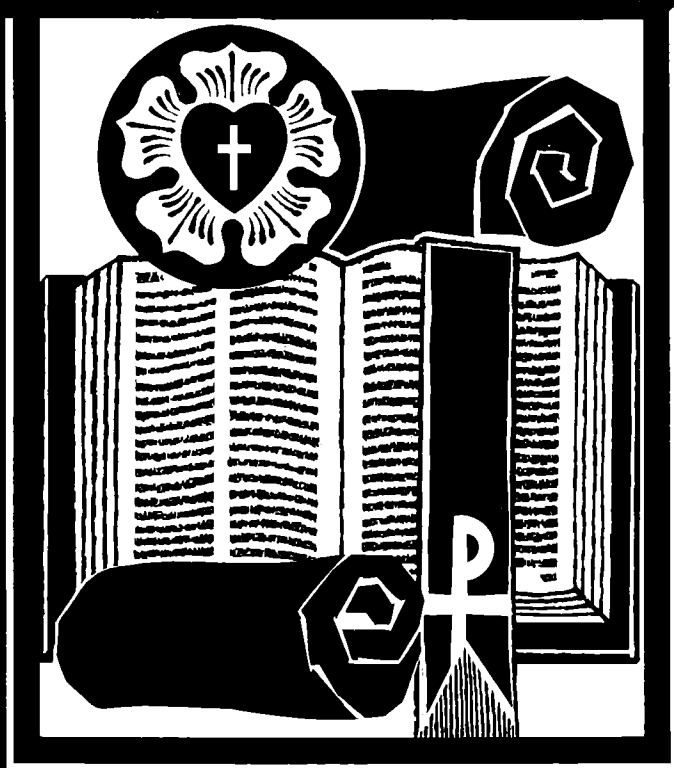


THEOLOGIAN'S CONVOCATION



ESSAYS

PREFACE

The 1975 convention of The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, recognizing that "there is a hunger and longing for peace and unity" among all members of the Synod, requested the Commission on Theology and Church Relations to continue to carry out its responsibilities of "fostering and providing for ongoing theological education through institutes, seminars, and other means" and to "coordinate the preparation of a series of Bible Class Studies" in order to further "true and lasting peace and concord" in the Synod. (1975 Resolution 3-01 "To Seek Unity")

In response the CTCR, convinced that this assignment demanded a comprehensive and long range program, formulated initial plans which were shared with representatives from the synodical boards, commissions, and auxiliaries. As a result of these discussions, the "That We May Grow" program emerged and five major objectives were formulated. "That We May Grow" was adopted as the theme for the Planned Parish Program for 1977-78 and 1978-79, as well as for the 1977 Synodical Convention, and "That We May Grow" calendars and Parish Planning Kits which outlined the major facets of the program and provided suggestions for congregational planning were sent to all congregations in the Synod.

At the heart of the "That We May Grow" program is a comprehensive study of the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions. Under the direction of the Board for Parish Education a series of eight studies on the Scriptures and four on the Lutheran Confessions has been developed for lay study classes. The second phase of the "That We May Grow" study program was the Theologians' Convocation held on the campus of Concordia Seminary in St. Louis November 7-9. This three day convocation brought together approximately 175 Missouri Synod theologians to hear and discuss a series of papers and responses on the theme "Formula for Concord." District/Regional pastors and principals conferences to be held in 1978 comprise the third stage of the "That We May Grow" study program.

It is in preparation for these "Formula for Concord" conferences that the CTCR is herewith sharing the three major essays presented at the Theologians' Convocation with all pastors and teachers of The

Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. Included in this resource booklet is also Dr. Karl Barth's keynote address, which relates the purpose of the convocation (and thus also of the upcoming conferences) to the five basic objectives of the "That We May Grow" program. Some study questions have been appended to the essays to assist in focusing on the basic issues.

It is the prayer of the members of the CTCR that these essays will prove helpful as you prepare for the regional conferences, the final phase of the "That We May Grow" study program. May God bless our study of His Word and of the Lutheran Confessions so that "speaking the truth in love, we (may) in all things grow up into Him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From Him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work." (Ephesians 4:15-16)

Samuel H. Nafzger
Executive Secretary
Commission on Theology and
Church Relations
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THE CELEBRATION OF CONCORD

by Dr. Ralph Bohlmann

Basic Principles and Implications of Confessional Ecumenism

After noting the existence of more than 250 denominations in the United States alone, a Roman Catholic theologian once observed, "The general impression is that of being confronted by a religious world blown to atoms and whose secret of cohesion has been lost".¹ But the multiplicity of denominations is only half the problem: consider the current proliferation of doctrines, theologies, ideologies, and beliefs emanating from nominally Christian denominations and churchmen, sometimes with little apparent connection to historic Christian doctrine. Even if it wanted to, The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod today could not remain aloof from the twin problems of ecclesiastical fragmentation and doctrinal discord; not only do such problems exist — and cry out for solution! — within our own church body, but The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod has come to realize its need to be involved with other Christians in working toward their solution.

We have assembled here as the Synod's theologians and leaders so that *we* may grow, and help others to grow, in concord. Having explored the confessional basis and model for concord in the church, we now propose to review and apply the biblical and confessional principles that underlie and inform our churchly relationships to each other and to other Christian groups. In this 400th anniversary year of the Formula of Concord, it is especially fitting that we do this on the basis of our 16th century confessional writings, both by analyzing their basic principles on the interrelationship of Gospel, church, and unity, and then by setting forth some implications of these accents for our practice today.² Before doing that, however, we will briefly

¹Bernard Lambert, *Ecumenism, Theology and History*, translated from the French by Lancelot C. Sheppard (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967), p. 54.

²Sections I and II of this essay have been taken from earlier essays by the author and revised slightly. For Section I, see "The Church Under the Scriptures", in *The Nature and Function of Holy Scripture*, distributed by The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, 1975, pp. 24-28. For Section II, see "Confessional Ecumenism", in *Evangelical Directions for the Lutheran Church*, edited by Erich Kiehl and Waldo J. Werning (n.p., 1970), pp. 85-90.

remind ourselves of three great biblical principles involved in the celebration of concord: truth, unity, and love. Finally, we will enumerate a number of special concerns and problems to illustrate the complexity and sensitivity of ecumenical relationships today. Far from offering explicit solutions to specific church relations questions, this paper's more modest aim is to provide a biblical and confessional framework and rationale for the profitable study and discussion of the issues.

Prolegomena: Truth, Unity, and Love

In the New Testament, the church not only learns who it is, but hears the Lord of the church, through His chosen evangelists and apostles, exhorting it to proclaim and preserve His *truth*, that is, the pure doctrine of the Gospel in all its parts; to maintain the *unity* of the Spirit in the bond of peace; and to show *love* toward all men. As we examine confessional ecumenical principles and their implications for us today, it will be helpful for us to keep in mind that three great biblical principles are vitally involved in our relationships with other Christians: truth, unity, and love.³ The manner in which Christian groups emphasize one or more of these principles and relate them to each other often provides the rationale for their ecumenical endeavors. Confessional ecumenism today, like its 16th century paradigm, must take each of these principles seriously and interrelate them properly.

The truth principle is the biblical mandate to the church to prize, proclaim, and defend its divinely revealed message in its entirety. We are to continue in Christ's Word with the promise that thereby we will know the truth and the truth will make us free (John 8:31-32). We are commissioned to teach all things commanded by Christ (Matthew 28:19-20). Paul taught all the counsel of God (Acts 20:27-28). The Pastoral Epistles frequently stress the importance of sound doctrine and the need for Christians to hold fast the faithful Word (Titus 1:9), and not to give heed to those who turn away from the truth (Titus 1:13-14). Timothy is to teach no other doctrine (I Timothy 1:3-4). Just as Jesus warned against false prophets (Matthew 7:15-16;

³In this paper, truth, unity, and love are called "principles" because they are being used as a kind of theological shorthand to identify broadly related ideas, rather than as word or concept studies in the narrow sense.

24:24), so the apostles warn against false teachings and false teachers (Galatians 1:6-9, II John 9-11, Romans 16:16-20, I Timothy 1:19-20, I Timothy 4:1-12). Examples could be multiplied to illustrate the simple but critical point that the Lord expects His church to contend for the faith, to hold fast to its doctrine, and to reject false doctrine.

The unity principle is the biblical teaching that Christians are to manifest the oneness they have with each other by virtue of their having a common Head, Jesus Christ. In His High Priestly prayer, Jesus prayed that His disciples might be one just as He and the Father are one, so that the world might believe that He was sent by the Father (John 17:21-23). In the church, there is neither Jew nor Greek, bond nor slave, male nor female, for all are one in Christ (Galatians 3:26-28). The church is the one Body of Christ, the Head, united to Him by faith and thereby to every other Christian (I Corinthians 12, Romans 12). There is one Body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all (Ephesians 4:5-6). Moreover, being one in Christ, Christians are exhorted to speak the same thing, to avoid divisions, and to be perfectly joined together in the same mind and judgment (I Corinthians 1:10-11). Our *koinonia* with Christ leads to an immediate *koinonia* with all other Christians (Acts 2:42; Philippians 4:15; I John 1:3, 6, 7). Dozens of references in the New Testament stress the need for Christians to recognize and to manifest their essential unity in Jesus Christ.

The love principle is the great New Testament theme that Christians are to manifest the same self-giving love toward each other that Christ gave to the church. Such love is extolled as the greatest of Christian virtues (I Corinthians 13). Jesus exhorted Christians to love one another just as He had loved them (John 13:34, 15:12, 17). To love is to obey the whole law (Romans 13:8-10). Christians are to serve one another by love (Galatians 5:13), forbear one another in love (Ephesians 4:2), speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15), and walk in love as Christ also loved us (Ephesians 5:2). In virtually every epistle, Christian readers are encouraged to increase their love toward one another. The epistles of John give particular emphasis to this concern, reminding Christians that he who loves God should love his brother also (I John 4:21). To be sure, such love is not mere sentimental affection; as the Apostle Paul's own example shows, love will not tolerate dissimulation in a brother (Galatians 2:11 ff.). Love is tolerant and long-suffering, but intolerant of error, since any error

not only denies God's truth, but may jeopardize the brother's faith. But love impels Christians to be genuinely concerned about every brother.

Let us recall that also the Lutheran confessional writings of the 16th century manifest great concern for these three fundamental principles. Virtually all of the symbols were occasioned by the church's need to confess God's truth over against false doctrine. The antitheses in the confessional writings are specifically directed against all heresies, both ancient and modern. Moreover, the confessors were keenly aware of the church's essential oneness as well as the need to work for its external unity. In fact, the symbols were written in major part to effect such unity. While rejecting the medieval notion that love is a cause of man's justification, the confessional writings frequently stress its importance and activity as an essential fruit of faith. In fact, the confessors manifest the highest kind of love in their concern for the weak in faith, those who are burdened and tormented with guilt, and those whose understanding or faith is weak.

While few Christians or Christian denominations would question the importance of any of these principles, they do tend to give each of them a different weight and to relate them differently to each other in the establishment of their fellowship relationships — particularly when a concern for truth appears to be in conflict with one's love of the brother. The late Concordia Seminary professor, Dr. F. E. Mayer, observed twenty-five years ago that Christian fellowship will manifest itself both in "Aengstlichkeit um die reine Lehre" [concern for pure doctrine] and "weltumfassende Liebe" [world embracing love]. "In matters of faith and doctrine," he wrote, "we must have an extremely narrow and keen conscience, while in matters of love, we must be broad and wide, in fact, so broad that our love will embrace the entire world".⁴ How are we to resolve the tension between a confessionally narrow conscience and an ecumenically broad heart? How does an individual Christian, a congregation, or a church body show true Christian love toward an erring counterpart? Conversely, are there ways in which individual Christians, Christian congregations, and church bodies can manifest unity in Christ and love toward Christian brethren at the same time as they testify by word and deed

⁴F. E. Mayer, "The New Testament Concept of Fellowship", *Concordia Theological Monthly*, XXIII (Sept., 1952), 644.

against the falsification of God's Word? It will be useful for us to keep such questions firmly in mind as we now turn to the Lutheran Confessions. The confessional way of relating truth, unity, and love provides a helpful paradigm for our wrestling with Christian relationships today.

I. Confessional Principles on Church, Gospel, and Unity

In his inimitable fashion, Dr. Martin Luther writes in the Smalcald Articles: "Thank God, a seven-year old child knows what the church is, namely, holy believers and sheep who hear the voice of their Shepherd" (SA, III, xii, 2). Many today, although presumably wiser than the seven-year olds of Luther's day, have evidently forgotten the two chief features of this definition, namely, that the church consists of believers, and that believers follow the Shepherd's Word, the Gospel. The confessions deal at length with the intimate interrelationship between church, Gospel, and unity.⁵

1. *The church in the narrow or proper sense is the "assembly of believers"* (AC VII). It is "mainly an association of faith and of the Holy Spirit" (Ap VII, 5) and not merely an "association of outward ties and rites". The great truth that the church is constituted by faith was articulated by Luther and his colleagues in the 16th century not only because of the polemical situation of that time, that is, to enable Luther to say in the Smalcald Articles, "We do not concede to the papists that they are the church, for they are not" (III, xii, 1). Much more, this understanding of the church as constituted by faith in Jesus Christ and not by membership in an external organization, follows from the great Apostolic and Reformation truth that man is justified by faith. Just as it is only by faith in Jesus Christ (or, the Gospel in the narrow sense) that a man is righteous in the sight of God, so the church is simply the totality of those who have such faith. The church is the Body of Christ because it has a living relationship with Him who is its Head. Apart from a living relationship with the Head, there is no living relationship with other members of the Body (Ap VII, 5). Apart from faith, there is no church. Just as faith alone justifies, so

⁵The following paragraphs reflect the confessional distinction between the narrow and broad sense of both "church" and "Gospel". The church in the narrow sense consists of all believers and only believers (cf. AC VII; Ap VII, 28) but the church in the broad sense includes also hypocrites and unbelievers (cf. AC VIII and Ap VIII, *passim*). Gospel in the narrow sense identifies the message or promise of the forgiveness of sins for the sake of Jesus Christ, while in the broad sense it includes all Christian doctrine (Ap IV, 43, 345; FC, SD, V, 3-6).

also faith alone constitutes the church. What this means dare not be overlooked! It is not our membership in any congregation or denomination that makes us "church". The church, properly speaking, is the community of all those, and only those, in whom the Holy Spirit has created saving faith in Jesus Christ. It is therefore not coextensive with any denominational structure or structures. Its reality is *spiritual*, for it is constituted by *faith*. The precise limits of the church in the narrow sense cannot be determined by man, nor can its extent be measured statistically, organizationally, or sociologically; for only God Himself knows who truly believes in Him through Jesus Christ.

2. *The church is called and recognized by the use of the Gospel and Sacraments.* The church is GOD's creation. Because we cannot by our own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ or come to Him, the Holy Spirit calls us by the Gospel and enlightens us with His gifts. When the Gospel is communicated or the sacraments are used⁶ God does miraculous things! The Holy Spirit works through these instruments to make saints out of sinners by creating faith in Jesus Christ. When He creates faith, He places the faithful into a community called the church. The church is people, not a mere intellectual abstraction. For the means through which the church is *called* is also the means by which it is *recognized*. So great is our confidence in God the Holy Spirit's operation through the Gospel and sacraments that we know that the church exists wherever His means are employed. Thus, to find or recognize the church, our confessions urge us to look neither for great programs, many buildings, and large and elaborate organizations, nor even for purity of life or excellency of love — important as all of these may be —, but rather ask us to look for the pure and right use of the Gospel and sacraments. This emphasis honors God as the Author of the church and recognizes the church as His creation, rather than our own. It takes seriously God's promise that His Word will not return to Him void but will accomplish His purpose (Isaiah 55:11).

3. *The church is united spiritually; its unity is given with faith in the Gospel.* We confess in the Nicene Creed: I believe in ONE, holy, Christian and apostolic church. Properly speaking, there are not 250 churches in America, but ONE church. We *are* one with every

⁶The sacraments have the same purpose and effect as the preached or spoken Gospel, for they are also ways in which our gracious God "offers counsel and help against sin" (SA, III, iv). They should therefore be thought of as "signed Gospel" or "visible Word" (Ap, XIII, 5), not as something distinct from the Gospel.

Christian who lives or has ever lived on the face of this earth. Christian unity is nothing other than the spiritual bond that unites all believers to their Lord Jesus Christ and thereby to each other. There is only *one* assembly of such believers in both space and time. *Ubi ecclesia, ibi unitas*, our fathers said: "Where the church is, there is its unity". When the Augsburg Confession states in its Seventh Article, "For the true unity of the church it is enough to agree concerning the teaching of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments", the confession is not in the first instance making a programmatic statement about our modern ecumenical problem.⁷ To quote from the Apology, it is rather describing "true spiritual unity, without which there can be no faith in the heart nor righteousness in the heart before God" (Ap, VII, 31). Unity is there correlated with faith and righteousness — *spiritual* realities rather than empirical objects. Such unity is found where the Gospel and sacraments are used purely and rightly, that is, where they are in the first instance, *qualitatively* pure and right, where the Gospel is preached and the sacraments are used without pollution and contamination by human additions or subtractions or by legalistic admixtures. For it is only through the pure Gospel that God creates the one and only church of Jesus Christ.

In this connection it will be helpful to distinguish between the unity *of* the church (which all believers *have* with each other) and unity *in* the church (which believers seek). Our fathers frequently used the term *concordia* (concord) when referring to the latter, and *unitas* (unity) when speaking of the former.⁸

4. *The church in the narrow sense is found only within the church in the broad sense.* Where do we find this one church of believers only? The confessions answer: only in a larger assembly of people including hypocrites and unbelievers who for various reasons are gathered around the Word and sacraments together with the true believers. The confessions call this assembly the "association of outward ties and rights" (Ap VII, 5), or the church in the broad sense.

⁷There has been widespread misunderstanding and misuse of this article by contemporary Lutherans. Its primary purpose was to state what is necessary for the true church to exist, and by implication to affirm that the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church was also present among Luther's followers.

⁸The Latin versions of the Formula of Concord tend to use the term "concordia" when speaking of the external fellowship or unity in the church, and to reserve the term "unitas" for the spiritual fellowship existing among true believers in the *una sancta*. For further elaboration of this point, see the CTCR document, *A Lutheran Stance Toward Ecumenism*, pp. 9ff.

The hypocrites and unbelievers in this assembly are not living members of the body of Christ but are only what the Apology calls “members of the church according to the outward associations of the church’s marks” (Ap VII, 3), or “as far as outward ceremonies are concerned” (Ap, VII, 12). The church in this broad sense *can* be measured and described empirically and sociologically. Membership lists and statistical yearbooks can be compiled on it. But it bears the name “church” only because of the true church within it. It too is identified by the use of Gospel and sacraments carried on in its midst and which continue to retain their divine power and efficacy even when done by unbelievers. This is not a second church, for there is only one church. But the one church of true believers — real people, not some Platonic idea or mere intellectual abstraction exists within the broad church and is not simply coextensive with it. But it is the church in the broad sense that is in fact the normal identification of the word “church” today. In other words, we recognize that our congregations and our synod are not made up exclusively of believers, and therefore are not simply coextensive with “church” in the proper sense.

5. *The external unity of the church in the broad sense is to be based on agreement in the purely taught Gospel and the rightly administered sacraments, that is, in “doctrine and in all its articles as well as in the right use of the holy sacraments” (FC, Ep, X, 7).* While unity is a “given” of the church in the proper sense, it is also a *goal* for the church in the broad sense, the “association of outward ties and rites”. The Augsburg Confession was written not only to establish the fact that the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church was present among Luther’s followers, but to help restore an outward unity that had been lost. The Preface of the AC states this purpose very clearly, namely, “to have all of us embrace and adhere to a single, true religion and live together in unity and in one fellowship and church, even as we are all enlisted under one Christ” (AC Preface, 4). Such outward unity is dependent on agreement in the Gospel and use of the sacraments according to Christ’s institution. We are here talking about agreement in the Gospel in the broad sense, that is, about doctrine and all its articles.⁹ Why is such agreement necessary?

⁹This broad sense of “Gospel”, which is no doubt derived from the four “Gospel” accounts of the New Testament, was common usage in the sixteenth century and occurs in a variety of ways in the confessions. The expressions *iuxta evangelium* or *secundum evangelium* (“according to the Gospel”) traditionally had reference to the four New Testament Gospels or a specific passage in them. The following confessional references are samples of such usage:

One can answer that question simply by observing that Christians want to be faithful and obedient to their Lord who commanded His church to "obey everything I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:19, TEV), and whose Holy Prophets, Evangelists, and Apostles exhort us in many places to uphold sound doctrine (see references above).

But there is also a "Gospel" reason for seeking agreement in doctrine and all its articles. And that is the fact that the Gospel in the narrow sense (that is, the "Good News" of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ for our salvation) is integrally related to *all* articles of faith. As the fathers often said, they are either antecedent or consequent to the doctrine of justification by grace. The Gospel in the narrow sense is central and primary within "doctrine and all its articles", and all articles of faith have a direct or indirect bearing on the Gospel in the narrow sense.¹⁰ Because of this relationship, the

AC, XXVIII, 5; Ap, XI, 4; Ap, XII, 122; LC, I, 65, 81, 276, 285. By extension, the term "Gospel" is sometimes applied to other parts of the New Testament, or to the Biblical teachings as a whole. For example, when Melancthon writes that the Mosak ceremonial laws do not justify "according to the Gospel", his reference is to Colossians 2:16-17 (Ap, XV, 30). When the Apology asserts that we obtain forgiveness of sins freely because of Christ, it is possible to base this assertion on either "Scripture teaches" (Ap, XII, 157) or "Gospel teaches" (Ap, XV, 30). Likewise such expressions as "command of the Gospel" or "the Gospel commands" evidently reflect this broad usage of the term (e.g., Ap, XII, 172). Melancthon laments the fact that the monks "neither hear nor preach the Gospel", and then asserts that the Gospel deals not only with forgiveness and justification but also is "about true penitence, about works that have the command of God" (Ap, XXVII, 54). Luther regrets that the clergy have learned very little from the "Gospel" about the conduct of their offices, with the result that they abuse their Christian liberty (LC, Preface, 3-4).

It is understandable that "Gospel" in this broad sense was also used for the proclamation or teaching of the contemporary church. Luther claims, for example, that "the entire Gospel is an external, oral proclamation" (LC, IV, 30). The Apology equates "Gospel" with "doctrine" in defining the church as the assembly of saints who share the association of the same Gospel or teaching and of the same Holy Spirit" (Ap, VII, 8). Or again, one of the fruits of the fact that "the Gospel is taught purely and diligently among us" is that no Anabaptists have arisen in the churches of the Augsburg Confession; the teaching of Baptism is based on Matthew 28:19, but the content and effect as taught in the church is "Gospel" (Ap, IX, 2). It is often difficult to draw a precise line between the Biblical Gospel and its contemporary proclamation. When, for example, the confessions talk about the "chief doctrine of the Gospel", it is clear that they have reference to the forgiveness of sins for the sake of Jesus Christ (e.g., AC, XXVIII, 52; Ap, XII, 3, 10). But "Gospel" in this expression refers in the first instance to the entire doctrine of the New Testament and then to the proclamation of that doctrine in the church. This expression, incidentally, indicates that the Gospel-in-the-narrow-sense is the most important point and the chief topic of the Gospel-in-the-broad-sense.

Students of the confessions need to be sensitive to the various emphases in the use of the term "Gospel", for the confessions employ the term without great precision and sometimes use it in different ways in the same context (e.g., AC, VII; AC, XXVIII, 5; Tr, 60).

¹⁰The Gospel has been likened to a seamless garment, a golden ring, or a wagon wheel whose hub is Jesus Christ and whose spokes are the articles of faith. The interrelationship of the articles of faith and their relationship to the Gospel in the narrow sense is explained in the following: "A Review of the Question, What Is a Doctrine?", III, 7, in 1969 L.C.M.S. Convention *Proceedings*, pp. 506-507; *Theology of Fellowship*, Part II, B 2, in 1969 LCMS Convention *Proceedings*, p. 535; and "The Doctrine of the Church in the Lutheran Confessions. Essay Adopted by the Commissioners of The American Lutheran Church and The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod", in 1967 LCMS Convention *Proceedings*, pp. 417-419.

This inter-relationship can be seen by thinking through the "simple" Gospel on the basis of a passage like John 3:16. Questions like the following lead to a consideration of all theology from creation to eschatology, and indicate why agreement in the Gospel involves full doctrinal agreement: Who is God? Where did the "world" come from? Why did it need God's "love"? Who is God's "Son" and why is he called "only-begotten"? What did he do when the Father "gave" him, and how did this really change man's situation? What is meant by "believing in Him" and how does one get such faith? What does it mean that the world would "perish" without him? What is "eternal life"? On what basis can we be sure that our answers are God's?

denial or falsification of any article of faith seriously injures the preaching of the Gospel according to a pure understanding of it.

It should be noted that the Augsburg Confession in Article VII calls for a Gospel that is *purely* taught and for Sacraments that are *rightly* administered. These adverbs not only describe *qualitative* purity, but have *quantitative* significance as well; for the Gospel through which the Holy Spirit calls, gathers, and enlightens His Church, ultimately embraces all articles of faith revealed in Holy Scripture.

In this connection, it should be observed that agreement in the Gospel, in all its articles, does *not* mean that “human traditions or rites and ceremonies, instituted by men, should be alike everywhere” (AC, VII). Uniformity in ceremonies may be useful, but ceremonies not ordained by God have no organic connection with the Gospel and are therefore not criteria for the external unity of the church. But the antithesis in AC VII is between the *divine* Gospel and *human* ceremonies, and not between the Gospel and “other” teachings of Holy Scripture.

6. *Only such external unity as preserves and employs the means of grace in their essential purity serves the true unity, preservation, and extension of the church.* The Holy Spirit builds the church through the Gospel and sacraments. Believing, teaching, and confessing the Gospel according to Holy Scripture becomes the one essential task of the church and the one God-given means for seeking and finding true Christian unity. In other words, the primary mission of the church can be described as the faithful use of the means of grace. External unity in the church is not an end in itself, but serves the primary task of the church. *Concordia* (that is, concord, external unity, or unity *in* the church) is intended to deepen and extend *unitas* (that is, true spiritual unity, or the unity *of* the church), and this is done only when the Gospel is faithfully preserved and consistently employed. Therefore, we cannot automatically assume that the formation of denominations, organizational mergers, participation in church federations, or even ecclesiastical declarations of altar and pulpit fellowship in themselves advance the cause of true Christian unity, for the decisive criterion remains whether such actions advance and are faithful to the Gospel. According to this criterion, not every separation of Christians from other Christians is to be condemned (however much it is

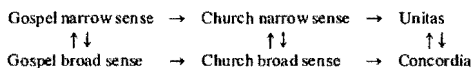
deplored), for God Himself commands separation from all alliances that persistently falsify His Gospel, or tolerate such falsification.

To summarize: The church in the narrow sense, which consists of believers in Jesus Christ, is united spiritually by its common faith in the Gospel in the narrow sense, but exists within the church in the broad sense whose external unity is to be based on agreement in the Gospel in the broad sense. The Gospel in the narrow sense is related to all aspects of the Gospel in the broad sense, and is the means by which the Holy Spirit creates and extends the church. The church under the Scriptures is therefore constituted by and committed to the pure teaching of the Gospel and the right administration of the sacraments.¹¹

II. Implications for Confessional Ecumenism Today

1. *Confessional ecumenism is based on the understanding of the church as the assembly of believers, rather than on the current misunderstanding of the church that defines it solely in terms of sociological and empirical terms.* This is one of the most serious errors of contemporary ecumenism. Its concomitant is the notion that equates denominational fellowship with Christian unity. Such thinking has either forgotten or rejected the spiritual unity of the church on the basis of its common faith in Jesus Christ. Confessional ecumenism, on the other hand, knows that while the church is not a mere abstraction, neither is it precisely identical with the institutional church or its trans-denominational ecumenical organizations. Confessional ecumenism recognizes the fact that the church is true believers and that accordingly only such activities as give that fact preeminence are really and truly ecumenical. Understanding the true nature of the church is of crucial importance. According to the Apology, knowing that the church consists only of believers who enjoy the gifts promised by Christ is a great comfort against despair when we see "the infinite

¹¹Perhaps the following diagram will help us to understand the complexity and interrelationship of the confessional concepts:



There is only one Gospel, one church, and one bond between Christians, but each of these has narrow and broad aspects that vitally affect each other. Consequently, each of these concepts defies precise quantitative definition.

dangers that threaten the church with ruin" (Ap VII, 9). Moreover, "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, 13). In other words, misunderstanding the church may involve a misunderstanding of the Gospel itself. Moreover, because the real nature of the church is spiritual, merger, organic union, and other forms of structural consolidation cannot be regarded as the necessary and ultimate goal of ecumenical endeavor — however desirable they may be for the other reasons.

2. *Confessional ecumenism is predicted on the existence of true Christian unity among all believers.* The spiritual unity of believers is the presupposition and basis for seeking the empirical manifestations of that unity. Let us state that somewhat less academically. It is precisely because we *are* one with all Christians that we are concerned about all Christians. It is because the Roman Catholic believer is my brother in Christ, for example, that I am concerned about his understanding of the role of Mary or the authority of the papacy. It is because the Baptist believer is my brother that I am concerned about his views on the sacraments. Oneness of faith leads and impels us to frank and earnest efforts with other Christians to help them preserve the faith, grow in the knowledge of the Savior, and share His love with others. On the other hand, it is for the sake of their common faith that Christians will often have to remain separate, individually and denominationally, from other Christians; for such separation as is commanded by God Himself serves as a fraternal admonition to the separated brethren to heed the whole counsel of God for the sake of their salvation. It is most unfortunate that so much recent ecumenical literature treats Christian unity only as the goal, and not as the presupposition, for our ecumenical efforts.

3. *Confessional ecumenism is both evangelical and evangelistic.* It knows that the Gospel of Jesus Christ creates, sustains, and enlarges the church and therefore spares no effort to preach and administer that Gospel. It keeps the Gospel central (evangelical); it shares it with others (evangelistic). To be sure, Christians must be concerned with the great moral and social questions of our time, but not as a substitute for the Gospel or a means to promote true Christian unity, for

the church's primary mission to itself and to others is fulfilled only by giving the Gospel preeminence in all it does. In fact, confessional ecumenism can be correctly understood as the practice of evangelism *with* visible Christendom. (This is not to minimize the witness value of joint Christian social action, which, in certain circumstances, may be an important testimony of Christian love and unity.)

4. *Confessional ecumenism is doctrinal ecumenism.* It is committed to seeking full doctrinal agreement (i.e. agreement in the Gospel in the broad sense) as the basis for fellowship between Christian churches. For it knows that doctrine is in all its articles related to the Gospel by which the church lives, moves, and has its being. It therefore opposes both minimalistic and pluralistic doctrinal approaches to ecumenism. The former occurs in the appeal to practice ecclesiastical fellowship simply on the basis of a declaration of the Lordship of Christ, the "simple" Gospel, a Trinitarian statement, the fact of Baptism, or perhaps membership in a nominally Christian church.¹² As Lutherans, we must be particularly careful that AC VII is not misused in this way, as though the requirements for membership and unity in the *una sancta*, the church in the narrow sense, are a sufficient requirement for external unity or fellowship in the church in the broad sense.¹³ Closely related is the pluralistic assertion, so common in ecumenical literature, that many doctrinal positions can exist side by side within the same fellowship without disrupting the fellowship.¹⁴ This agreement to disagree is often bolstered by the fallacious argument that varying traditions of doctrine can enrich and help each other. Both the minimalistic and the pluralistic positions reflect an indifferentism to revealed doctrine that dishonors God's Word, weakens the Gospel that sustains the church and its true unity, offends the brethren, and ultimately promotes the external disunity of the churches. Such positions, often predicated on an inadequate notion of Christian love, serve the cause of neither love

¹²Novel as it may be to use the word "fundamentalistic" correctly, it should be observed that it is "fundamentalistic" to base church fellowship on agreement in certain basic doctrines to the exclusion of others. This was the position of historic Fundamentalism as well as of the earlier Moravian slogan, "In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity".

¹³It is a serious confusion when the requirements for spiritual unity are made the sole basis for altar and pulpit fellowship. This was done, for example, in the Fellowship Supplement of *The Lutheran Witness Reporter*, Vol. 4, No. 22, November 17, 1968, which stated on p. 4: "That which is necessary and sufficient for the church's true spiritual unity is also necessary and sufficient for altar and pulpit fellowship". The statement either requires too much for true spiritual unity or too little for altar and pulpit fellowship (although the following context fortunately clarified the matter somewhat).

¹⁴See the discussion on "Limits of Diversity", below, p. 26.

nor truth. Love demands that our brother be served by truth rather than by error, because error leads away from Jesus Christ, not toward Him. Doctrinal indifference ultimately destroys true Christian unity and produces schism, division, and polarization within Christendom. It is also to be emphasized that it is agreement in the Gospel — not in anything else, such as social action, liturgy, or structure — that is the basis for true Christian fellowship.¹⁵ Granted that the divided state of Christendom is a serious offense, it must be understood that doctrinal indifference or laxity not only does nothing to remove real barriers to fellowship, but creates an additional offense.

5. *Confessional ecumenism accepts and employs Holy Scripture, the written Word of God, as "the only judge, rule, and norm according to which, as the only touchstone all doctrines should and must be understood and judged as good or evil, right or wrong" (FC, Ep, Rule and Norm, 7), and vigorously rejects whatever calls into question the authority or truthfulness of the Bible.* For confessional Lutherans, it is axiomatic that Holy Scripture is the God-given means whereby the church learns to preach, teach, and administer His Gospel and sacraments "purely and rightly". Confessional ecumenism resists the temptation to pit the Gospel or Christ against the Scriptures, for it knows that Christ is the center of all Scripture and that Holy Scripture is God's way of revealing Christ to us. Confessional ecumenism therefore resists the new "enthusiasm" or mysticism which substitutes subjective ideas (usually on the pretext of being guided individually or corporately by the Holy Spirit) for the clear Word of Holy Scripture. To be sure, our Lord has promised to guide the church into all truth and to give it His Holy Spirit, but He gives His Holy Spirit *through* the Word of His truth, and not apart from it.¹⁶ Moreover, confessional ecumenism recognizes the doctrinal unity of Holy Scriptures, and therefore resists the contemporary ecumenical notion that theological diversity within the Scripture justifies theological diversity within the church. When it is asserted that the authority of the Bible is not the basis of fellowship, it must be recalled that the Bible is the basis, and fabric, as it were, of all

¹⁵Nor is sociological or psychological compatibility to be confused with true Christian unity. Advocates of the "more we get together, the happier we'll be" kind of ecumenism are too much in evidence.

¹⁶The appeal to truth or action on the basis of an intuitive reading of the times, for a dynamic group process, or other forms of experience apart from the Word is nothing other than "enthusiasm" (Schwaermerei). Luther reminds us that enthusiasm "is the source, strength, and power of all heresy" (SA, III, viii, 9). And heresy is the heart of the ecumenical problems!

articles of faith and therefore the norm of the Gospel we preach and teach.¹⁷

6. *Confessional ecumenism knows that the basis of church fellowship lies in agreement in doctrine, not in human ceremonies.* "It is not necessary" states AC VII, "that human traditions or rites or ceremonies, instituted by men, should be alike everywhere". Christian fellowship should not be made more stringent than God has made it by requiring agreement in such ceremonial or human matters. Liturgical agreement and structural conformity may be highly desirable for various reasons, but are not of the essence of the church or its unity. Brethren contemplating the declaration of either separation or fellowship need to be very careful that man-made and external considerations are not determining factors.

7. *Confessional ecumenism cultivates a fellowship that is vertical in time as well as horizontal in space.* It therefore cherishes its doctrinal heritage and makes its historic confessions its own. Moreover, it echoes the desire of the Lutheran confessors that our posterity will share our faith, and knows that this can be achieved when, by the blessing of God the Holy Spirit, men of all ages seek and find their common agreement in the Gospel of Jesus Christ on the basis of His Holy Word. Confessional ecumenism therefore deplores the current emphasis on theological change and novelty at the expense of continuity, particularly when such advocacy is predicated on the false notion that doctrine itself must change as part of the evolutionary and revolutionary process by which Christ is said to be exercising His Lordship over the world.

8. *Confessional ecumenism recognizes the importance of practice as the application of doctrine to life.* Proper formulations of the meaning of the Gospel on the basis of the Scriptures, necessary as such formulations are, are no substitute for actually preaching, teaching, and living the Gospel and using the sacraments. Practice is a fair indication of fidelity to the Gospel. For example, it does little good to point to an excellent formulation of the lodge problem in a synodical

¹⁷Twenty-five years ago, Prof. F. E. Mayer correctly observed: "Faith is engendered by, and rests solely upon, the Word of God. Any tampering with the Word of God may, and frequently does, destroy faith. Since Christ is the center of all Christian revelation and of all proclamation within the Christian Church, I Cor. 2:2-10, therefore any deviation from the Word, though it may appear non-essential, will ultimately strike at the very heart and center of the Gospel. The spiritual fellowship is so delicate that it cannot endure any deviation from Christ's Gospel". In "The New Testament Concept of Fellowship", CTM, XXIII (Sept., 1952), 640.

constitution if in fact that policy is not being followed in the parishes. It means little to point to a fine statement on the inerrancy of Holy Scripture in the *Brief Statement* or the *United Testimony of Faith and Life* if, in fact, that position is no longer consistently followed. We need to remember that the Augsburg Confession (VII) is talking about a Gospel that is actually taught and proclaimed and about sacraments that are actually administered. Why? Because it is through the "practice" of the Gospel, if you will, that the Holy Spirit creates and sustains His church. To be sure, not all items in the area of practice are clearly defined in the Word of God, and this needs to be recognized. But where they are, or where they clearly relate to the Gospel, there can be no ecumenical retreat to the safety of written formulations at the expense of what is actually happening in the church's parishes as well as its seminaries, colleges, publishing houses, boards and commissions. Herein lies one of the chief reasons why The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod holds doctrinal discussions with other Lutheran groups prior to the establishment of altar and pulpit fellowship.

9. *Confessional ecumenism employs both Law and Gospel in a fraternal and evangelical practice of Christian discipline toward those whose life or doctrine contradicts the teaching of Holy Scripture and vitiates or denies the Gospel of Jesus Christ, thereby impairing fellowship within the church of Jesus Christ.* To be sure, the presence of error in a church body is not immediate grounds for suspension of fellowship. Heresy is the *persistent* advocacy of error, and erring brethren — whether individuals or churches — need our earnest efforts to correct them before we take the always regrettable ultimate step of separation. But doctrinal discipline is necessary for the preservation of the Gospel among us, for the promulgation or toleration of error neither builds nor sustains the church. It is therefore mandatory that procedures for doctrinal discipline within and between church bodies be as direct and uncomplicated as possible; that persons responsible for the public supervision of doctrine exercise that responsibility without prodding and without harassment, and that all of us, pastors and laity, keep ourselves informed on what is being taught, preached, and written in the church so that we can exercise a mutual ministry of concern toward each other. Evangelical doctrinal discipline is not legalistic, as some assert. It rather helps brethren remain faithful to the truth which alone makes men free.

“This is not to say that church bodies ever reach perfection in their quest to be faithful to the Word of God, nor does it mean that there can be no diversity within a confessional church body. Our confessions make a sharp distinction between “unprofitable contentions” and “necessary controversy”, and describe the latter as “dissension concerning articles of the Creed or the chief parts of our Christian doctrine, when the contrary error must be refuted in order to preserve the truth” (FC, SD, Rule and Norm, 15). The later confessors were careful not to condemn either “those persons who err ingenuously and who do not blaspheme the truth of the divine Word” or “entire churches inside or outside the Holy Empire of the German Nation” (Preface to Book of Concord, p. 11). However, such statements in the confessional writings never have as their purpose to suggest that any teachings of Scripture can be ignored, denied, or falsified. Nor do they suggest that any doctrinal errors, even among the ingenuous, should long be tolerated in the church of God. “It is furthermore to be hoped”, states the Preface to the Book of Concord, “that when they are rightly instructed in this doctrine, they will through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, turn to the infallible truth of the divine Word and unite with us and our churches and schools”. Moreover, our confessional fathers solemnly remind theologians and ministers of their responsibility “duly to remind even those who err ingenuously and ignorantly of the danger to their souls and to warn them against it, lest one blind person let himself be misled by another” (Preface to Book of Concord, p. 12)”.

It is irresponsible churchmanship to close our eyes to error within either our own church body or another church body with whom we are in fellowship. To recognize that another church body’s doctrinal position is erroneous while maintaining that the error does not disrupt fellowship is clearly contrary to the approach of our confessional fathers. In a church body plagued with doctrinal discord and schismatic activity, a particularly heavy responsibility rests upon those who have been called to supervise the pastors, teachers, and congregations of the church.

10. *Confessional ecumenism is grassroots ecumenism.* It involves the efforts of *all* Christians, both to become and to remain doctrinally informed, and also to give testimony of their faith to other Christians. Efforts toward achieving doctrinal agreement with other Christians should not be limited to the church’s officials or theologians,

important as these are. For true fellowship in the church in the broad sense is predicated on the assumption that the *believers*, whether pastors or laymen, are indeed united in the understanding and confession of the Gospel in the broad sense. Much more must be done to extend the ecumenical movement to our individual parishes.¹⁸

11. *Confessional ecumenism distinguishes between merger or altar and pulpit fellowship on the one hand, and cooperation in external matters on the other.* Fellowship with other Christians at the altar or in the preaching of the Word of God is clearly the pinnacle of Christian cooperative efforts, while joint efforts in social action or welfare and in other areas not directly affecting Word and Sacrament can sometimes be carried out with less than full doctrinal agreement. Even then, Christians will avoid giving the impression by such joint efforts that full agreement exists. The Formula of Concord reminds us that there are situations when there must be no "yielding or conforming in external things where Christian agreement in doctrine has not previously been achieved" (FC SD, X, 16). That statement means that even adiaphora, things neither commanded nor forbidden by God, can be a legitimate source of contention and separation between Christians when the Gospel is at stake. We should not hesitate to cooperate with other Christians in such matters when this can be done without offense or misunderstanding. Such activity, however, must not be regarded as a substitute for attaining doctrinal agreement, for this would be to confuse a merely secular ecumenism with authentic confessional ecumenism.

12. *Confessional ecumenism distinguishes between merger or altar and pulpit fellowship on the one hand, and ecclesiastical participation in federations and councils of churches on the other.* Merger, organic union, and altar and pulpit fellowship are based on complete doctrinal agreement (i.e. the Gospel in the broad sense), while federations or councils, on the other hand, usually represent efforts to provide structures for achieving such agreement. Membership in the latter type of organization (e.g. LCUSA, LWF) would be possible (though not mandatory) without complete doctrinal agreement whenever (1) such membership would entail serious doctrinal discussions with a view to the attainment of full doctrinal agreement,

¹⁸Resolution 3-26 of the 1971 synodical convention calls attention to this fact in stating that our first step in working toward fellowship with other Lutheran churches in "multilevel discussion" of the Scripture and Lutheran Confessions. In 1971 *Proceedings*, p. 139.

(2) when the federation or council as such does not engage in activity which would identify it as a church, (3) when membership in the council or federation would not tend to identify the member churches as being in doctrinal agreement when in fact they were not, and (4) when membership in such an organization would not identify a member church with undesirable or questionable positions or activities of the organization as a whole or with any of its member churches. When such concerns are adequately met, membership becomes primarily a question of feasibility. When such organizations are not fulfilling their potential usefulness in the attainment of external unity, attempts should be made to change the organization before withdrawing from it or entering it, as the case may be. For such organizations, ideally considered, offer a useful framework for seeking a greater measure of doctrinal agreement and for cooperation in externals.

13. *Available time and resources, as well as the demands and opportunities in other areas of the church's task, suggest that Christian churches follow clear priorities in seeking closer ties with other Christians.* On the principle that those closest to us in the household of faith deserve our closest attention and most persistent effort we would suggest the following sequence of ecumenical priorities:

- (1) Attaining closer relationships and the reconciliation of differences with estranged brethren within our own denominational fellowship, both on the congregation and church body level. Those who are engaged in schismatic activities or hold doctrinal positions different from those of the Synod should be dealt with patiently and fraternally. Members of the Synod who fully accept the Synod's doctrinal position should not make withdrawal or separation from the Synod their immediate goal whenever they sense that the Synod has erred, but should rather make every effort to correct the problem through the orderly processes and procedures provided by the Synod.¹⁹
- (2) Maintaining and enriching our fellowship relationships with partner and sister churches around the world. In the case of

¹⁹Although intra-denominational relations are usually not included in "ecumenism", the confessional distinction between the church in the broad sense and the church in the narrow and proper sense enables us to think of all ecclesiastical structure in terms of its contribution to the true spiritual unity among believers. It is worth noting that the primary objective of The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod is "The conservation and promotion of the unity of the true faith (Eph. 4:3-6, I Cor. 1:10) and a united defense against schism and sectarianism (Rom. 16:17)". In "Constitution of The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod", *Handbook*, p. 15.

the ALC-LCMS relationship, we need to encourage the Commission on Fellowship to deal effectively with the issues that were commended to it and to promote greater doctrinal discussion at all levels. Where problems exist, we need to recall that patient and fraternal exhortation should precede more drastic action — whether we are dealing with individuals or church bodies. The present “fellowship in protest” should be understood as fraternal exhortation rather than as a legalistic or negative action; for that reason, it is irresponsible churchmanship for any synodical official to blunt the force of that exhortation by publicly misrepresenting it or disagreeing with it.

- (3) Seeking to restore fellowship with churches formerly in fellowship, such as the WELS, the ELS, or our Finnish brethren.
- (4) Attempting to attain sufficient doctrinal agreement for fellowship with Lutheran churches not in fellowship with us, such as the Lutheran Church in Australia and the Lutheran Church in America.²⁰
- (5) Promoting closer relations with non-Lutheran Christians.²¹
- (6) Using available opportunities to discuss the Gospel with representatives of non-Christian religions or ideologies, provided such contacts give ample opportunity for a clear testimony to the Gospel and are not regarded as according the non-Christian religion an equal claim to the truth.²²

In all these contacts and efforts, the quality of participation certainly is as important as the quantity. It is important that spokesmen represent the doctrinal position of their church body and that they address differences fairly and frankly. Furthermore, while the foregoing areas of ecumenical activity are listed in a suggested order of

²⁰The doctrinal situation in these two church bodies is quite different, inasmuch as one of the predecessor bodies of the Australian church was previously in fellowship with Missouri, while none of the predecessor bodies of the Lutheran Church in America was. Moreover, the official statements emanating from the Australian church show that church body to be strongly confessional in character.

²¹Within this vast array of denominations, we should cultivate closer ties with evangelical Christians first, and then with more liberal groups. It is important for us to realize that significant changes have taken place in the traditional views of some denominations, including certain Reformed groups and Roman Catholicism.

²²As we have defined the term, this activity is technically not “ecumenical”, but evangelistic. See the discussion of this problem with particular reference to Judaism in Lambert, pp. 445 ff.

priority, it should be understood that we would seek to engage in all of these areas concurrently, to the extent that time and circumstances permit.

III. Special Problems and Questions for Lutherans Today

Considerable study and discussion will need to take place on a number of complex questions involved in inter-Lutheran relationships, particularly in America. A brief characterization of some of these problems follows.

1. *Terminology.* Considerable dissimilarity and confusion exist in the use of terms frequently employed to describe Christian relationships. The *unitas/concordia* distinction is little used outside of The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. But even greater confusion and difficulty exists in the use of the term "fellowship". One difficulty stems from the fact that its major ecclesiastical usage by contemporary Lutherans, including The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, is for *concordia* situations, when in fact it is an *unitas* concept in the New Testament.²³ All Christians *have* fellowship with each other; it is not something we establish! Another difficulty with the ecclesiastical usage of the term "fellowship" is that relatively few major Lutheran church bodies mean the same thing with the term that The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod does. For other Lutherans, "fellowship" generally indicates a rather minimal relationship between Christians, while The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod regards it as the most comprehensive and complete relationship possible among Christians.²⁴ For that reason, among others, Lutheran discussions of "fellowships" have often been characterized by disagreements about the practical components of denominational fellowship.²⁵ Perhaps

²³See the excellent and still very useful study of the biblical concept of fellowship in Part I of *Theology of Fellowship*, accepted by the Synod in 1967 (available in pamphlet form from Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, Mo.).

²⁴This fact may explain the statement made at a press conference during the Dallas Convention by Dr. Arnold Mickelsen of The American Lutheran Church to the effect that the concerns expressed by Missouri concerning "fellowship" were the kinds of things discussed by the ALC when considering "merger". It is noteworthy that the concerns identified by the resolution in question (3-02A, 1977 *Proceedings*, pp. 125-126) are primarily doctrinal.

²⁵In a pamphlet issued in early 1969 by the President's office, six components of altar fellowship were listed on p. 13: (1) joint worship services, (2) pulpit exchange between synods, (3) members of one synod communing at the altars of the other synod, (4) transfer of members between congregations of the two synods, (5) the calling of pastors from one synod to the other, and (6) preparation for the ministry in the seminaries of either synod. Discussions with the ALC and LCA since 1969 have revealed that little agreement exists today that these six components all pertain.

the time has come for us to consider developing and employing a different set of terms to clarify and distinguish various kinds of Christian relationships. To that end, we may find it helpful to review the terminology used elsewhere in Christendom.²⁶

2. *Basis of Fellowship*. This question is of considerable interest in the larger ecumenical discussion, and it continues to be raised in discussions involving our own church body. It has been a major question in the national Lutheran-Reformed Dialog, the LCUSA/DTS Consultation on the Function of Doctrine and Theology in Light of the Unity of the Church (FODT), and in relationships with The American Lutheran Church. To illustrate the problem, let us recall that after The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod (in 1971) asked The American Lutheran Church to reconsider its action permitting the ordination of women to the pastoral office, the ALC replied in 1971

²⁶The following terminology was proposed by the Conference of Faith and Order at Lund in 1952:

- (1) *Full Communion* (though the adjective need rarely be used): where churches in doctrinal agreement, or of the same confessional family, allow communicant members freely to communicate at the altars of each, and where there is freedom of ministers to officiate sacramentally in either church (i.e., intercelebration), e.g., the Orthodox, Anglican, Lutheran, and Reformed (Presbyterian) "families" of churches, respectively.
- (2) *Intercommunion and Intercelebration*: where two churches not of the same confessional family, by agreement allow communicant members freely to communicate at the altars of each, and where there is freedom of ministers to officiate sacramentally in either church, e.g., Lutheran and Reformed churches in France. N.B. — The relations at present existing between the Church of South India and the Church of England are a special case of this kind, involving certain specific limitations.
- (3) *Intercommunion*: where two churches, not of the same confessional family, by agreement allow communicant members freely to communicate at the altars of each, e.g., churches of the Anglican communion and Old Catholics, Protestant Episcopal Church and Polish National Catholic Church in U.S.A. Subject to differences of language, etc., intercommunion in most cases would also involve intercelebration.
- (4) *Open Communion*: where a church on principle invites members of other churches to receive communion when they are present at its communion services, e.g., the Methodist, Congregationalist, and most of the Reformed churches.
- (5) *Mutual Open Communion*: where two or more churches on principle invite each other's members and the members are free to accept the invitation. This does not necessarily involve intercelebration.
- (6) *Limited Open Communion* (Communion by Economy or Dispensation): the admission of members of other churches not in full communion or intercommunion to the sacrament in cases of emergency or in other special circumstances.
- (7) *Closed Communion*: where a church limits participation in the Lord's Supper to its own members.

Dr. Vilmos Vajta, formerly director of the Department of Theology of the Lutheran World Federation, has suggested the following terminology:

A. Fellowship (*communio*)

1. Church fellowship: fellowship in preaching, confession of faith, and administration of sacraments.
2. Intercommunion: two churches of different confessions, which are not in fellowship with one another, allow one another to commune in one another's churches and to practice intercelebration on the basis of unwritten custom or formal agreements.

B. Admission (*admissio*)

1. General admission: a church admits all baptized Christians to communion, which it celebrates in accordance with its own order and by its own appointed ministers.
2. Occasional admission: a church admits to communion only its own members, members of other churches being admitted only under special circumstances.

In Vilmos Vajta, "The Unity of the Church and Communion", *Church in Fellowship*, edited by Vilmos Vajta (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1963), pp. 225-226, 228.

by asking whether Missouri had changed its position on the basis for fellowship since fellowship was officially declared in 1969. Discussions within the Commission on Fellowship have given considerable attention to this question. In its 1971 statement, the ALC stated that it is willing to have fellowship with "any and all Lutheran churches which confess their adherence to the Holy Scriptures as the Word of God in all matters of faith and life and subscribe to the confessions of the Lutheran Church".²⁷ The ALC document also stated that other questions of practice or interpretations of Scripture "not specified in the confessions" could remain as matters of continuing conversation without being divisive of fellowship.²⁸ Missouri representatives have emphasized that our understanding of the basis of fellowship is "mutual agreement in the doctrine of the Gospel and all its articles and in the proper administration of the sacraments on the basis of Holy Scripture and in keeping with the Lutheran Confessions as a true exposition of Holy Scripture". In more recent months, the president of The American Lutheran Church has publicly and repeatedly claimed that The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod now requires a more comprehensive agreement in doctrine than was understood when fellowship was established between the two church bodies in 1969. Quite apart from the question of change, however, is the simple fact that a sharp difference of opinion exists within American Lutheranism and beyond on this fundamental question.²⁹

²⁷The Missouri Synod response, written by the author, stated: "Certainly this statement is a satisfactory statement of what The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod also considers a sufficient basis for fellowship, provided we understand it in the same way. What, for example, is included in 'adherence to the Holy Scripture as the Word of God in all matters of faith and life'? Is the apostle Paul's teaching on the relationship between man and woman included among the 'matters of faith and life'? Does 'adherence' include only proper doctrinal formulations, or a practice that is commensurate with such formulations as well? Does 'Holy Scriptures' include everything the Holy Scriptures teach, or are there teachings of Holy Scripture which are not 'matters of faith and life'? Questions such as these were certainly discussed by the commissioners of both church bodies prior to the establishment of fellowship, and we can no doubt assume here that agreement was reached on them".

²⁸The Missouri Synod response to this point stated: "What does the statement mean when it asserts that other questions of practice or interpretations of Scripture 'not specified in the confessions' could remain as matters of continuing conversation without being divisive of fellowship? Does this wording suggest that the confessions somehow determine what is or is not included in the basis for fellowship, or that any doctrinal point not explicitly treated in the confessions is an open question? If so, we of The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod would have a serious problem with this understanding of the basis for fellowship. We understand that our confessional base is as broad as the Scriptures themselves. Nothing in the Holy Scriptures can be declared an open question, whether it is set forth in the Lutheran Confessions or not, unless the Scriptures themselves leave it open. Any practice that calls the authority of Holy Scripture into question thereby does a disservice to the Gospel, the Scriptures, and subscription of the Lutheran Confessions. Such a practice would therefore have serious implications for fellowship".

²⁹This is clearly recognized in the recently completed report of the Consultation on the Function of Doctrine and Theology in Light of the Unity of the Church, conducted over the past five years under the auspices of the Division of Theological Studies of the Lutheran Council in the U.S.A. That report states: "The LCA and ALC representatives have taken 'Gospel' in a narrow sense as identifying the message or promise of the forgiveness of sins for the sake of

3. *Authority of Scripture.* The differences that have troubled The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod on the authority of Holy Scripture also exist between The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod and other Lutheran church bodies. Not only do widely divergent views of the authority of Holy Scripture become evident in virtually all official discussions involving representatives of the three major Lutheran church bodies, but there is also considerable disagreement with Missouri's contention that such differences pertain to the basis of fellowship. A recently concluded major discussion involving representatives of the three major Lutheran church bodies has frankly stated this dilemma and urged that considerable effort be given to resolving it.³⁰

4. *Role of Confessions.* Differences of a profound character also exist within American Lutheranism and beyond on the understanding of confessional subscription, with Missouri emphasizing that such subscription embraces the entire doctrinal content of the confessions, while other Lutheran bodies take a more limited view.³¹ Moreover, the major Lutheran church bodies in America differ in the way confessional subscription pertains to church fellowship. The LCA, like its predecessor body, the ULCA (in its Savannah resolution), regards itself to be in fellowship with all who accept the

Jesus Christ . . . The LCMS representatives agree on the importance of this view of 'Gospel', but they assert that it is not possible to consider it in isolation . . . To establish fellowship, therefore, it is necessary to establish agreement in doctrine and in all its articles (FC, SD, X, 31)".

It should also be noted that the ALC-LCA "Communion Practices" document (still under discussion in those church bodies) advocates admitting to the Lord's Supper "those who are baptized", and states that, "Whoever the Sacrament is celebrated it should be open to all communing Christians present".

³⁰The aforementioned FODT reports states: "These divergent approaches to the methodology of Biblical interpretation have resulted in widely different conclusions about the legitimacy of affirming the existence of discrepancies, contradictions, mistaken notions, or diverse theologies within the Scripture". Again: "The ALC and LCA were willing to speak of a wider range of diversity within the Bible, including the possibility of different accents and theologies and of apparent contradictions. The unity of Scripture, they argue, includes this diversity and has a mosaic character. The LCMS, while recognizing a variety of images, conceptions and emphases within the Scripture, emphasized an organic unity which made suggestions of differing biblical theologies and apparent contradictions unacceptable".

³¹The FODT report states "Differences have emerged within our church bodies on the implications of confessional subscription for biblical interpretation today. Representatives of the LCMS have emphasized that the entire doctrinal content of the Lutheran confessional writings, including the implications of confessional statements dealing with the nature and interpretation of Holy Scripture, is accepted and remains valid today because it is drawn from the Word of God, that is, because it is a faithful exposition of Holy Scripture. On the other hand, some representatives of the other two church bodies, while affirming their continuing commitment to the Gospel of Jesus Christ as witnessed to in the Lutheran confessional writings, have tended to emphasize the historical character of those writings and to maintain the possibility of dissent from confessional positions that do not deal directly with the Gospel itself, such as some aspects of the confessional positions on the fall of man into sin and the nature and interpretation of Holy Scripture. In their continuing efforts to achieve theological consensus, our church bodies will need to give increasing attention to the implications of such differences in understanding the significance of confessional subscription."

Lutheran confessions, and therefore opposes formal and official doctrinal discussions with other Lutheran church bodies, including the LCMS. The ALC also regards itself to be in fellowship with virtually all Lutheran bodies, but is willing to hold doctrinal discussions.³² The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, on the other hand, has emphasized that formal subscription to the confessions must result in the actual confessing of the doctrinal content of the confessions in the life of the church. In reality, official discussions within American Lutheranism have made it very clear that theologians of these church bodies are in fact free to disagree with doctrinal positions of the Lutheran Confessions.³³ In other words, Lutherans disagree on two questions: the nature and meaning of confessional subscription, and the role of the confessions as an adequate basis for fellowship.

5. *Limits of Diversity.* One of the widely accepted results of historical-critical interpretation of the New Testament has been the conclusion that the New Testament contains diverse, if not contradictory, theologies. Not uncommonly, theologians have argued that diversity in the New Testament justifies ecumenical unity without the resolution of doctrinal differences.³⁴ Considerable attention was given at the most recent assembly of the Lutheran World Federation to the notion of "reconciled diversity". Similarly, some notions of "conciliarism" would provide for the coexistence of diverse doctrinal viewpoints without attempts at resolution. In one sense, the question of the limits of diversity within confessional churches and fellowship is a question of long standing; what is new, at least for

³²The 1934 Savannah resolution states: "Inasmuch as our now separated Lutheran church bodies all subscribe to these same confessions, it is our sincere belief that we already possess a firm basis on which to unite in one Lutheran Church in America and there is no doctrinal reason why such a union should not come to pass". Cited in Vajta, *op. cit.* in note 26, p. 34.

In a similar vein, Article II of the Constitution of the Lutheran Church in America states that the LCA "acknowledges as one with it in faith and doctrine all churches that likewise accept the teachings of these symbols". Official statements of the ALC and its officials reflect a similar orientation (cf., for example, the 1964 ALC Resolution or the statements by the late President Kent Knutson in the September, 1971, issue of *The Lutheran Standard*.)

The position advocated by Dr. John H. Tietjen's *Which Way to Lutheran Unity?* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1966), is basically the same. He writes: "What should be the basis for uniting the Lutherans of America? I suggest that it should be consensus in recognizing the Holy Scriptures as the norm and standard of teaching and in regarding the Lutheran Confessions as the correct exposition of the Scriptures — that much and no more", p. 151.

³³See, for example, the FODT report cited in note 31.

³⁴See, for example, the well-known 1951 essay by Dr. Ernst Kaesemann, "The Canon of the New Testament and the Unity of the Church", in *Essays on New Testament Themes*, (London: SCM Press, 1969), pp. 95-107. Similarly, Roman Catholic theologian John Charlot argues that the historical and theological disunity of the New Testament offers a basis from which to develop a new model for Christian relationships today; see his *New Testament Disunity*, (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1970).

inter-Lutheran discussions in the United States, is the degree to which diversity in doctrine is openly permitted or even championed.³⁵ In other words, unanimity in doctrine is no longer a primary goal in much ecumenical thinking, also among Lutherans.

6. *Ambiguous Denominationalism.* There once was a tie when most Christian denominations confessed a fairly unified doctrinal position. While there are, of course, several exceptions, it is a striking fact of contemporary church life that doctrinal divergence is often as great within a denomination as between denominations. This fact is increasingly true of the three major Lutheran church bodies, including The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. In that situation, a question that needs to be faced seriously is the meaning of *denominational* declarations of fellowship with other denominations, particularly since Missouri's understanding of the basis for fellowship calls for a rather comprehensive agreement in doctrine and practice.

7. *Movements and Enclaves.* Closely related is the fact that thousands of contemporary Christians, including Lutheran Christians, express their fellowship with other Christians in ways that do not respect traditional denominational boundaries. Perhaps the most outstanding example of non-denominational or trans-denominational fellowship is to be found in the charismatic movement, although other examples can also be named. At the other end of the spectrum, many Christians also find their most meaningful and frequent expressions of fellowship to be in enclaves within a denomination. Common to both tendencies is the fact that denominational confessionalism is clearly not regarded as establishing the boundaries for the practice of fellowship.

8. *Selective Fellowship.* After the former ALC established a policy of selective fellowship in 1946, the Missouri Synod in 1947

³⁵This became evident in the FODT discussions conducted over the past five years. The report states: "Both the ALC and LCA are the products of mergers of different strands within Lutheranism, while the Missouri Synod has a more homogenous institutional and theological history. The result is that the ALC and LCA have a more diverse character as churches, and they consider that diversity an important asset in their understanding and expression of the Gospel of Jesus Christ". See also notes 29, 30, and 31.

In this connection it should also be recalled that the "Openness and Trust" document produced by some members of the LCMS in early 1970 argued that certain differences in doctrine should not divide the Christian fellowship nor be the basis for excluding people from membership in the Synod. The document specifically advocated latitude in the following areas: the manner of the creation of the universe by God, the authorship and literary form of any books of the Bible, the definition of the presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper, the moral obligation of Christians in individual or corporate action, the question of factual error in the Bible, and the role and authority of clergy in the church. See the CTCR evaluation of this document in the 1971 *Convention Workbook*, pp. 37-39, and Resolution 2-50 of the 1971 synodical convention (*Proceedings*, pp. 128-129) which repudiated the document.

adopted a resolution against this practice.³⁶ Similar resolutions were adopted by Missouri Synod conventions in later years.³⁷ In spite of such resolutions, it is widely known and frequently reported in Lutheran publications that some congregations and officials of The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod have practiced fellowship with their counterparts in the Lutheran Church of America and perhaps other groups with whom the Synod has not established fellowship. It could also be argued that various congregations within Missouri today restrict their practice of fellowship to others of like mind. Some today hold that selective fellowship is the only responsible approach for congregations and pastors who belong to doctrinally divided denominations, while others continue to maintain that selective fellowship weakens a church body's witness and thereby impedes the eventual establishment of church fellowship.

9. *Excessive Congregationalism.* A current emphasis on congregational autonomy and independence in certain quarters of The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod has tended to obscure the interdependence of congregations and their responsibilities to the larger church. The implications of such congregationalism are considerable for the doctrine of the church and the establishment of church fellowship. (It would appear that some advocates of extreme congregationalism have also lost sight of the moral commitments made by congregations when they became members of a larger fellowship and agreed to abide by its principles.)³⁸

³⁶See 1947 *Proceedings*, pp. 497-499 and 519-520. The Synod's action criticizes selective fellowship because it will hinder "the earnest, patient, and God-pleasing endeavor of Synod to establish fellowship with The American Lutheran Church on the basis of doctrinal agreement". The Synod's resolution continued: "It must be remembered that the purpose of our Synod is *joint* defense against schism and sectarianism, Rom. 16:17. What God has commanded every pastor, every congregation, and every Christian to do, namely, to avoid those that cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine that we have learned, we are pledged by membership in our Synod to do jointly or collectively. Joint defense implies and demands joint action in establishing fellowship with other church bodies or their component parts. Independent action in the establishment of fellowship by individual members must be regarded as an offense against faithfulness to one's membership pledge, a breach of confidence, which, if persisted in, would lead to separation or disruption.

On this principle, that every member of Synod has foregone the right to establish fellowship with another church body independently is based Synod's repeated warning . . . that no action be taken by any of our pastors or congregations which would overlook the fact that we are not yet united . . . forcing the issue and establishing any form of outward fellowship (prayer, pulpit, or altar fellowship) . . . would militate against the law of love and the spirit of fellowship".

³⁷See especially 1965 Resolution 2-16 (*Proceedings*, pp. 97-98), 1967 Resolution 2-18 and 2-19 (*Proceedings*, pp. 92-93), 1969 Resolution 3-18 (*Proceedings*, p. 101), and 1971 Resolution 3-11 (*Proceedings*, pp. 132-133). These resolutions are reprinted on p. 44 of the 1973 *Convention Workbook*.

³⁸The late Hermann Sasse argued strongly and cogently against extreme congregationalism in the establishment of fellowship. He noted: "If a congregation has joined a synod, brotherly love would demand that not only the consciences of the 'weak' — whoever these may be in a specific case — should be respected but that good order should be maintained without which the synod cannot properly serve the local congregation". He also emphasizes that it is "impossible to separate the fellowship between local churches from the fellowship between the church bodies to which they belong". In "Selective Fellowship", *The Australian Theological Review*, XXVIII (Sept., 1957), 51-52.

10. *Separating Altar from Pulpit Fellowship*. President Robert Marshall of the Lutheran Church in America advocated the consideration of this possibility in connection with the Evian Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation in 1972. Although this proposal does not appear to have received much consideration in world Lutheranism, it is interesting to note that a similar notion has been proposed for the Synod's consideration. Such a proposal would make the practice of pulpit fellowship more restrictive than altar fellowship. While the proposal has some cogency, it tends to obscure the fact that the church throughout its existence has recognized altar fellowship as church fellowship, and has denied the recognition of such fellowship to those whose doctrine was unacceptable.³⁹ A somewhat related question of considerable interest in certain parts of the Christian community is the question whether Holy Communion should be employed as a means toward fellowship rather than as the goal of fellowship.⁴⁰

11. *Levels of Unity*. There are many Lutherans who feel that the "unit concept" of the Wisconsin Synod, which places virtually all forms of church relations on the same level, has much to commend it.⁴¹ Others have argued that the amount of doctrinal agreement between Christian groups determines the extent to which they may cooperate or practice fellowship with one another. One could argue that

³⁹Separation of altar fellowship from pulpit fellowship would be the practical effect of various overtures submitted to recent conventions by the Southeastern District, the Florida-Georgia District, and others; see Overture 3-173 (1977 *Workbook*, pp. 118-119), Overture 2-147 (1973 *Workbook*, p. 90), Overture 3-225 (1975 *Workbook*, p. 128), Overture 3-182A (1977 *Workbook*, pp. 120-121), and Overture 3-245 (1971 *Workbook*, p. 184).

Werner Elert, *Eucharist and Church Fellowship in the First Four Centuries*, translated by Norman Nagel (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1966), provides a convincing demonstration that altar fellowship was church fellowship in the early church.

⁴⁰Many Protestants answer the question affirmatively, while Roman Catholics tend to reaffirm their traditional negative answer. In Lutheran circles, the question was addressed in an article written in 1963 by Dr. John H. Tietjen entitled, "Holy Communion: Goal or Means for Church Unity", in *Liturgy and Renewal* (Valparaiso University, 1968), pp. 34-41. Tietjen argues against intercommunion arrangements because "we must let the scandal of divided altars remain to prod us on to reach consensus". He notes, however, that "This counsel does not demand a rigid practice of close communion. It is possible to commune other than Lutherans at Lutheran altars", p. 40.

⁴¹This aspect of the Wisconsin Synod position, as stated in 1960, reads as follows: "We may classify these joint expressions of faith in various ways according to the particular realm of activity in which they occur, e.g., 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. Hence Scripture can give the general admonition 'avoid them' when church fellowship is to cease, Rom. 16:17. Hence Scripture sees as expression of church fellowship also in giving the right hand of fellowship, Gal. 2:9, and in greeting one another with the fraternal kiss, Rom. 16:16; on the other hand, it points out that a withholding of church fellowship may also be indicated by not extending a fraternal welcome to errorists and by not bidding them Godspeed, 2 John 10-11. Cf. 3 John 5-8". Quoted from *Four Statements on Fellowship*, presented by the constituent synods of the Synodical Conference for study and discussion, November, 1960, p. 9.

the latter approach is the *de facto* situation for The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod which even now engages in some forms of cooperation with church bodies who are not in fellowship. If this is so, a clearly defined rationale should be articulated for the guidance of the Synod at all levels.

12. *The AELC Dilemma.* The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod today is experiencing the phenomenon of pastors and congregations leaving the Synod, advising others to leave the Synod, and even proselytizing among the Synod's members while insisting that such actions are not disruptive of fellowship. If such separation is for doctrinal reasons, there should be no fellowship until the doctrinal differences have been resolved; on the other hand, if doctrinal reasons do not underlie the separation, such separation would be separatistic and schismatic. In either case, the situation cannot be handled merely as a constitutional or organizational matter without due regard for the profound implications it has for our understanding of church fellowship.

13. *Unionism Today.* Missouri's position on church fellowship has rightly objected to "unionism."⁴² Recognizing that this term grew out of Missouri's concern with the implications of the Prussian union in the early nineteenth century, and recognizing further that the term has taken on other connotations in our society, it may be that a different term should be employed to identify the same malady. In that connection, however, it may be well to ask whether various joint activities by Christians not in fellowship carry the same implications as doctrinal indifference that were present in the nineteenth century.

14. *Emergency Situations.* As an outgrowth of World War II, Missouri's Armed Service Commission reached an understanding with the National Lutheran Council permitting chaplains or pastors to commune members of the armed services who were members of other Lutheran bodies "in exceptional situations".⁴³ In a somewhat

⁴²See, for example, Article VI of the LCMS *Constitution*, which states that one condition for acquiring and holding membership in the Synod is "renunciation of unionism and syncretism of every description". The *Brief Statement* also states: "We repudiate *unionism*, that is, church fellowship with the adherents of false doctrine, as disobedience to God's command, as causing divisions in the church (Rom. 16:17; II John 9, 10), and as involving the constant danger of losing the Word of God entirely (II Tim. 2:17-21)".

⁴³The key words in their agreement (as drafted in 1951 and quoted in Meuser, *op. cit.*, p. 62) are the following: "In the matter of admission to the Lord's Supper . . . the normal procedure shall be that members of each group attend the Communion Service conducted by representatives of that particular group . . .

In exceptional situations, where a member of one group earnestly seeks admission to the Lord's Supper conducted by . . . the other group, the individual case in each instance will be considered by the pastor concerned. It is

similar manner, the 1975 synodical convention recognized the pastoral situation in which campus ministers sometimes find themselves.⁴⁴ Furthermore, it has been generally recognized that pastoral care situations may occur in various other situations which justify the communing of Christians who are members of church bodies not officially in fellowship with our own. Practical guidelines for such situations should be developed which respect both the need for responsible freedom in pastoral care situations as well as the confessional witness of the church body.

15. *Fellowship Triangles.* When fellowship is understood as implying comprehensive doctrinal agreement, a serious question is raised when church body A is in fellowship with church body B but not church body C, while church body B is in fellowship with both church body A and church body C. Such a situation obtains today with the relationship between the three major Lutheran bodies in the United States. The Synod's traditional view has been that such relationships are illegitimate.⁴⁵ This situation too is in need of a careful clarification.

16. *Protesting Fellowship.* When Missouri declared itself to be in fellowship in protest with The American Lutheran Church, it took an action similar to earlier actions by other members of the synodical conference. Although some of the interpretations of the Dallas action by the president of The American Lutheran Church and others have apparently misunderstood the meaning of this concept, it may be helpful to underscore the fact that fraternal admonition between church bodies, as between individual Christians, is not punitive, but is intended to correct a problem. It should also be observed that the

agreed that in such cases particular synodical membership of a Lutheran in the armed forces shall not be a required condition for admission to the Lord's Supper.

It is agreed that the chaplain or pastor may commune such men and women in the armed forces as are conscious of the need of repentance and hold the essence of faith, including the doctrines of the Real Presence and of the Lord's Supper as a Means of Grace, and profess acceptance thereof".

⁴⁴Resolution 2-07A (1975 *Proceedings*, pp. 88-89) was successfully amended to include the words "and applying the Communion guidelines of Lutheran military and institutional chaplains" in the fourth Resolved.

⁴⁵A 1946 Missouri Synod document entitled "The Six Points 1946" expressed this synodical attitude as follows: "God-pleasing fellowship is impossible with a church body whose *publica doctrina* and practice are in harmony with God's Word but which is in fellowship with a church organization persistently adhering to unscriptural doctrines and condoning unscriptural practice and which fails to testify against such errors. Matt. 10:32 f.; John 8:31 f.; Rom. 16:17. The same rule applies to fellowshiping with congregations, themselves orthodox, but which persist in maintaining fellowship with an unorthodox church body". Quoted in Meuser, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

meaning of this protest is spelled out in the Dallas resolution itself.⁴⁶ It would appear, however, that the whole rationale for this action, as well as its implications for the congregations and pastors of the Synod, needs to be more carefully spelled out.

IV. Some Concluding Thoughts about Truth, Unity, and Love

As we wrestle with questions pertaining to our relationships with other Christians, it is imperative that we recognize the critical nature of the doctrinal and ecumenical situation in which we live. The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod is one of a very few major Lutheran bodies in the world who still confess and cling to the whole doctrinal content of the Lutheran confessional writings. Furthermore, The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod and its sister churches are in a distinct minority within world Christianity in sensing with disapproval that a major impact of the ecumenical movement of our times has been to diminish the significance of doctrinal disagreements while encouraging Christians to act and worship together whether agreed in doctrine or not. While recognizing that the problems existing at the level of officialdom may not be found in the same way among the rank and file members of church bodies, the fact is that the doctrinal and ecumenical situation today compels The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod to act with a great deal of responsibility and with full cognizance of the fact that our witness in these matters, for good or ill, will be heard.

Questions about our relationships to other Christians are often quite complex. But it is imperative that we always keep in mind and follow the implications of the three great biblical principles, namely, truth, love, and unity. *How* we do this is of the utmost importance. Various options exist, of course. Some Christian groups, and sometimes we ourselves, have acted as though there were no other principle involved than the truth principle. Others take the opposite approach of emphasizing that the only way to unity is through love, sometimes using slogans like "Love unites, doctrine divides", or "Let our deeds be our creeds". Such Christian groups often appear to be indifferent toward the great truth imperatives of the New Testament. For many others, particularly in our day, the unity principle,

⁴⁶See especially the first Resolved and point two of the second Resolved of Resolution 3-02A (1977 *Proceedings*, pp. 125-126).

frequently understood in a superficial or purely sociological manner, is evidently regarded as the chief criterion for ecumenical practice. This happens not only at the theoretical level of the theologian, but in the practical decisions of officials, congregations, and pastors to tolerate doctrinal differences in an effort to keep the group or organization together at all costs. But how, then, do we relate truth, love, and unity to each other?

Our Lutheran confessional heritage makes it quite clear that none of the three great principles is to be omitted in the ecumenical activity of Christians. But our confessional heritage also reminds us that the truth principle is central to the other two. It is through the proclamation and administrations of God's truth in Word and Sacraments that ecclesiastical unity is created and nurtured. Moreover, it is through the Holy Spirit's working through the same truth of God in Word and Sacrament that Christians are enabled and motivated to manifest love toward God and toward each other. In a previous essay, this principle was stated as follows:

Considerations of truth must take precedence over considerations of 'love' should these be in conflict, for Christian love is always dependent upon the truth of the Gospel. When a choice must be made between external unity and the truth of the Gospel, unity must yield to truth. For it is better to be divided for the sake of the truth than to be united in error.⁴⁷

To be sure, true Christian love is never in conflict with the truth, for love rejoices in the truth. But Christian ecumenical action must recognize and express the priority of the truth of the Gospel, both in the bestowal of unity and in the activity of Christian love.⁴⁸ However, there is no either/or for confessional ecumenism; we are at all times to be faithful to all three principles — truth, unity, and love.

⁴⁷"The Church Under the Scriptures", *op. cit.* in note 2, p. 38.

⁴⁸Two statements by Dr. Martin Luther, cited by Prof. F. E. Mayer (*op. cit.* in note 4, pp. 640-641), are pertinent here: "I would therefore rather that the errorists and the entire world separate from me than I should separate myself from Christ, so that He become my enemy. This would be the case if I would depart from His clear Word and follow vain dreams. The One Christ is more significant to me that untold unities in love. (*Der eine (unus) Christus ist mir groesser als unzählige viel Einheiten in der Liebe.* St. Louis, IX: 727.)

No, my dear man, I want no peace and unity on account of which one loses the Word of God; for then eternal life and everything would be lost. Here we dare not yield in the least point. We can yield solely and only to the Word of God. The Word and the Christian doctrine are given in order to effect Christian unity and fellowship. Where this is obtained, everything else will follow in good order; where there is no spiritual unity, there is no other kind of unity either. Please do not talk to me of love and friendship, which will play havoc (*periclitatur*) with the Word of God or faith. For we are no longer concerned with love, but with the Word of God, which brings eternal life, God's grace, and all the heavenly treasures. (*Mir nicht des Friedens und der Einigkeit, darueber man Gottes Wort verliert, denn damit waere schon das ewige Leben und alles verloren.* IX: 831.)

Such faithfulness will manifest itself in attitudes, approaches, and actions such as the following (and the list is far from complete).

1. We will actively seek to participate in discussions with other Christians who are willing to discuss the doctrine of the Gospel in all its articles and the right administration of the sacraments on the basis of the Word of God, Holy Scriptures. In such discussions, our goals are to *witness*, to *listen*, and to *study*. We should bear witness to our doctrinal position and explain it to others, including the important point that our separation or protest over against other Christians is to be understood as a loving admonition for the sake of truth, unity, and love, and is not a denial of the bond that unites us to our Lord and to each other in the Body of Christ (*unitas*). We should listen to those with whom we dialogue to make sure that our understanding of them is accurate, to remove any caricatures we may have, and to learn whether historic positions may have changed.⁴⁹ We should endeavor to study the Word of God together in such situations, for it is through the Spirit's action in the Word that growth takes place.
2. We will address questions such as the following when uncertain about our participation in ecumenical situations: Is it faithful to God's Word? Does it compromise the Gospel? Will it give a false or unclear witness? Will it manifest the kind of love for the brother that includes concern for his doctrinal position? Will it advance the true unity of Christ's church?
3. The faithful use of the means of grace must continue to be central in our theory and practice of confessional ecumenism today. For that reason, it remains useful, although very difficult, to distinguish between *cooperatio in sacris* (cooperation in sacred things) and *cooperatio in externis* (cooperation in externals). The former is indicative of the highest and deepest kind of church fellowship, while the latter may well be a legitimate way of expressing the *unitas* we share with other Christians.

⁴⁹Dr. C. F. W. Walther once observed, "We do not belong to those who believe their knowledge [Erkenntnis] requires no expansion nor correction [Berichtigung]"; in *Der Lutheraner*, XIII, 1.

4. Because we are one with every other Christian and are called to love one another, we will endeavor to find ways of expressing that oneness and love at all organizational levels of the church, always taking care that our joint efforts with other Christians are carried out without manifesting or implying any compromise of God's truth.
5. We will reserve our righteous anger, when necessary, for enemies of the Gospel, not brothers in Christ; for false teachings, and not their sometimes innocent purveyors. Contention for the faith once delivered to the saints does not justify sin against either love or unity.
6. We will seek to interpret any necessary separation or protest both to the church and to the world as fidelity to the Gospel and love for the brother, rather than as pride, aloofness, or a lack of concern.
7. We will recognize and distinguish between *corporate* action and witness, on the one hand, and *individual* pastoral situations. The latter do not establish the rationale for the former. By the same token, officials of the Synod as well as pastors, congregations, and theological professors, must remember that their actions are quite properly understood by many Christians as officially representing the corporate views of the Synod.
8. We will cultivate the kind of brotherly trust and regard for one another in the church that will lead us to recognize that situations differ from place to place and time to time, and that some decisions in this area are neither clear nor simple. There may be some situations of a pastoral kind where the simple confession that Jesus is Lord is completely faithful to the biblical principles of truth, unity, and love, while in other circumstances and situations nothing less than acceptance of a very detailed statement of our doctrinal position will suffice.
9. Separation and protest concerning the position or practice of other Christians should never be undertaken quickly or impatiently. When Christian church bodies disagree over major doctrinal issues, their relationship should be characterized by patient, fraternal, evangelical, and pastoral

discipline rather than by hasty actions. By the same token, procrastination in bearing frank and fraternal witness to others does not serve the cause of either truth or love.⁵⁰

10. Finally, we will rejoice in everything that advances the cause of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and sorrow over everything that shames His name or causes doubts about His truth that alone brings eternal salvation — wherever in Christendom this may occur. Error and discord are to be deplored, but concord is to be celebrated as a precious gift from the Lord of the church, who daily forgives our failures to love one another, to manifest our unity in His Son, and to confess His truth before the nations without weakness or compromise.

⁵⁰Dr. Charles Porterfield Krauth, distinguished contemporary of Walther's, stated it well: "Truthful separation is far better than dishonest union, and two churches are happier and more kindly in their mutual relations when their differences are frankly confessed than when they are clouding with ambiguities and double meanings the real divergencies", in *The Conservative Reformation* (Philadelphia: 1913; first published in 1871), p. 326.