for and with one another, even if they belong to church bodies not in church fellowship.

In holding to this position the LCMS finds itself in conformity with confessional Lutherans from the time of the Reformation. It is instructive to refer to CTCR reports regarding this point. In its 1965 report, *Theology of Fellowship*, which was formally approved by the 1967 synodical convention, the Commission states:

Those who subscribed to them [the Lutheran Confessions] were automatically in pulpit fellowship with one another. Those who did not subscribe to them, but adhered to other confessions, were, according to the Preface of the Book of Concord, not condemned as heretics . . . This followed inevitably from the doctrine of the church as it is contained in the Lutheran Confessions . . . the Book of Concord recognizes a responsibility of Lutherans toward such erring Christians . . . so-called colloquies . . . were repeatedly held by Lutheran theologians with Roman Catholic and also with Reformed theologians. At the colloquy of Regensburg in 1601 neither Lutherans nor Roman Catholics appear to have considered it improper to open the colloquy and the individual

take into account all of what the Scriptures have to say about the nature of fellowship. The Commission on Theology and Church Relations, therefore, while recognizing that this model is neither divinely ordained nor Scripturally mandated, is convinced that The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod should continue to seek to carry out the Scriptural Principles of Fellowship at the church body level by means of ecclesiastical declarations of altar and pulpit fellowship based on agreement in doctrine and practice." (42)

sessions of the colloquy with prayer. Numerous passages in the official minutes of this colloquy state that all meetings were opened with liturgical prayers and that representatives of both sides changed off in conducting the opening devotions.

At the Colloquy of Thorn in 1645 where Roman Catholics, Lutherans and Reformed met, the Lutherans asked that the same procedure be followed. When the Catholics refused, and insisted that they alone conduct the opening devotions, the Lutherans refused to attend the devotions under these conditions.

From these cases it appears that the Lutherans, during the period of orthodoxy, did not refuse as a matter of principle to pray with Reformed, and even the Roman Catholics. They did refuse when they themselves were treated as heretics.¹⁸

This view of the LCMS that the *koinonia* (fellowship) which binds Christians together in the Body of Christ may be given expression also where complete agreement in confession is lacking, contrasts sharply with the position of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS). One of its official documents states:

We may classify these joint expressions of faith in various ways according to the particular realm of activity in which they occur, pulpit fellowship, altar fellowship, prayer fellowship, fellowship in worship, fellowship in church work, in missions, in Christian education, in Christian charity. Yet insofar as they are joint expressions of faith, they are all essentially one and the same thing, and are all properly covered by a common designation, namely, church fellowship. Church fellowship should therefore be treated as a unit concept, covering every joint expression, manifestation, and demonstration of a common faith.¹⁹

It is for this reason that the WELS rejects joint prayers or worship of any kind with individuals who belong to church bodies not in altar and pulpit fellowship with it.²⁰ This is not now, nor has it ever been, the

¹⁸ *Theology of Fellowship*, A Report of the CTCR, 1965, 18–19. Cf. 1967 Resolution 2-13 "To Adopt 'Theology of Fellowship' for Reference and Guidance."

¹⁹ *Doctrinal Statements of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod*, 1970, 51.

²⁰ On the basis of the unit concept understanding of fellowship, for example, WELS considers it unionistic for "a soloist who does not share our faith to lead us in worship" at a wedding service, cf. *The Northwestern Lutheran*, October 1983, 278. It is also considered unionistic for a WELS congregation to have a non-WELS member play the organ for public worship, or for a WELS member to play the organ in a congregation not in church fellowship with WELS; cf. *The Northwestern Lutheran*, April 15, 1989, 152. In response to the question as to whether it would be contrary to the WELS teaching on church fellowship to sing Handel's Messiah with a community chorus, the answer is that it all depends. If the purpose of the singing is that the chorus "merely performs the

position of the LCMS, although there are examples of individuals in the LCMS who have held similar views. It was primarily a disagreement over this very issue that led the WELS to break church fellowship with the LCMS in 1961.²¹ And as an article in a recent issue of the *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* makes clear, this continues to be the position of the Wisconsin Synod.²²

4. The scriptural principles of fellowship must be distinguished from their application in specific inter-Christian relationship situations.

The CTCR states in its *Nature and Implications* report:

Although the Scriptures have much to say about the spiritual unity which binds all believers together in the body of Christ and with one another, and despite the exhortations of the inspired writers that the church should seek to manifest its given unity externally without endangering the means by which the unity of the church is created, God's Word does not prescribe specific procedures for carrying this out in each particular case. . . . The Scriptures, rather than presenting the church with specific regulations for each and every inter-Christian relationship, set forth fundamental principles which are to be applied to the unique situation in which Christians find themselves at any given point in history.²³

This distinction between the principles of fellowship and their application in specific situations may be illustrated in the ministry of the Apostle Paul. As the CTCR has noted, in one situation Paul circumcised

great works of choral heritage," then participation by a WELS member "is not religious unionism - the false fellowship of disparate faith." But "if some in the community chorus want to make the singing of the Messiah as expression of religious oneness," then the "confessional response must be to withdraw"; cf. *The Northwestern Lutheran*, November 15, 1990, 397.

²¹ In this connection, it is enlightening to review an open letter sent by W. M. Oesch and Manfred Roensch, professors of our LCMS sister church in Germany in 1961 to WELS President Naumann. It reads in part: "It should be possible in certain situations to express one's Christian faith together with Christians from false-believing churches. . . . Our attention must be directed not toward avoiding all mutuality of faith manifestations, but toward overcoming all that compromises the *Notae Purae*. This positive approach governed Walther's actions at the Free Conferences. . . . It was the unanimous conviction of the Overseas Committee that this definition of church fellowship by placing all manifestations of a common faith on the same level actually . . . puts the Wisconsin synod in a position which is to some extent outside of the Scriptures themselves. . . . " (Letter from Professor W. M. Oesch, D.D. and Pastor Manfred Roensch, Dr. Theol., to President Oscar J. Naumann, July 28, 1961) (in CTCR files).

²²John F. Brug, "News and Comments," *Wisconsin Synod Quarterly* 105:4 (Fall 2008): 294-300.

²³ *The Nature and Implications of the Concepts of Fellowship*, 18-19.

Timothy (whose father was a Greek and mother a Jew) "because of the Jews that were in those places" (Acts 16:3), while in another situation he chose not to circumcise the Greek Titus (Gal. 2:3), so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved. The same principle that the gospel be purely preached was applied in differing ways in different circumstances, but it was the same principle. The same scripture principles apply to all inter-Christian relationships, but they must always be applied confessionally and charitably.

Christians, as they seek to be faithful to the scriptural principles of fellowship, recognize the need to guard against the danger of turning the scriptural principles into legalistic rules. Relating to other Christians charitably and confessionally must necessarily allow for pastoral flexibility in applying the scriptural principles of fellowship in different situations and contexts.

5. Responsible commitment to the covenants of love members of the Synod make with one another with respect to the application of the scriptural principles of fellowship is necessary for the building up of and the maintaining of an atmosphere necessary for relating to other Christians charitably and confessionally.

The LCMS constitution lists seven "Conditions of Membership" for acquiring and holding membership in the Synod. The second "condition" listed is the following: "Renunciation of unionism and syncretism of every description, such as a) Serving congregations of mixed confession, as such, by ministers of the church; b) Taking part in the services and sacramental rites of heterodox congregations or of congregations of mixed confession; c) Participating in heterodox tract and missionary activities." (LCMS Constitution, Art. VI). This is a "covenant of love" which the members of the LCMS make with one another regarding the understanding of the application of the scriptural principles of fellowship as they relate to church bodies with which the Synod is not in church fellowship. And it is a "covenant of love" which the members of the Synod agree to honor and uphold, "to abide by, act, and teach in accordance with" (Bylaw 1.6.2.7). Relating to other Christians charitably and confessionally goes

hand in hand with responsible commitment to mutual decisions. It is impossible to have one without the other. A lack of responsible commitment invites the very suspicion and mistrust which inhibits responsible pastoral care. But genuine commitment to our agreed-upon

procedures builds the atmosphere of confidence and trust in which freedom for pastoral ministry thrives.²⁴

This implies, however, that it is also proper and indeed even necessary to re-examine our "covenants of love" with one another from time to time to see if such agreed-upon ways of proceeding with respect to applying the scriptural principles of fellowship are still the best and most effective ways of relating to other Christians and Christian churches in the present context. Covenants of love can and need to be revised from time to time. But they ought not be disregarded and violated unilaterally. To arbitrarily dismiss our agreed-upon ways of carrying out certain inter-Christian relationships is devoid of integrity, and is itself a loveless act and therefore contrary to the scriptural principles of fellowship.²⁵

The CTCR is at the present time nearing completion of "Guidelines for Inter-Christian Relationships." In this report it is examining a number of these "covenants of love" which the members of the Synod have made with each other by virtue of their membership in the Synod with respect to relationships with brothers and sisters in Christ in church bodies not in doctrinal agreement with the LCMS. The challenge facing us in the LCMS today is to seek together manifestations of our unity in the Body of Christ externally in ways which take into account all that the Scriptures say, lest we be found guilty of falling into either the error of separatism or the error of compromising the gospel of Jesus Christ.

III. Conclusion

The unity of the one Holy Christian Church is a reality. It is the Body of Christ, made one by the power of the Holy Spirit working through the means of grace, the Gospel and the sacraments. But external divisions in

²⁴ *The Nature and Implications of the Concepts of Fellowship*, 18-19.

²⁵ Cf. Edmund Schlink, *Theology of the Lutheran Confessions* (Muhlenberg Press: Philadelphia, 1961), 256-257. Schlink states: "Obedience to the ecclesiastical authority is above all faith in the Gospel ... Disobedience to the bishop is disobedience to God. Over against this it cannot be urged that the institution of a superior church government and the delineation of its authority is by human right, that is, the outgrowth of the free arrangement of the church. For obedience to the church administration is taken out of the area of the free interests of individuals or those of the congregation, because the preaching of the bishop and the ordination and excommunications which he performs are done not by human but by divine right in the office of the Word. Moreover, we should not only obey the preaching but also the regulations which the church has adopted in the unity of faith and love for the preservation of preaching. No Christian exists by himself, but he is a member of a congregation. Also disobedience to an ordinance of the church instituted by human right is disobedience to God since it violates the law of love."

the church as it exists in this world continue to exist. Christians committed to this scriptural truth must be engaged in every effort to resolve, with the blessing of the Holy Spirit, doctrinal disagreements with fellow Christians by working toward church fellowship with those Christian churches with which it is not united in "doctrine and practice." The LCMS is such a church. Our first purpose (objective) as a Synod is:

To 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 (Rom. 16:17), and heresy" (LCMS Constitution, Art. III, 1).

Christians who belong to such a church body will seek ways to manifest this unity with brothers and sisters in Christ, wherever they are to be found, "Charitably and Confessionally."