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# **"Inter-Christian Relationships": A Minority Report**

Kurt E. Marquart

In February of 1991 the majority of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR) adopted a document entitled "Inter-Christian Relationships" (sometimes abbreviated hereafter as ICR). The response which follows was presented to the Commission on Theology and Church Relations in February of 1992 as a dissent from "Inter-Christian Relationships." Only minor alterations have been made to conform to the stylistic conventions of the *Concordia Theological Quarterly*.

From the outset it is vital to note what is and what is not at issue here: The question is not whether Christians of different churches should enjoy friendly relations with one another. It is not whether there are occasions for joint prayer among them. And it is not an issue whether there are special situations of pastoral care when the sacrament might be given to persons not officially members of our synod or of a synod in fellowship with it. Nor is it an issue whether there are areas for legitimate cooperation among churches of differing confessions. All these things are taken for granted. What is at stake here is the frame of reference within which such things are treated. The real question is whether our doctrine of church fellowship is to be evangelically and confessionally sound and, indeed, whether it can even be stated coherently enough so that its soundness can be tested.

Among Lutherans there are clear criteria for testing the theological adequacy of anything. They are the Holy Scriptures as the word of God (*norma normans*), and the orthodox creeds and confessions as the true and uncorrupted understanding of that word (*norma normata*) in regard to the matters addressed. What the properly understood divine word (that is, the self-interpreting Holy Scripture as rightly confessed in the Book of Concord) actually teaches about church fellowship, is set out admirably in "Fellowship in Its Necessary Context of the Doctrine of the Church," produced by the Overseas Committee on Fellowship of the Synodical Conference in 1961.<sup>1</sup> This standard, orthodox, evangelical Lutheran position is the frame of reference for the critique of "Inter-Christian Relationships" which follows.

Self-evidently "Inter-Christian Relationships" contains much that

is unexceptionable. This minority report must needs focus on the points of divergence. These may be grouped in terms of surface symptoms and deeper troubles, respectively.

### A. Surface Problems

(1.) The attempted distinction between "regular and official public and corporate worship services" with heterodox churches, on the one hand, and "special" or "occasional" such services, on the other hand (ICR, 33-38), is specious and, in effect, sets aside Article VIIb of the synodical constitution, which forbids "taking part in the services and sacramental rites of heterodox congregations or of congregations of mixed confession." While the synod has expressly held "that we expect our pastors and congregations to follow this article (VI) with respect to mixed wedding ceremonies" (1977, Resolution 3-25), "Inter-Christian Relationships" treats official participation in "ecumenical wedding services" as in principle permissible (ICR, 35-38), citing German and Australian opinions to that effect for good measure (ICR, Appendix C, 54-57). In respect of the opinion of the Australian Commission on Theology and Inter-Church Relations (CTICR) of 1988 cited in Appendix C, this statement should be contrasted with an earlier pronouncement by the same CTICR: "The Commission fraternally urges that the pastors of the LCA refrain from co-officiating at or taking official part in wedding, funeral, or other similar services, which are of an inter-church character in the sense of Article II, paragraph 4, of the Theses of Agreement, i.e., 'services conducted by churches not in fellowship of faith.' Participation in such services should be regarded as a form of promiscuous worship to which Article II, paragraph 2, clearly applies."<sup>2</sup>

(2.) "Inter-Christian Relationships" opens the synod's close communion to "visitors who belong to congregations of other Christian denominations" and who "desire to commune at the altars of our synodical congregations." Provided the answers to certain "questions are satisfactory, guests should be welcomed" (ICR, 43-44). Among the questions to be put to prospective communicants—so it was urged during the discussion of the text—should be the vital question whether these guests are regular communicants at altars of other confessions. The final edition of "Inter-Christian

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Relationships" deflected this suggestion by placing the question among the non-committal "discussion questions" (ICR, 44), not among the questions to be asked before admission.

Another suggestion lost without trace in the final version was that Werner Elert's classic monograph on fellowship be quoted as follows:

By his partaking of the Sacrament in a church a Christian declares that the confession of that church is his confession. Since a man cannot at the same time hold two differing confessions, he cannot communicate in two churches of differing confessions. If anyone does this nevertheless, he denies his own confession or has none at all.<sup>3</sup>

(3.) The "Case Studies" in "Inter-Christian Relationships" (Appendix A) are undecidable, given a certain hesitancy about the applicability of the biblical texts (ICR, 15).

(4.) This hesitancy (noted in point 3 above) is related to the loss of clear categories brought about by terminological and conceptual muddles, above all the alien notion of "levels of fellowship."

(a.) On the one hand, "the outward unity of the church" at the top of page 20 is still said to require full agreement in doctrine and sacraments. That is the view expressed in the theses adopted by the CTCR in 1981, which identify "external unity in the church" with "church fellowship," for which full confessional agreement is required (ICR, 7-9). Yet, on the other hand, by the second half of page 20, as on page 22, there are gradations of external unity: "The unity of all believers is a unity of faith in the gospel, and our expression of that unity in outward and organizational ways is determined by the measure of our consensus in confessing the gospel." Again, "expressions of Christian unity" must be "proportionate to the measure of consensus in confessing the Biblical gospel that we enjoy with the other Christians involved" (ICR, 29).

(b.) The logic of "ambiguous denominationalism" (ICR, 5), plus the distinction between fellowship at the "church-body level" and at the "local level" (ICR, 9), plus the insistence "that expressions of Christian unity be proportionate to the measure of consensus . . .

with the other Christians involved" (ICR, 29), leads directly to the "selective fellowship" still rejected by the CTCR in 1981 (ICR, 9), but practised or advocated (or both) in several districts of the LCMS.

(c.) On the one hand, "unionism" is correctly defined as "church fellowship with the adherents of false doctrine" (ICR, 28). On the other hand, joint services with heterodox churches and their ministers are allowed and advocated (ICR, 33-38). Whereas Article VI of the synodical constitution forbids joint services *because* they are unionistic, "Inter-Christian Relationships" forbids them *if* they are unionistic, that is to say, "only when doctrinal compromise might be involved" (ICR, 34). There are, then, joint public worship services with heterodox churches which are unionistic and other such joint services which are not unionistic—a conclusion suggestive of sophistry.

(d.) The term "relationships" is a slippery one. It is a sociological term which has no theological meaning whatever. There is no harm in its use as a simple starting point (e.g., "How are various relationships to be understood theologically?"). But then one needs to know in theological terms just what relationship is meant, whether that of parents and children, husbands and wives, governments and citizens, orthodox and heterodox churches, orthodox clergy and laity, or one of many others. The phrase "inter-Christian relationships" can cover any or all of these. As a classifying handle "relationships" works like a "wild card," supplying any desired meaning. The main mischief here is that the term fudges the all-important difference between fellowship and non-fellowship. Thus, on page 24 "relationships" covers both fellowship and non-fellowshipping relations. Yet "the pinnacle of inter-Christian relationships" there is clearly equivalent to "the highest and deepest kind of communion or fellowship" in the next paragraph. When crucial terms are fudged, the discussion wallows in ambiguity. Shuttling back and forth between "relationship" and "fellowship" blurs the absolute boundary between all human sociological constructs and God's own gifts and institutions.

(e.) The ambiguity of "relationships" is the bridge by which the harmless term "levels of relationships" crosses over into the troublesome notion of "levels of fellowship"—a theological novelty

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introduced into the Missouri Synod from alien sources. Although "Inter-Christian Relationships" avoids the *term* "levels of fellowship," the *idea* is the real motor of the entire document: "We express the unity of all believers in Christ on the basis of our measure of consensus in confessing the gospel" (ICR, 20-21); "... our expression of that unity in outward and organizational ways is determined by the measure of our consensus in confessing the gospel" (ICR, 22); "we must insist that expressions of Christian unity be proportionate to the measure of consensus in confessing the Biblical gospel that we enjoy with the other Christians involved" (ICR, 29); "it is important that we encourage one another to raise the question of the amount of doctrinal agreement that exists and then to determine the kinds of joint activity that are consistent with that agreement" (ICR, 29). The old "either-or"—"communion or fellowship in sacred things" or else "cooperation in externals," that is, non-fellowship (ICR, 24)—is thus replaced with a sliding scale of more or less "relationship" (equalling fellowship and external expression of unity) depending on the degree of agreement. Three preliminary points may be noted:

(i.) With the orthodox church of all ages—in which *communio una est* ("fellowship is one")—the Missouri Synod has always rejected the idea of levels of fellowship based on degrees of agreement. Werner Elert stated: "There was either complete fellowship or none at all."<sup>4</sup> C. F. W. Walther asserted: "The Evangelical Lutheran Church rejects all fraternal and churchly fellowship with those who reject its Confessions in whole or in part."<sup>5</sup> Ralph Bohlmann once said: "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."<sup>6</sup>

(ii.) The idea of "levels of fellowship" was introduced to, and resisted by, the Missouri Synod in its discussions with the synods of the National Lutheran Council beginning in 1960. Martin Franzmann observed: "The NLC presentation . . . envisages degrees or stages of fellowship proportionate to the degree of consensus which has been attained. The Missouri presentation is oriented toward doctrinal confessional unity between Lutherans."<sup>7</sup> Bergendoff

asserted: "In short we may claim that in the degree to which we can come to a common understanding of the gospel, in that degree we are able to work together in the ministry of reconciliation. . . . The proposition of complete unity or none at all cannot be defended on scriptural grounds . . . Rather the Scriptures teach a unity between the believer and the Redeemer which issues in a unity between believers that varies according to circumstances."<sup>8</sup>

(iii.) Apart from dissident district sources, the only published statements advocating "levels of fellowship" in the Missouri Synod known to the undersigned are the following, the first being the words of Ralph Bohlmann and the second being those of Samuel Nafzger:

Perhaps 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 . . . *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. 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 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.<sup>9</sup>

My assignment is "to look at the basic challenge of Fundamental Consensus and Fundamental Differences in the light of 'Levels of Fellowship' as seen from your place in the Lutheran tradition". . . Not only is a "levels of fellowship" approach . . . theologically possible, but it seems to me that it is also contextually necessary today. . . . Finally, a "levels of fellowship" approach . . . can help us avoid an "all or nothing" posture to the quest for unity in the church."<sup>10</sup>

## B. Deep-Structure Problems

In the nature of the case the analysis of theological background requires more space than is available in a necessarily short minority report. Only the main points of the argument will be indicated here, therefore, and the full discussion will be attached as Appendix B.

### 1. Individualism

The problems of unity and division in the church cannot be handled in terms of *individuals* ("Christians"), as "Inter-Christian Relationships" attempts to do. That was just the trouble with both the "Missourian" and the "Wisconsinite" approaches in the early 1960's, which the theses of the Overseas Committee on Fellowship (Appendix A) attempted to cure by making the *marks of the church* pivotal. But the marks attach to and identify the church and churches, not individuals.

### 2. Luther and Schleiermacher

The thinking behind "Inter-Christian Relationships," while admitting the radical opposition between Luther's and Schleiermacher's understandings of church and fellowship, attempts, disturbingly, to accommodate "both of these conceptions," in the interests of "levels of fellowship."<sup>11</sup> Such a positive evaluation of Schleiermacher represents a significant departure from the position taken by the CTCR in "The Nature and Implications of the Concept of Fellowship" (1981), where Schleiermacher's view on just this issue is roundly rejected.

Beyond its general individualism, "Inter-Christian Relationships" features two related characteristics of thinking in the mode of Schleiermacher: (a.) church fellowship is seen as a special case within the general category of "fellowship" and (b.) church fellowship is treated under the rubric of ethics (law), rather than doctrine (gospel). Against these ideas the church of the Augsburg Confession holds that church fellowship rests on that which creates the church (Ephesians 2:20), the pure gospel and sacraments of Christ, which are before and above all individual faith, love, justification, and sanctification, as their source and foundation. "All other ground is sinking sand."



### 3. "Truth, Unity, Love"

These themes add nothing new, but are simply a condensation of the nine "fellowship principles" writ large. The conclusions of "Inter-Christian Relationships," however, loosen and broaden the "external unity" of the "fellowship principles" formulated a decade earlier. Theses 8 and 9 of 1981 identify "external unity" with "church fellowship" and insist on actual consensus in the apostolic faith as its basis. The "Inter-Christian Relationships" of 1991 broadens this approach to external unity, that is, "expressions of that [internal] unity in outward and organizational ways" on the basis of a *partial* consensus, that is, a "measure" of it (page 22 and elsewhere).

Furthermore, by introducing three terms—"truth," "unity," and "love"—where Luther had two, "doctrine" and "life" (or "love"), the sharp dichotomy between God's saving gifts and our responses is blurred, which amounts to a confusion of law and gospel. "Love can sometimes be neglected without danger, but the word and faith cannot. It belongs to love to bear everything and to yield to everyone. On the other hand, it belongs to faith to bear nothing whatever and to yield to no one."<sup>12</sup> Therefore, says Luther, "Doctrine is heaven; life is earth." The truth of gospel doctrine is not to be relativised to outward "unity" or quantified by "measure" and "proportion."<sup>13</sup>

Finally, neither the "fellowship principles," nor their summary as truth, unity, and love, actually define the *nature* of church fellowship, as distinct from its *basis* (which is defined). Since everything depends on the means of grace, fellowship is basically pulpit and altar fellowship, joint proclamation and celebration. "Joint services" with heterodox churches therefore directly violate the divine (evangelical) instituting mandates by which alone the church lives. It is not a matter of human and changing applications of "eternal" but ethereal "fellowship principles."

### 4. *Augustana VII*

"Inter-Christian Relationships" assumes a schema which assigns Article VII of the Augsburg Confession to an internal ("spiritual")

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unity and fellowship (*unitas*) and Article X:31 of the Formula of Concord (Solid Declaration) to external unity and fellowship (*concordia*). Internal and external unity are, of course, distinct, but it is not true that Augustana VII speaks of one and Formula X of the other. By making this disjunction and banishing the "true unity" of Augustana VII to some invisible ("spiritual") realm, the proper solid ground and starting point is given up. Generic "fellowship principles" are placed into the breach, but they cannot "compute" church fellowship and joint services. "Levels of fellowship" can arise only in the void created by the scuttling of the "strong," traditional understanding of Augustana VII.

### Appendix A

#### "Fellowship in Its Necessary Context of the Doctrine of the Church"

(Statement of the Overseas Committee of the  
Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference)

[The following theses were presented to the Forty-Sixth Convention of the Evangelical Lutheran Conference of North America, which convened in Milwaukee in May (17-19) of 1961. Some instances of capitalization and abbreviation have been modified to conform to the usage of the *Concordia Theological Quarterly*.]

1. The holy, catholic, and apostolic church is one body in Christ, incorporating all believers, whose faith is created, sustained, fulfilled, and known by God alone. The church and the faith of the heart (*fides qua*) are outside the competence and the direct comprehension of men.

Matthew 16:16-19; John 10:16, 27-29; Galatians 3:26-28; Ephesians 1:20-23; 2:14, 15; 2:19-21; 4:3-6, 15, 16 (G. Stoeckhardt, *Lehre und Wehre*, 1901, 97ff.)—Nicene Creed; SC [Small Catechism], Second and Third Articles; CA [Augsburg Confession] V and VII; Apology VII:5-8.

John 6:44; Acts 13:48; Colossians 2:12; 3:3, 4; 2 Timothy 2:19.

2. Faith is created and sustained by God through the means of grace. Where the means of grace (gospel and sacraments) are in

use, even where much impeded, there believers are present. We know this by faith and not by empirical experience. This knowledge rests on the promise of God in the means of grace outside of us (*extra nos*) and not on criteria in us (*in nobis*): sanctification, or any assessment of men, their works, polity, or discipline.

Isaiah 55:10; Luke 8:11-15; Romans 10:5-17; 1 Peter 1:23-25; Titus 3: 5, 6. CA V: "That we may obtain this faith, the ministry of teaching the gospel and administering the sacraments was instituted. For through the word and sacraments, as through instruments, the Holy Ghost is given, who works faith, where and when it pleases God, in them that hear the gospel, to wit, that God, not for our own merits, but for Christ's sake, justifies those who believe that they are received into grace for Christ's sake." Apology IV:67, 346 (225); SC, Third Article (cf. Large Catechism, Third Article, 43-45); SD [Solid Declaration] II:50; XI:29, 50.—No other criterion [is allowable]: Apology VII:10, 11, 18, 19.

1 Samuel 16:7; Acts 15:8.

3. Where the means of grace are in operation, there the church is to be found, whole, local, and tangible. The assembly regularly gathered about the pure preaching and the right administration of the sacraments is called by God Himself the church at that place, irrespective of the hypocrites who may be attached outwardly to such assembly. This is no mere organizational form or association of individuals, but the one church that will remain forever (*una sancta perpetuo mansura*) in the exercise of its God-given, spiritual functions (office of the keys). This church is only one. Though locally apprehended, it must not be thought of as isolated, intermittent, or individual with reference to persons, time, or place.

Matthew 18:18-20; Acts 6:7; 12:24; 19:20; Ephesians 4:3-16; 5:25, 27 CA VII and VIII; LC [Large Catechism], Third Article, 51-58, 61f.; AS [Smalcald Articles], Part 3, VII:1; Tractatus 24:67-69; SD X:9.—Luther (WA, 18:652, 743): "The church is hidden, the saints latent. . . . The whole life of the church and its being is in the word of God." *Disputation of 1542* (Drews, 655f.): "The church is recognized by its confession . . . it is in other words visible by its confession."

The addresses of the epistles and Acts 2-5; 9:31.

Matthew 28:18-20 par; Galatians 4:26-28; 1 Corinthians 5:3-5;

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1 Peter 2:2-10.

4. The means of grace, which are the means of uniting the church to Christ, its Head, are a given whole, inseparable from the total revelation of law and gospel as set forth in the Scriptures (cf. the whole definition in CA VII).

John 10:34, 35; 16:12-15; 17:20; 1 John 2:26, 27; Romans 1:1, 2; 2 Timothy 3:14-17; parallels—AS, Part 2, II:15: "The word of God shall establish articles of faith. . . ." CA: first paragraph of transition from Article XXI to XXII; SD, Rule and Norm. Note the singulars "doctrine," "form of sound words," "deposit," etc. 1 Timothy 3:15. Luke 24:47 and 1 Timothy 1:8, 9; parallels—SD V and VI.

5. The means of grace create the fellowship of believers with God and thereby fellowship with all believers. This fellowship is, accordingly, given by God, not achieved by any human effort. Its existence can be believed and known only on the basis of the marks of the church (*notae ecclesiae*).

Acts 2:42; 1 Corinthians 1:7; 10:16, 17; 12:13; Ephesians 4:3-6; 1 John 1:1-4; 3 John 3-8.—Apology VII:5f., 12, 19, 20.—Hollaz, *Examen* (1707 and 1750), p. 1300: "The inner and essential form of the church consists in the spiritual unity of those who truly believe, of the saints who are tied together (John 13:35) as members of the church with Christ the Head, by means of a true and living faith (John 1: 12; Galatians 3:27; 1 Corinthians 6:17), which is followed by a fellowship of mutual love."

Galatians 2:6, 9, 11-14; 2 Thessalonians 3:14, 15; 1 John 1:5-7.—Apology VII:22; SD X:3.

6. Where the marks of the church are opposed by false teaching, not only is this double fellowship (in the *una sancta*) endangered, but a power is set up which is in contradiction to the fellowship manifested on earth (see 12). Where the pure marks of the church (*notae purae*) hold sway, this disrupting power is repudiated and overcome through refusal to recognize its right to exist, for Christ alone must reign in His church through His word. Where the sway of the pure marks of the church is rejected, the fellowship is broken. A rupture of fellowship for any other reason is impermissible. The restoring of a broken fellowship must be brought about by use of the

pure marks of the church, as they cleanse out the impurity.

Matthew 7:15; 16:6; Acts 20:27-30; Romans 16:16-20; Galatians 1:8, 9; 5:9; 2 Corinthians 6:14-18; 11:4, 13-15; Philippians 3:2; 1 Timothy 1:3, 18, 19; 4:1-3; 5:22; 6:3-5; 2 Timothy 2:15-21; 3:5, 8, 9; Titus 1:9, 10; 3:10; 1 John 2:18-23; 4:1-6; 2 John 8-11.—CA VII; SD XI:94-96. The negatives of all symbols; CA XXVIII:20-28; Apology VII:20-22, 48-50; XV:18; AS, Part 2, 11:10; Tractatus 38, 41, 42, 71; Preface to SD: 6-10; X:5, 6, 31.

Acts 15; 2 Corinthians 10:4-6; Ephesians 4:11-14; 6:17.

1 Corinthians 1:10; chapters 12-14.—CA VII: 2, 3; Apology IV: 231 (110).

It is understood that the church takes action through the office of the keys committed to it by Christ (see 3).

7. Impurity can be discerned only by the standard of the pure marks of the church. The subjective faith of any man or group cannot be judged by us, but only what is actually taught or confessed, as it conforms or does not conform to the pure marks.

John 8:31, 32; Romans 6:17; 1 Timothy 6:13, 20; 2 Timothy 1:13.—The passages from the symbols referred to under 4 and 6 [pertain here also].

8. The purity of the marks is defended by the symbols. The symbols (*norma normata*) as the true interpretation of the word of God (*norma normans*) are a continuous standard of public teaching in the church from generation to generation and bind together not only all true confessors of any particular time but those of all ages in oneness of teaching (cf. the durative present tenses in "is taught" and "are administered" and also the adverbs "purely" and "rightly" in AC VII). In the symbols we have a safeguard against those who hold God's word to be present only as God wills from time to time, as they are also a safeguard of the truth against reliance upon a traditional exegesis and ecclesiastical success, and against a method of hermeneutics which uses the Bible as a book of oracles to the neglect of the rule of faith.

Isaiah 8:20; Matthew 16:16, 17; parallels; 1 Corinthians 15:1-5; 1 Timothy 6:12-14; 2 Timothy 1:13, 14; 2:2; Hebrews 4:14.—Article I in each [of these symbols]: CA, Apology, and AS; CA VII: "Also they teach that one holy church is to continue forever. The church

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is the congregation of saints, in which the gospel is rightly taught and the sacraments are rightly administered. And to the true unity of the church it is enough to agree concerning the doctrine of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments." See also FC [Formula of Concord], Norm and Rule, together with prefaces.

Matthew 10:32, 33, 40, 41; Romans 10:9, 10.

9. A quantitative approach is as misleading as an unhistorical one. The inexhaustible wholeness of the marks of the church calls for constant and complete submission and acceptance. The symbols do not speak fully on every doctrine, but as presentations of the marks they have abiding validity, as have also their rejections of what they recognize as falsifications of or subtractions from the marks.

Matthew 23:8; John 10:5, 27; 2 Corinthians 5:18-20.—AS, part 3, VIII; SD, X:31; XI:95, 96; XII:39, 40.

10. The faith which is taught in a church is first of all the formal and official confession of a church. This may, however, be called in question or rendered doubtful by actual or practical negation of it. In that case a distinction must be made between sporadic contradiction and persistent approval or toleration of contradiction. In the latter case, the official confession, no matter how excellent, is negated.

For Scripture passages see under 6 and under 8.—SC, Second Commandment and First Petition; end of Preface to the Book of Concord; SD, VII:1; X:5, 6, 10, 11, 28, 29.

11. The marks of the church are all-decisive. Everything must be referred to them. This duty is hindered by presumptuous judgments or statements concerning the faith or lack of it in individuals. It is enthusiasm to build on subjective faith (*fides qua*) and love, for faith is hidden and love is variable. Both are in man. The means of grace are objective, solid, apprehensible. Since these are God's own means, we must attend entirely upon them and draw from them the distinction between the orthodox church and heterodox churches.

See under 4, 6, 8, 10. Observe that of the abounding polemics in the Book of Concord more than one third is directed against pseudo-Lutheranism.

12. The fellowship created by word and sacraments shows itself fundamentally in pulpit and altar fellowship. It can show itself in many other ways, some of which, like prayer and worship and love of the brethren, the church cannot do without; others of which, like the holy kiss or the handshake or the reception into one's house, vary from place to place and from time to time. In whatever way the fellowship created by word and sacraments shows itself, all visible manifestations of fellowship must be truthful and in accordance with the supreme demands of the marks of the church. The "sacred things" (*sacra*) are the means of grace, and only by way of them is anything else a "sacred thing" (*sacrum*).

Acts 2:41-47; 1 Corinthians 1:10; cf. 15:1-4; 10:16, 17; 11:22-34; 12:13; chapter 14; 2 Corinthians 8-9. See also material under 2, 6, and 7.

13. Prayer is not one of the marks of the church and should not be co-ordinated with word and sacraments, as though it were essentially of the same nature as they. As a response to the divine word, it is an expression of faith and a fruit of faith and, when spoken before others, a profession of faith. As a profession of faith it must be in harmony with and under the control of the marks of the church.

Daniel 9:18; Acts 9:11; Galatians 4:6; Romans 10:8-14; 1 Timothy 2:1, 2; Acts 27:35.—Apology XIII:16; XXIII:30, 31; LC, Lord's Prayer:13-30. Also see under 12.

This statement bears within it (a.) the implication that the member churches of the Synodical Conference have not enunciated and carried through the principles outlined in it in their documents of fellowship with the necessary clarity and consistency and (b.) the suggestion that the goal of the Synodical Conference discussion is to be reached by the traditional highway of the doctrine of the church. Since the premature turning off into the byway of fellowship has led to a dead end, it would seem best, first of all, to return to the highway and there move forward together guided only by the marks of the church.

Finally, the members of the Overseas Committee on Fellowship feel that they will not have done what is expected of them if they do not indicate, at least in a general way, in the concrete case of prayer

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fellowship how the approach here developed may lead to a happy solution of this vexing matter. It seems to them that statements on prayer fellowship like the following could be suggested as flowing directly from the principles enunciated:

- (1.) Prayer between Christians belonging to churches which have a conflicting relation to the marks of the church must avoid the ever-present suspicion that the marks of the church are being disregarded.
- (2.) "When joint prayer shows the marks or characteristics of unionism, it must be condemned and avoided. Such marks and characteristics of unionism are (a.) failure to confess the whole truth of the divine word (*in statu confessionis*); (b.) failure to reject and denounce every opposing error; (c.) assigning to error equal right with truth; (d.) creating the impression of unity in faith or of church fellowship where it does not exist" (Australian Theses of Agreement, II, 2).

These four characteristics of unionism are clearly negations of the marks of the church.

- (3.) Joint prayer of the kind described in 1 cannot in the very nature of the case be normal or regular, but will rather be exceptional (see 2.d above).
- (4.) Situations, however, can be imagined, and have actually occurred in the history of the church, where joint prayer of the kind mentioned in 1 can be practiced, for it can be shown that the marks of the church have not been or are not in such cases disregarded, jeopardized, or surrendered. These instances cannot be judged by a flat rule beforehand, for the situation differs with each case, and so a decision on the permissibility of joint prayer in any particular situation will have to be made by a fair and adequate judgment of that case. And in such individual cases one must reckon with the fact that Christians will differ in their judgment. Such differences in judgment will have to be tolerated in the church militant, as long as there is an evident loyalty to the demands of the divine word and sacraments.



Isaiah 59:2; Galatians 2—SC, Commandments 1, 2, and 3; First Petition; LC, Second Commandment, 53-56; First Petition, 39-48.

Galatians 5:1; Colossians 2:16, 20.—CA VII:2, 3; XV; XXVIII:30ff. and the correspondents in Apology and AS; SD X.

## **Appendix B: The Theological Argument in Detail**

### *1. Individualism*

The root-fallacy of the entire document entitled "Inter-Christian Relationships" is the idea that the problem of unity and division in the church can be handled in terms of individuals ("Christians") rather than churches. This approach was just what the official critique by the synod's sister-church in Australia found wrong with the original version of "Theology of Fellowship" (later improved in response to such criticisms):

The tendency throughout—and it is intentional—is not to speak of churches, but to speak of individuals. For with them, in accordance with the subjective *proton pseudos* at the basis of the whole presentation, we can . . . distinguish those who are plainly not of Christ . . . and those who are true Christians.

Basically the same fault, it may be noted, was found by the overseas theologians with the Wisconsin Synod's definition of fellowship at that time (in the early 1960's), which focused on the "faith" of "Christians" and its "joint expression, manifestation, and demonstration," rather than directly on the objective marks of the church (the purely preached gospel and the rightly administered sacraments). A "unit concept" so based is simply the other (exclusivist) side of the same individualistic coin—the inclusivist side being now represented by "Inter-Christian Relationships".

The fact is that the pure marks attach to and identify not individuals but the church. Only God knows who His believers really are. Individuals ("Christians") can be identified for fellowship purposes not directly but only by way of the churches to which they belong, which are either orthodox or heterodox, depending on their relation to the marks. The "CR" in CTCR, it may be noted, means "Church

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Relations," not "Christian Relationships."

Whatever may be said about the many ways in which individual Christians from different churches today find themselves at close quarters, that is not the issue addressed by "Inter-Christian Relationships". All the "Specific Situations" treated in "Inter-Christian Relationships" (pp. 32-47) deal not with private relations among individuals at all, but only with the official actions of churches and their public ministers. And to treat heterodox churches and the ministers who officially represent them simply as so many individual "Christians," is to enter a wayless, bottomless morass. Without stable, objective reference points an already difficult problem becomes insoluble.

## 2. *Luther and Schleiermacher*

The thinking behind "Inter-Christian Relationships" is made quite explicit in the following:

According to Elert the distinction between having "something to do with a person" and having "a part in a common thing" was vital to Luther. Fellowship, as Luther understands this concept, is not something produced by a human act. . .

Schleiermacher, on the other hand, understands fellowship quite differently, says Elert. He writes in his *Glaubenslehre*: "The general concept of the church, if there is to be such a thing, must be derived from ethics because the church at all events is a fellowship created by the voluntary actions of men, and only through these does it continue to exist." Instead of drawing his understanding of fellowship from the nature of the church, as had Luther, Schleiermacher derives the nature of the church from the concept of fellowship as understood in the realm of ethics. For Schleiermacher, therefore, the church is a special instance of the general category of fellowship. Concludes Elert: "What Luther meant is, then, diametrically opposed to what Schleiermacher meant by fellowship when he spoke of the church. For Schleiermacher fellowship 'is created by

the voluntary actions of men.' This is precisely what Luther rejected when he denied that fellowship means 'to have something to do with a person.'" . . .

As we take a look at Missouri's understanding of fellowship, let us keep in mind the distinction which Elert has drawn between Luther's understanding of this concept as "having part in a common thing" and that of Schleiermacher as "the voluntary actions of men." This distinction, it seems to me, can be most helpful to us as we consider "Levels of Fellowship." I want to suggest that Missouri's understanding of fellowship takes into account both of these conceptions. It is also my contention that by clearly distinguishing, but not separating, these two ways of thinking about fellowship, it becomes not only possible but also perhaps even necessary to talk about "Levels of Fellowship" as a possible response to the "basic challenge of Fundamental Consensus and Fundamental Differences."<sup>14</sup>

The whole notion of blending the "conceptions" of Luther and Schleiermacher is theologically impossible—one simply has to choose between them. It may be noted, too, that this positive evaluation of Schleiermacher, as though his "conception" supplemented some deficiency in Luther, runs directly counter to the statement produced by the CTCR in 1981, "The Nature and Implications of the Concept of Fellowship" (pp. 40-41), where Schleiermacher's view on just this point is roundly rejected.

Beyond its general individualism, "Inter-Christian Relationships" features two specific characteristics of Schleiermacher's thinking. One is the treatment of church fellowship as a special case of a more basic, inter-personal "fellowship," governed by generic "fellowship principles." The other is the tendency to treat external church fellowship as an issue in ethics (law) rather than dogmatics or doctrine (gospel).

"Inter-Christian Relationships" indeed has a short section on "The Church and Its Mission" (pp. 11-14). And the "Counsel for Specific Situations" treats, with the exception of half a page devoted to the sub-issue of "para-denominational associations," only of official

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churchly and ministerial acts and relations (pp. 32-47). In other words, the problem is church relations, not individual relationships. Yet the guiding perspective of "Inter-Christian Relationships" is that of generic "fellowship principles" governing relations among individual "Christians." To quote verbatim, "Inter-Christian Relationships" means to set out "the implications of the scriptural principles of fellowship for Christians in their daily life and relationships with other Christians" (p. 10). Thus "church fellowship" is simply a special case within the general "fellowship" relationships among individual Christians.

Even the language of "Inter-Christian Relationships" about the church being "constituted by faith in Jesus Christ" (p. 11) is askew and lends itself too easily to subjective misconceptions—despite the good intention to do justice to the "faith alone" of the Reformation. Faith "constitutes" the church no more than it constitutes baptism: "For my faith does not constitute baptism but receives it" (Large Catechism, Baptism, 52). If anything, the church constitutes us and our faith: "It is the mother that begets and bears every Christian through the word of God" (Large Catechism, Creed, 42). The church is constituted by Christ alone through His holy gospel and sacraments (Ephesians 2:20), "and of His fulness have all we received, grace for grace" (John 1:16). Therefore, "the whole life and substance of the church is in the word of God."<sup>15</sup> It does matter how one thinks and speaks about these things.

The "principles of fellowship" of "Inter-Christian Relationships" (pp. 7-9) are taken over from the "Nature and Implications of the Concept of Fellowship." That paper of 1981 had stronger and much more churchly *conclusions* than the "Inter-Christian Relationships" of 1991, in that the CTCR in 1981 rejected Schleiermacher out of hand<sup>16</sup> and did not dream of yielding to the demand for joint "ecumenical weddings, funerals, and occasional services."<sup>17</sup> Yet the fatal flaw which has now come to full flower in "Inter-Christian Relationships", was present in embryo already in the "principles" of 1981: church fellowship was treated in those nine theses under the rubric of love and ethics, not of primal gospel-doctrine and faith.

This is plain from the progression of the argument in the theses. Faith and justification play their role in the first two theses, which

deal not with "church fellowship" but only with "spiritual fellowship with Christ and with all believers." Outward church fellowship comes only at the end, in theses 7-9, and then by way of "good works" (thesis 4), "love" seeking edification (thesis 5), and the divinely "mandated" means of such edification, the confession of the full apostolic faith (thesis 6). Orthodox confession and the church fellowship based on it function here as aspects of the love and sanctification which follow upon justifying faith and "spiritual fellowship." And so theses 8 and 9 really mean that what is wrong with a false granting and withholding of church fellowship is that this violates "the law of Christian love."<sup>18</sup>

But if the whole practice of church fellowship is in principle a matter of love and ethics, and of obedience to divine mandates in that sense, then it cannot be church-divisive. For it would, of course, be schismatic to refuse church fellowship to churches and ministers simply because they do not practise enough love! No orthodox Lutheran church, least of all the Missouri Synod, ever based fellowship on fuzzy "principles" of love. On the contrary, to whom fellowship was granted or refused was always considered not just a point of ethics or love, but a prime indicator of gospel confession or denial. Francis Pieper put it very concretely in his lectures of 1916 on Walther's *The True Visible Church*: "If there is in Australia a church—and thank God there is a church there which agrees with us in the true faith—then we must maintain fellowship of confession and love also with that church. Were we to deny a [church-]body which agrees with us in the faith, that is, which confesses Christ's name in all parts [of doctrine], then we should be denying Christ Himself in such a [church-]body. Furthermore, if we did not want to confess ourselves [as standing together] with the synods of Wisconsin and Minnesota and the Norwegian Lutheran Church, when these are attacked on account of their right doctrine, then we should be denying Christ Himself in these synods. And they would be doing the same were they ashamed of 'the Missourians.'"<sup>19</sup>

What is at stake in church fellowship is not in the first place love or ethics, but that which is absolutely prior not only to love but to justifying faith itself, as its source and ground: the church-creating

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gospel of Christ, that is, His pure doctrine and sacraments. The weak, ethically derived and oriented approach of "Inter-Christian Relationships" contrasts clearly with the strong, objective, gospel-shaped theses of the Overseas Committee of 1961 (appended above): "The marks of the church are all-decisive. Everything must be referred to them. This duty is hindered by presumptuous judgments or statements concerning the faith or lack of it in individuals. It is Enthusiasm to build on subjective faith (*fides qua*) and love, for faith is hidden and love is variable. Both are in man. The means of grace are objective, solid, apprehensible. Since these are God's own means, we must attend entirely upon them and draw from them the distinction between the orthodox church and heterodox churches" (thesis 11).

The stunted growth of the nine "principles of fellowship" might have been forestalled, had *fides quae* (the content of faith) been introduced already in thesis 2 thus: "Faith in the heart (*fides qua*) comes into being through the power of the Holy Spirit working through the gospel (*fides quae*)." Instead, the content of faith (*fides quae*) is introduced only in thesis 6, by way of good works (thesis 4) and love (thesis 5). Or, rather, "faith in the heart" (*fides qua*) is probably regarded—falsely—as a smaller core-content or excerpt from the larger *fides quae*, the full orthodox apostolic faith in all its articles, which latter then is in the domain of sanctification, not justification. The real meaning of the terms is not of this nature at all. Rather, *fides qua* is the faith by which we believe, that is, the act of believing, while *fides quae* is the faith which is believed, the content. The two are related like eating and food, respectively—not like minimal survival food and maximal "balanced diet" food. The *fides qua* bestowed in the one baptism receives a fractional faith no more than it receives a fractional Christ. The "one Lord, one faith, and one baptism" (Ephesians 4:5) are wholes.

The contrary misunderstanding of "Inter-Christian Relationships" tallies exactly with this construct in one of the document's sources (ICR, p. 16, n. 12): "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."<sup>20</sup> In the Book of Concord, however, the "strict" and "broad" senses of the word "gospel" mean not something like "justification" and "all other articles," but rather "gospel as distinct from law" and "gospel plus law" respectively.<sup>21</sup> And both internal and external unity in the church are created by the same gospel in the strict sense, that is by the gospel as distinct from the law—though the law is, of course, always presupposed. Early Missourians understood this point very well. Francis Pieper, for example, wrote as follows:

*By unity in faith we understand agreement in all articles of the Christian doctrine revealed in Holy Scripture. . .*

Thus the Lutheran Church has understood the divinely willed unity in the faith. She defines the "true unity of the Christian church" so in the seventh article of the Augsburg Confession: "that the gospel be preached unanimously according to its pure understanding and the holy sacraments be administered according to the gospel". . . Here [in the Epitome of the Formula of Concord, X, 7] our church declares that by true unity she understands agreement "in the doctrine and *all* its articles," not merely in some of them . . .

Also in the [above] thesis only the gospel is meant. When we speak of "articles of the Christian doctrine," this is to be understood as the revelation and preaching of Christ . . . The law does not come into consideration here. The foundation on which the Christian church is built is Christ, the gospel. The law, after all, is not peculiar to the Christian church, but is common to all men . . . The law does not create the church, neither does the law unify the church. Only the gospel does that. Therefore, the law does not belong into a definition of Christian unity or unity in the faith. . .

Although the law therefore does not belong within faith and therefore also not within the definition of faith, acceptance of the law is nevertheless a necessary presupposition of unity in faith. When it is said that we believe the law,

then the word "believe" is taken in a sense totally different from when one speaks of the Christian faith. The expression "articles of faith" designates a quite definite concept: the doctrine of the gospel in contrast to the law.<sup>22</sup>

### 3. "Truth, Unity, Love"

The principles of "truth, unity, and love" (ICR, pp. 14-23) cannot and do not, despite many fine statements in this section of "Inter-Christian Relationships," remedy the document's basic defect of individualism and subjectivism. In the first place, these three themes introduce nothing new. They are simply the nine "fellowship principles" boiled down to three "overarching" mega-principles (see ICR, p. 23). Thus principles 2, 3, 6, 7, and 8 relate to truth; 1, 2, 7, 8, and 9 to unity; and 4 and 5 to love.

Secondly, the treatment of "unity" in "Inter-Christian Relationships" actually loosens and erodes the stricter understanding of "external unity" in principles 7 and 8 of 1981. Those principles (ICR, p. 8) base "external unity" on the faith confessed (*fides quae*), not on faith in the heart (*fides qua*), and require agreement not in some "measure" of the faith, but in the full apostolic faith "as it is taught in the Scriptures." Yet the "unity principle" of "Inter-Christian Relationships" seeks "empirical manifestations" of the "spiritual unity of all believers" (hence *fides qua*, p. 20) and generalises and relativises a clearly external unity to an "organizational" unity (p. 22) and other expressions of it on the basis of only partial agreement—that is, a "measure of consensus" (pp. 21, 22) or "expressions of Christian unity . . . proportionate to the measure of consensus . . ." or "amount of doctrinal agreement" (p. 29). Here "cooperation in externals" is expressly treated as differing only in degree, not in kind, from actual church fellowship. For such external cooperation is cited as an example of "expressions of Christian unity . . . proportionate to the measure of consensus . . ." For the old either-or (communion in sacred things or else cooperation in externals) "Inter-Christian Relationships" here substitutes a many-valued scale of more or less of the same sort of thing, that is, "expressions of Christian unity." Such "external unity" was under principles 7 and 8 of 1981 tantamount to church fellowship.



Thirdly, by making three terms—"truth," "unity," and "love"—of Luther's two ("doctrine" and "life"), "Inter-Christian Relationships" fudges the clear-cut dichotomy between doctrine and life, and it thus confuses law and gospel. Although "Inter-Christian Relationships" laudably states that "the truth principle is central to the other two" and that "it is better to be divided for the sake of the truth than to be united in error" (p. 23), the notion of a duty to "manifest" a unity merely "proportionate" to a "measure" of the truth, relativises and quantifies the latter. Luther simply lumps unity together with love and does not relieve the stark truth-love bi-polarity with any attempt at triangulation. For Luther truth—pure gospel, *fides quae*, the doctrine in all its articles—is not a desirable maximum under the rubric of sanctification, but the non-negotiable, qualitatively whole, divine *sine qua non* standing objectively before and above all subjective faith, love, justification, and sanctification. (By no means, of course, does he imply that the one true Spirit-wrought faith in a Christian's heart cannot be overlaid with mental confusions and even contradictions, just as it exists in constant conflict with the flesh generally, as asserted in Romans 7). Luther argues:

For the sectarians who deny the bodily presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper accuse us today of being quarrelsome, harsh, and intractable, because, as they say, we shatter love and harmony among the churches on account of the single doctrine about the sacrament . . .

To this argument of theirs we reply with Paul: "A little yeast leavens the whole lump." In philosophy a tiny error in the beginning is very great at the end. Thus in theology a tiny error overthrows the whole teaching. Therefore doctrine and life should be distinguished as sharply as possible. Doctrine belongs to God, not to us; and we are called only as its ministers. Therefore we cannot give up or change even one dot of it (Matthew 5:18). Life belongs to us . . . For doctrine is like a mathematical point. Therefore it cannot be divided; that is, it cannot stand either subtraction or addition. On the other hand, life is like a physical point. Therefore it can always be divided and can always yield something . . .

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Therefore doctrine must be one eternal and round golden circle, in which there is no crack; if even the tiniest crack appears, the circle is no longer perfect . . .

A curse on a love that is observed at the expense of the doctrine of faith, to which everything must yield—love, an apostle, an angel from heaven, etc.! . . . If they believed that it is the word of God, they would not play around with it this way . . . and they would know that one word of God is all and that all are one, that one doctrine is all doctrines and all are one, so that, when one is lost, all are eventually lost, because they belong together and are held together by a common bond.

Therefore let us leave the praise of harmony and of Christian love to them. We, on the other hand, praise faith and the majesty of the word. Love can sometimes be neglected without danger, but the word and faith cannot . . . Therefore if you deny God in one article of faith, you have denied Him in all; for God is not divided into many articles of faith, but He is everything in each article and He is one in all the articles of faith . . .

We can be saved without love and concord with the Sacramentarians, but not without pure doctrine and faith . . . Doctrine is heaven; life is earth . . . Therefore there is no comparison at all between doctrine and life . . .; therefore we do not permit the slightest offence against it. But we can be lenient toward errors of life. For we, too, err daily in our life and conduct; so do all the saints, as they earnestly confess in the Lord's Prayer and the Creed. But by the grace of God our doctrine is pure; we have all the articles of faith solidly established in Sacred Scripture. The devil would dearly love to corrupt and overthrow these; that is why he attacks us so cleverly with this specious argument about not offending against love and the harmony among the churches.<sup>23</sup>

Finally, neither the nine "fellowship principles" of 1981 nor their generalised condensation in the "truth, unity, love" principles of

1991 expressly spell out just what church fellowship is. The basis for fellowship is stated clearly enough, namely, full confessional agreement, in 1981, and some measure of it for a degree of unity, in 1991. But the "principles" themselves are strangely silent about what sort of activities actually constitute church fellowship. In 1981, to be sure, it was taken for granted that "joint worship services" were at least pulpit fellowship, and that pulpit and altar fellowship was church fellowship.<sup>24</sup> By 1991 "Inter-Christian Relationships" advocates joint services, including "ecumenical wedding services" with the heterodox (pp. 33 ff.). (The heading "A. Joint Worship Occasions" originally read, more candidly, "A. Joint Worship Services.") How is this rapid about-face within one decade to be explained?

Whether by oversight or by design the "fellowship principles" do not actually define church fellowship. It is therefore possible to argue that what was once church fellowship, no longer is that now: "As we seek to apply the same biblical principles to our life today, we need to be aware of contemporary developments in order to distinguish between timeless biblical truths and their applications to a particular set of circumstances. If our circumstances and perceptions have changed, it may well be that different applications are in order precisely for us to maintain the same biblical confession" (ICR, p. 6). Doubtless we have here an echo of a little-noticed comment from 1983:

Quite clearly, the agreement which we in the LCMS have with one another not to participate "in the services and sacramental rites of heterodox congregations" is based on scriptural and confessional principles. The question before us today is whether the renunciation of all joint worship services with all those in doctrinal disagreement with our church is the only or the best way to apply these principles in every situation. Does this practice adequately recognize and give expression to various levels of agreement in the confession of the faith? These are questions which we in the LCMS will be discussing in the coming months.<sup>25</sup>

Joint services despite doctrinal discord, then, are not wrong in and of themselves, but only if they violate certain "principles," which, as

it happens, do not define just what constitutes "church fellowship." In other words, *communio in sacris* (communion in sacred things) with heterodox churches is not in itself wrong, "but thinking makes it so," to quote Shakespeare.

In opposing participation in a joint community "Christmas Festival" service, Hermann Sasse traced to Cardinal d'Annibale's moral theology (1908) the opinion, now widespread in Roman Catholicism, that *communicatio in divinis* (communion in divine things) with the heterodox is not sinful in its own nature, and is forbidden only by human, rather than divine, law.<sup>26</sup> Wrote Sasse: "Through all centuries and in all churches that take doctrine seriously this has been regarded as a divine law." Certainly for us Lutherans "it is a divine law that the church cannot have communion with heresies, i.e., false doctrines that threaten to destroy the gospel. This is the meaning of the condemnations in the Book of Concord as the preface to the Formula of Concord makes clear with the important distinction between people who err in all simplicity of heart and stubborn teachers of such heresies. This doctrine is based on the many passages in the New Testament in which the apostles warn their churches against heretics (Romans 16:17f.; Galatians 1:8f.; Philippians 3:2f. 18f.; 1 Timothy 6:3f. 20f.; Titus 3:1; 1 John 2:1f. 2 John)."

It is above all the clear distinction between law and gospel that opens up the salvific treasures of the holy word of God (FC-SD V:1). From this vantage-point our Lutheran church follows a distinctively evangelical path in this matter of the church and her fellowship: "The word of God is the true holy thing above all holy things . . . By it all the saints themselves have been sanctified."<sup>27</sup> Therefore, "the fellowship created by word and sacraments shows itself fundamentally in pulpit and altar fellowship . . . The 'sacred things' (*sacra*) are the means of grace, and only by way of them is anything else a 'sacred thing' (*sacrum*)."<sup>28</sup>

This point means that church fellowship is defined not by indirect derivation from individualistic "fellowship principles," but directly from those concrete gifts through which Christ Himself builds His church—the gospel purely preached and the sacraments rightly administered. To proclaim and celebrate jointly from common pul-

pits and at common altars is therefore the essence of church fellowship. And doing these things together with churches which, whatever their names, teach and practise contrary to the pure gospel and sacraments as confessed in the Book of Concord, is the essence of sinful fellowship, or unionism. In this way the nature and boundaries of church fellowship are set by God Himself, in and by the instituting (evangelical) mandates and gifts by which alone His church comes into being and lives. In this context "by divine right" means "according to the gospel."<sup>29</sup>

When the founders of the Missouri Synod, therefore, in their very constitution (Article VI) renounced joint services with heterodox churches as "unionism," they understood such services to be forbidden "by divine right." They were not, by human right and constitutional compact, temporarily and provisionally applying eternal but ethereal "fellowship principles." In the *Denkschrift* of 1871 (which explained the reasons for founding the Synodical Conference, rather than joining an existing general body), not only Missouri, but all the constituting synods of the Synodical Conference unanimously declared "that this doctrinal difference [between Lutherans and Reformed] by its nature essentially annuls also the bond of churchly-brotherly fellowship, and accordingly any cultivation of such fellowship, by way of pulpit and altar fellowship, working together for churchly purposes, and such things, is indeed a wrong [*Unrecht*] and sin committed against God's express prohibition."<sup>30</sup>

#### 4. *Augustana VII*

The strong disjunction between "spiritual" and "external" or "outward" fellowship or unity (ICR, pp. 7, 18-20) alerts the reader that something is wrong. Internal and external unity in the church are indeed distinct.<sup>31</sup> But to make of this a hard-and-fast contrast between "spiritual" and "external" is to suggest that the "association of outward things and rites" is not spiritual! "Inter-Christian Relationships" cannot really mean such a suggestion, but then why insist on talking in this way? The "outward signs," as the German of Apology VII-VIII:5 puts it, are precisely God's pure word and sacraments. Nothing could be more spiritual than just these outward

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gospel-ministrations, which are the fount and source of all that is spiritual in us, for by them the Spirit Himself is given, with all His gifts.<sup>32</sup> "Therefore, we constantly teach that the sacraments and all the external things ordained and instituted by God should be regarded not according to the gross, external mask (as we see the shell of a nut) but as that in which God's word is enclosed."<sup>33</sup> If anything, the *external* "ministration of the Spirit," as the "more glorious" (2 Corinthians 3:8) proximate source of the divine and life-giving light (4:6), has a far greater claim to being called "spiritual" than does the modestly flickering or glimmering wick of our "internal" faith, which is in constant need of re-kindling from the "external" gospel. In sum, external church-fellowship in preaching and sacraments and internal church-fellowship in faith are both "spiritual."

Behind the misleading "spiritual" versus "external" language lies the decisive structural defect of "Inter-Christian Relationships." That defect is the scuttling of a misconstrued Augsburg Confession VII, as not dealing directly with external church unity. "Inter-Christian Relationships" takes Augustana VII to be dealing with *unitas*, meaning internal ("spiritual") unity, based on a "gospel in the narrow sense" and *fides qua*, while Formula X (FC-SD X:31) supposedly deals with *concordia*, or external unity, based on the "gospel in the broad sense" (including all articles) or *fides quae*. The fallacies of contrasting *fides qua* and *fides quae* and "narrow" and "broad" senses of the gospel in this way have already been shown.<sup>34</sup>

The trouble with splitting up Augsburg Confession VII and Formula of Concord X is that then the solid ground on which Lutherans have always built their account of church relations comes unstuck—producing a shifting patchwork of diverse elements in broad and narrow senses. With the solid base of the ecclesiology of Augustana VII gone—banished to the realm of an invisible ("spiritual") church, unity, and fellowship—"Inter-Christian Relationships" must find some other starting point. The vacancy is filled with "fellowship principles" which leave the nature of *church* fellowship undefined and, therefore, cannot cope with "joint services." (The fact that "special services sponsored jointly by associations or groups of churches not in church fellowship" [ICR, p. 33] constitute at least

*pulpit fellowship* simply no longer registers).

The nine "fellowship principles" (ICR, pp. 7-9) themselves model the marginalisation of Augustana VII. That article has finished its work in the first two theses, with "spiritual fellowship" and *fides qua*. By the time we come to the full apostolic faith (thesis 6) and external unity or fellowship (theses 7-9), there is no mention of Augustana VII. This unity is now the quite different preserve of Formula X, cited under theses 8 and 9. This disjunction between an internal *unitas* in Augustana VII and an external *concordia* in Formula X originated in an article by A. C. Piepkorn<sup>35</sup> and was inherited by the CTCR statements of 1981 and 1991 from the otherwise excellent "A Lutheran Stance Toward Ecumenism" (CTCR, 1974) and from contributions by Ralph Bohlmann to *Formula for Concord* and *In Search of Christian Unity*<sup>36</sup> and by Samuel Nafziger to *In Search of Christian Unity*.<sup>37</sup>

By contrast, the traditional Lutheran stand, which sees Augustana VII and Formula X as covering the same ground (though perhaps with different emphases), was taken by the CTCR in its "Theology of Fellowship" of 1965 ("the basis for pulpit and altar fellowship, as it has been understood in the Lutheran church where it was loyal to its confessions, is set forth in Augustana . . . VII," p. 18) and by Robert Preus in *Formula for Concord*.<sup>38</sup> That stand, of course, tallies with the actual wording of Augustana VII, which makes "the true unity of the church" depend on ascertainable agreement in preaching and sacraments. The Missouri standard-bearers Walther<sup>39</sup> and Pieper<sup>40</sup> follow suit and do not find different unities in an Augustana VII and Formula X. Calov put it in this way over three centuries ago in his classic *Exegema*, an explanation of the Augsburg Confession: "For as body and soul jointly constitute one natural entity, so for the spiritual unity of the church interior gifts are required no less than external fellowship (*communio*)."<sup>41</sup>

By assigning Augustana VII with its "true unity" to an invisible, "spiritual" fellowship and Formula X to external fellowship and unity in all articles of doctrine, the approach of "Inter-Christian Relationships" creates a certain interval or "no man's land" between the two poles. In this space "levels of fellowship" or "degrees of unity" are able to find a foot-hold. The *intention* behind the "levels"

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approach is doubtless a good one; it is to solve the perceived problem that, by having no outward fellowship relations at all with the Christians in heterodox churches, orthodox churches seem to be placing them on a par with non-Christians. Therefore some "level" must be found at which some fellow-Christian solidarity, but short of full orthodox communion, can be honestly expressed.

The facts are, however, that (1.) there already are proper ways and means of fellow-Christian acknowledgement, and (2.) it is neither necessary nor possible to quantify and fractionalise church fellowship for this or any other purpose. As to the first point it needs to be seen that the church of the Augsburg Confession is, in keeping with her truly evangelical nature, far more generous towards other churches than is generally recognised. She has always acknowledged the true sacramental nature of all baptisms performed in trinitarian churches, as other churches do as well. Lutherans have also recognised, beneath the distortions, the essential presence of the sacrament of the Lord's body and blood in the Roman and the Greek churches, though not in the Calvinist churches. And Lutherans recognise, too, properly called and ordained men (not women) in trinitarian churches, despite heretical distortions, as really holding the one public office or ministry of the gospel. Therefore, the Lutheran church is in principle opposed to "sheep-stealing," and to re-ordaining heretical ministers when they turn to the faith and service of the orthodox church. All these things are a far cry from the denial of "valid" ministries and sacraments by some other confessions. But it would be very misleading to talk now of fellowship with the heterodox at the "levels" of baptism and ordination, for that would, apart from suggesting that baptism and ordination are *quantities*, imply *joint* public proclamation and celebration. In a sense it is even true that those who receive the Lord's body and blood at altars of separate confessions are, since they receive one and the same indivisible gift, "outwardly" in "sacramental fellowship." But, again, such a special and unusual meaning of the phrase must not be used to confuse and destroy the divinely mandated nature, basis, and boundaries of external church fellowship.

As for the second point, church fellowship is indivisible—*communio una est*. Franzmann queried: "There seems to have been



great variety in the organisational manifestations of unity in the New Testament church; but is there any evidence that there was anything like an organisational recognition of fractional obedience to the one Lord?"<sup>42</sup> Sasse observed: "There are even those who suppose that they can establish degrees of unity. The degrees match the level of agreement reached so far in the discussions. The consensus one tries to read out of Article VII is in all such cases a purely human arrangement."<sup>43</sup> Henry Hamann, Sr., a venerable "Old Missourian," declared: "Hence church-fellowship is indivisible. It exists or does not exist; it is accorded or withheld. There can be no stages or degrees of fellowship corresponding to quantitative amounts of doctrinal consensus."<sup>44</sup> The Overseas Committee on Fellowship concurred: "A quantitative approach is as misleading as an unhistorical one" (thesis 9).

Perhaps it will be said that "levels of fellowship" are not "levels of *church* fellowship." Is such a claim even coherent? Can it really be maintained, for instance, that external manifestations or expressions of unity are one thing and "external unity" another? If "external unity" is church fellowship, as theses 8 and 9 of 1981 and 1991 declare, then the external expressions of unity which are in "Inter-Christian Relationships" "proportionate" to some lesser amount of agreement must be simply less of the same sort of thing—"external unity" or church fellowship. Indeed, the German "Guidelines" cited in "Inter-Christian Relationships" (Appendix C, p. 55) expressly admit that wedding services with the official participation of ministers of other confessions entail "a form of church fellowship, although it is clearly below the level of pulpit and altar fellowship." If there are to be "levels of fellowship," they must be "levels of church fellowship." We may note also that the external manifestations of "unity" in "Inter-Christian Relationships" have in view *churches*, not simply private individuals, and that the scale of "full communion to closed communion" of Faith and Order, which is commended for our consideration as we look for "a different set of terms to clarify and distinguish various kinds of Christian relationships,"<sup>45</sup> in fact divides *altar fellowship* into levels—counter-evangelically (Acts 2:42; Romans 16:17; 1 Corinthians 10:17). It would be a bureaucratic subterfuge and misdefinition to argue that "church fellowship" is a "church body level" relationship, so that

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strictly *local* joint services, or sharing of altars and pulpits with heterodox congregations, cannot *by definition* be "church fellowship."

The Apology of the Augsburg Confession knows only the "association [*Gesellschaft*] in outward signs" and the "fellowship [*Gemeinschaft*] inwardly of the eternal goods in the heart."<sup>46</sup> There is no third fellowship, of which there could be varying amounts, degrees, or levels. Fellowship is a unique *kind*, not an *amount*, of relationship.

To argue (ICR, pp. 20, 22) for "empirical" and "organisational" manifestations of a "spiritual unity of all believers," apart from the pure marks of the church, is enthusiasm (Overseas Committee, thesis 11). Moreover, this inner "spiritual unity" is "invisible, hidden from human eyes, a matter of faith in the heart . . . fellowship understood in this way is a qualitative concept and therefore by definition incapable of a 'levels' conceptualisation."<sup>47</sup> By the rule of love we are bound to assume sincere Christian faith in all who claim it, unless they themselves openly refute their own claim by words or actions. But external church fellowship is a matter of faith or doctrine and confession, not of love's inferences.

"By definition 'levels of fellowship' talk is quantitative in nature and therefore inappropriate and inadequate to refer to fellowship understood as a qualitative concept."<sup>48</sup> Yet the whole basic premise of "Inter-Christian Relationships" is that outward "manifestations" of unity are *quantitatively* measured and guided—for example, by a "measure of consensus" (p. 21) or "proportionate" to "the amount of doctrinal agreement" (p. 29). The only explanation seems to be that, despite all protestations to the contrary, external *church fellowship* is being divided into levels or degrees on the theory that, unlike internal fellowship, external fellowship is *quantitative* and divisible.<sup>49</sup> Thesis 9 of the Overseas Committee rightly rejects a "quantitative approach" precisely with reference to *external church fellowship*.

Luther's wholistic, non-quantitative approach has already been described above. If ever there was a case for recognising "degrees of unity," it was at Marburg in 1529. Here Lutherans and Zwinglians seemed to agree on fourteen and a half out of fifteen points.

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But instead of some "level" of fellowship "proportionate" to a 97% consensus, there was Luther's "qualitative" reply to Bucer: "You have a different spirit!" Similar are the "no fellowship" of Formula VII (SD:33) and the conclusion of Formula XI (SD:95-96):

We have no intention (since we have no authority to do so) to yield anything of the eternal and unchangeable truth of God for the sake of temporal peace, tranquillity, and outward harmony. Nor would such peace and harmony last, because it would be contrary to the truth and actually intended for its suppression. Still less are we minded to whitewash or cover up any falsification of true doctrine or any publicly condemned errors. We have a sincere delight in and deep love for true harmony and are cordially inclined and determined on our part to do everything in our power to further the same. We desire such harmony as will not violate God's honor, that will not detract anything from the divine truth of the holy gospel, that will not give place to the smallest error but will lead the poor sinner to a true and sincere repentance . . .<sup>50</sup>

Behind this much-maligned appearance of "all or nothing" in outward fellowship stands the New Testament itself. As Hamann observed, "Our texts [Matthew 7:15; 18:17; Romans 16:17; Galatians 1:8, 9; 1 Timothy 4:1-6; Titus 3:10; 1 John 4:1; 2 John 9, 10] speak in blacks and whites. We almost wish for texts which said a little about greys. As the matter stands, there does not seem to be any text in the Bible which has a good word to say for errorists, or which, while granting their essential Christianity on the one hand, condemns their error on the other. It is always the two opposites which we see."<sup>51</sup>

If the texts are to be properly applied, therefore, one needs, with Augustana VII and Formula X, to think in terms of church and churches, orthodox or heterodox, not of private individuals ("Christians"), whose personal faith or lack of it must first be assessed. Hamann rightly argued:

Surely one must see that the true counterpart in our day to the false teachers of the New Testament age are the hetero-

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dox church bodies themselves. There are individual false teachers, too, aplenty, but the truly false teachers today are the heterodox bodies. For in them heterodoxy, false teaching, heresy, is given a habitation and a name; it is given respectability; it is given perpetuity—and all this under the protection of the blessed name 'church'! The false teachings given a refuge in heterodox bodies are every whit as bad as the false teachings known in the New Testament . . . And in all heterodox bodies it is just their characteristic false teaching which makes them what they are, and which is their *raison d'être*. The Methodist Church, *insofar as it is Methodist*, is the support of heresy; its incidental witness to the gospel is not something which would mean its continued separate existence. And the same is true of all heterodox bodies. In as far as they are what their reason for existence is, they are the modern counterparts of the New Testament false teachers and false prophets. And the New Testament condemnation of false teachers should be applied to them directly and without any softening of the rebuke.<sup>52</sup>

This truth is just the point of the historic Missourian understanding of fellowship. Thus, *A Brief Statement of the Doctrinal Position of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio, and Other States* speaks of church as follows:

Since God ordained that His word *only*, without the admixture of human doctrine, be taught and believed in the Christian Church, 1 Peter 4:11; John 8:31,32; 1 Timothy 6:3,4, all Christians are required by God to discriminate between orthodox and heterodox church bodies, Matthew 7:15, to have church-fellowship only with orthodox church bodies, and, in case they have strayed into heterodox church bodies, to leave them, Romans 16:17.<sup>53</sup>

The Old Missourians understood "fellowship" or "brotherhood" in a thoroughly churchly way, that is, not as something generic or invisible, but quite concretely as sharing publicly in the true faith and church (in accord with Romans 16:1ff.; 1 Corinthians 5:9-13; 16:20; 2 Corinthians 11:26; Galatians 2:4,9; Ephesians 6:23;

Philippians 4:21; Colossians 4:15; 1 Thessalonians 5:26; etc.). As good Lutherans,<sup>54</sup> the Old Missourians knew very well that their "little flock" included only a small fraction of the world's Christians, with all of whom they were one in Christ by virtue of the invisible bonds of faith and the Holy Spirit.<sup>55</sup> They also knew, however, that the lines of fellowship or brotherhood run not directly between individual Christians, but only by way of the center—Christ and His pure gospel, sacraments, and church (John 10). Therefore they could not publicly acknowledge fellowship and brotherhood in the faith with such as by their membership in heterodox churches made common cause with unbiblical, unevangelical doctrine. The traditional appeal was to 2 Samuel 15:11, by way of analogy.<sup>56</sup> The two hundred innocents who followed Absalom and "knew not anything" were sincere enough; but one still could not make common cause with them. Objectively they were part and parcel of the rebellion and had to be resisted as such.

To those who no longer "find themselves in agreement with Pieper's [and Walther's] position regarding the recognition of members of heterodox churches as 'brothers in the faith,'"<sup>57</sup> Pieper's view may indeed seem to suffer from "inconsistency."<sup>58</sup> The inconsistency, however, is not in Pieper. The illusion arises out of entirely different perceptions of the meaning and import of Augsburg Confession VII.

It is also contrary to fact to suggest that the idea of outward manifestations of unity, including joint services with heterodox churches, on the basis of a presumed inner unity in Christ, despite incomplete agreement in doctrine and sacraments, has any basis whatever in the synod's historic position, or even in the products of its CTCR prior to the Wichita Convention (1989). A friendly observer, J. L. Neve, who died in 1943, put it like this:

1. Fellowship in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper between churches and individuals disagreeing not only in the doctrinal conception of this sacrament, to which Luther was very much opposed . . . , but in Christian doctrine generally—is very carefully avoided by the bodies confederated in the Synodical Conference . . . 3. From this same standpoint the Missourians have been opposed also to

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prayer-fellowship with such as are not in doctrinal agreement with them . . . We are glad to observe that on this point Missouri is changing, changing also from Walther who interpreted 2 Corinthians 6:14-18 and 2 John 10-11 in an utterly impossible way. It was the customary interpretation among the Lutherans in the seventeenth century, which Walther followed. Missouri had drifted into an unhistorical use of Scripture pertaining to the whole church-fellowship question.<sup>59</sup>

The change which Neve noted was spearheaded by Missourian "progressives," represented by the so-called "Statement of 1945," who were rebelling especially against an overdone rigidity on the issue of prayer. (There had been joint prayers and devotions at Walther's "free conferences" in the nineteenth century). The aforesaid statement's rejection of the applicability of Romans 16:17 "to the present situation in the Lutheran Church of America," however, threatened the loss of all objective biblical constraints on inter-church relations. The theses of the Overseas Committee of 1961 later showed how to maintain objective standards (the pure marks), without unnecessary inflexibility on the issue of prayer. After all, unlike preaching and the sacrament of the altar, which are not only means of grace, but are by definition official and churchly in nature, prayer is not a means of grace and may be offered by private individuals without any direct involvement of the church as such.

The important point here is that "official" Missourian action resolved the problem *not* by distinguishing a "prayer-fellowship" *level* from an "altar and pulpit" *level* of fellowship, but rather by distinguishing "joint prayer" from "prayer fellowship," that is, the prayer aspect of church fellowship. Thus the synodical convention of 1944 maintained the warning of the previous convention (which had met in Fort Wayne) "that no pulpit, altar, or prayer fellowship has been established between us and the American Lutheran Church," but held that "joint prayer at intersynodical conferences, asking God for His guidance and blessing upon the deliberations and discussions of His word, does not militate against the resolution of the Fort Wayne Convention, provided such prayer does not imply

denial of truth or support of error."<sup>60</sup> The public liturgical prayer of "joint services" as such is and remains an expression of church fellowship. The convention of 1944 also declined membership in the National Lutheran Council because that "would apparently involve our synod in unionistic principles and endeavors beyond a mere cooperation in externals and thus violate scriptural principles which we are bound to observe."<sup>61</sup>

If later a model involving "levels of unity" became, in the minds of some, "the *de facto* situation for the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod,"<sup>62</sup> then this development implies theological legitimacy no more than do the other *de facto* aberrations and confusions in fellowship mentioned in "Inter-Christian Relationships" (p. 81). Indeed, the CTCR resolved at its meeting of 15-17 February 1988: "We continue to recognize the present situation in regard to fellowship practices within the synod as a crisis in our synod's confessional unity." Although some careless language was habitually used with reference to the former Lutheran Council in the U.S.A., degrees of fellowship based on degrees of agreement were never officially suggested, let alone embraced. LCUSA was not supposed to involve fellowship at all.

Yet keen observers noticed the ambiguities and sounded early warnings. Henry Hamann, Sr., the leading theologian of the old Evangelical Lutheran Church of Australia, wrote with "concern" and "apprehension": "'... extent of cooperation apart from pulpit and altar fellowship' suggests the possibility of creating steps or gradations between cooperation *in externis* and church fellowship; for fellowship at the altar and [in] the pulpit is church fellowship. If that be the intention, it involves a serious mistake. Church fellowship either exists or it does not exist between church bodies. It is granted, or it is withheld. It is indivisible. We find ourselves in agreement with people in the teaching and the practice demanded by the divine word, and we acknowledge the existence of fellowship; to deny it in such cases would be wrong. We find that no such agreement exists; and it is both right and a duty to withhold fellowship until the differences are resolved. *Tertium non datur*. That is the confessional principle."<sup>63</sup>

When it comes to CTCR statements, the relevant evolutionary line

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is as follows: In 1965 the improved version of "Theology of Fellowship" expressly maintained the correct and historic understanding of Augustana VII. It stressed that the marks of the church, as defined in Augustana VII, "have throughout the history of orthodox Lutheranism served to establish the limits of pulpit and altar fellowship and to distinguish the Lutheran Church from other churches" (p. 17). In 1974 "A Lutheran Stance Toward Ecumenism" for the first time adopted Piepkorn's new division between an *unitas* of Augustana VII and a *concordia* of Formula X (p. 9). But the intentions and conclusions of this document were entirely orthodox and traditional.<sup>64</sup> Its appendix cites, among others, Resolution 2-16 of the synodical convention of 1965: "*Resolved*: That no joint worship services be held with those with whom we have not established pulpit and altar fellowship." A prominent feature of the statement of 1974 is its reference to "levels"—but only in the correct sense of the application of the one indivisible fellowship at various structural levels, not as though fellowship itself were divided into levels. For example, "C. *On the Congregational Level . . .* Similarly, congregations agree that they will practice fellowship only with those congregations which belong to a church body with which the synod is in fellowship" (p. 15).

In 1981 the CTCR's "Nature and Implications of the Concept of Fellowship" continues the split between Augustana VII and Formula X, but makes more substantive use of it than had the document of 1974. The applications and conclusions are still traditional and orthodox, but the supporting argumentation in terms of "principles of fellowship" is inadequate, as has been shown above. There is one single hint, to which no attention was paid at the time, of the mischief to come from "levels." One sentence on page 43 states: "Through the use of the word 'fellowship' almost exclusively to refer to a formal altar and pulpit fellowship relationship established between two church bodies on the basis of agreement in the confession of the faith, some have been given the impression that no fellowship relationship other than spiritual unity in the body of Christ can or should exist among members of Christian churches not in altar and pulpit fellowship." By itself the sentence might mean no more than a criticism of the Wisconsin Synod's "unit concept," which no one on the CTCR advocated. Certainly no "levels of



fellowship" were intended by the CTCR in 1981. But appeal was later made to that single sentence as having prepared the way for "levels of fellowship," and in 1991 this faulty line of development came into full flower in "Inter-Christian Relationships."

One can only conclude that the advocacy of differential unities in "Inter-Christian Relationships" (including joint services with heterodox churches) has no genuine roots at all in the historic Lutheran theology of the Missouri Synod. Its kinship is rather with that other disastrous "course correction," by which President David Preus plunged the ALC into pulpit and altar fellowship with Reformed churches, thus giving up the sacrament of the altar as confessed by the church of the Augsburg Confession.<sup>65</sup> The common element is a model employing "levels": "The Scriptures call us to express the measure of unity that exists among Christians rather than to say we must agree on everything before we can express true Christian fellowship."<sup>66</sup> "Total doctrinal agreement is not necessary for mutual recognition of a basic unity in Christian faith."<sup>67</sup>

In the Missouri Synod itself such views were hitherto represented never by the CTCR but only by dissident elements. This example derived from the pages of *Missouri in Perspective*: "For Dorpat, purity of doctrine should not be made the basis for Christian fellowship. The purpose of all doctrine is 'to come to know Jesus,' and to 'deal with Him personally.' When that happens, one is a child of God, and so deserves to be treated as a brother by all the children of God . . . 'Have we repented for treating fellow Christians as unbelievers,' Dorpat asks of the Missouri Synod . . . Copies of 'The Lutheran Church-Missouri Sin' are available for 40 cents from ELIM Documents."<sup>68</sup> A second example is the following district action of 1985: "*Resolved*: That the Southeastern District acknowledge the following as broad principles reflecting the consensus of its thought regarding inter-Christian relationships: . . . 4. Decisions regarding the exercise of fellowship on the local level are best made at the local level . . . 8. The exercise of fellowship must be defined within the relationship between truth and love . . . This tension implies no easy answers, but a sure struggle drawing us closer to God and His will for our time . . . 9. There is a growing

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recognition that an 'all or nothing,' 'either/or' approach to fellowship is inadequate. 10. Christian relationships differ at various levels: international, national, church body, synod, district, congregation, and individual, and may require diverse and appropriate responses."<sup>69</sup>

Whether one takes Augustana VII at face value, as setting out the actual criteria for God-pleasing unity in the church militant here on earth, or whether one sends this article off into a fluffily "spiritual" limbo of invisibility, turns out to make quite a difference in the real world. What is at stake here—all subjectively good intentions aside—is the awesomely qualitative great divide between the God-given, purely taught gospel and rightly administered sacraments and their human falsifications. To bridge these opposites with levels and degrees is to quantify, relativise, and trivialise the church-creating truth of God and the abyss that separates confession from denial.

Contrary to the implications of "Inter-Christian Relationships" (page 5), today's "ambiguous denominationalism" (with people neither knowing nor caring about the official positions of their churches) is an argument for sharpening, not fudging inter-confessional boundaries. Church practice must teach people to be confessionally responsible, not irresponsible. Yet "Inter-Christian Relationships" leaves room for admission to orthodox altars regardless of the heterodox altars at which people may be communicating also. By contrast Walther held as follows:

Since the holy supper is also a sign of the confession of the faith and doctrine of those with whom one celebrates it, the admission of members of heterodox fellowships to the celebration of the supper within the Lutheran church militates (1.) against Christ's institution; (2.) against the mandated unity of the church in the faith and the corresponding confession; (3.) against love for him to whom it is given; (4.) against love for one's own fellow-believers, especially towards the weak, who are thereby given grave offence; (5.) against the command not to become partakers of the sins and errors of others . . .

The more unionism and syncretism is the sin and corruption

of our time, the more the [faithfulness] of the orthodox church now demands that the Lord's Supper not be misused as a means of external union without internal unity of faith.<sup>70</sup>

In conclusion, few documents reflect better the old Lutheran zeal for the truth of their confession, than does the unanimous record (*Denkschrift*) of the reasons given by the constituting synods for forming the Synodical Conference of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of North America in 1871. These synods felt obliged to explain why they could not join any of the three existing general Lutheran bodies. The first two, the General Synod and the General Synod South, were given short shrift. The longest discussion was devoted to the would-be orthodox General Council and to its chief fault—its "lax and indecisive spirit," ever blunting the cutting edge of truth. It was here, in the doctrine and practice of church fellowship, that the real difference lay between the "Missourians" and the halting reserve of the General Council, despite the great C. P. Krauth. The paragraphs which follow eloquently embody the confessional spirit of the Old Missourians and show how Augsburg Confession VII and the Formula of Concord were woven together in a seamless, confident, and consistent implementation and application of the church's saving treasures:

If we now focus more closely on the special situation of our dear Lutheran Church in America, it is indeed all too clear, even to the dullest eye, that it is frightful powers of darkness against which the faithful members and servants of our church must stand in unremitting battle already now and will likely have to stand still more earnestly in the future. Our synods and congregations stand here in the midst of a churning hotchpotch of almost innumerable sects and parties, which indeed fondly boast of their "evangelical Protestantism" and mostly also of their "vital piety," but which through their deceptive rationalisations and enthusiastic dreamings shamefully falsify the dear word of God, and especially the alone-saving gospel of the free grace of God in Christ, yet ridicule the orthodox church on account of her faithful witness, and seek to seduce her children, by means

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of false doctrine and the trickery of men, into the nets of her false-believing communions . . .

Next, it is the question of pulpit and altar fellowship with Calvinists and other heterodox [literally, false-believing] ecclesiastical parties—so important for the assessment of the Lutheran-churchly standpoint of a communion [fellowship]—in which the General Council has demonstrated a most lamentable lack of resolute faithfulness towards our Lutheran doctrine and church. The council has indeed, upon the request of several synods connected with it, repeatedly, though clearly not exactly with a joyful willingness, conducted discussions of the question mentioned and has, in a number of decisions, rendered official responses to inquiries submitted. Yet it is alas only too evident that, in all its largely ambiguous or at least contradictorily understood and interpreted pronouncements, the council has at least steadfastly refused to reject in definite, plain, and simple words, as contrary to Scripture and confession, that unionistic practice which is in keeping with the spirit of the old General Synod and seriously to work towards a resolute implementation of the opposite, strictly Lutheran and biblical principles in its synods and congregations.

Already this sad defect in confessional faithfulness makes it impossible for us to become members of the council. For therein is revealed, in our view, not only an excusable weakness of inconsistency (that is, a deficiency in drawing conclusions) combined with an otherwise actually existing unity of spirit with us, but regrettably rather an actual fundamental difference of attitude in respect of the right treasuring of the pure doctrine and of the orthodox church in opposition to the doctrinal indifference and church-mingling of our days. We for our part believe, with the recognisably orthodox and confessionally faithful doctrinal fathers of our church in the prime of her existence, that it is simply incompatible with the faithfulness in office and the churchly position of a Lutheran curate of souls, if he knowingly and willingly allows his pulpit to heterodox

preachers or administers the holy Supper to members of heterodox ecclesiastical parties. As a householder over God's mysteries, and a called servant of His orthodox church, he not only has the sacred obligation by a wise and faithful exercise of doctrinal correction [*Lehrenlenchus*] (that is, the reproof of false doctrine for the preservation of the pure doctrine, mandated in God's Word, Titus 1:9-11) to render a forceful testimony *for* the pure and *against* the false doctrine, but it is also his sacred duty by refusing the members of heterodox and heretical ecclesiastical parties the rights and treasures of ecclesiastical fellowship in the orthodox church to maintain the wall of separation between pure and false doctrine and church so emphatically commanded by God and by this confessional act actually to reprove and avoid the error . . .

Yet as correct as this distinction is [between articles of faith strictly indispensable for salvation, and those without which it is still possible to be saved], there lies in it no justifying ground for the unionistic practice of the council. Every true Lutheran will of course heartily agree, when it says in the Preface to our Book of Confession:

. . . There are also many other reasons why condemnations cannot by any means be avoided. However, it is not our purpose and intention to mean thereby those persons who err ingenuously and who do not blaspheme the truth of the divine word, and far less do we mean entire churches inside or outside the Holy Empire of the German Nation. On the contrary, we mean specifically to condemn only false and seductive doctrines and their stiff-necked proponents and blasphemers. These we do not by any means intend to tolerate in our lands, churches, and schools inasmuch as such teachings are contrary to the expressed word of God and cannot coexist with it. Besides, pious people should be warned against them. But we have no doubt at all that one can find many pious, innocent

people even in those churches which have up to now admittedly not come to agreement with us. These people go their way in the simplicity of their hearts, do not understand the issues, and take no pleasure in blasphemies against the holy supper as it is celebrated in our churches according to Christ's institution and as we concordantly teach about it on the basis of the words of His testament.<sup>71</sup>

. . . Our church indeed acknowledges that also in heterodox communions there are "many pious, innocent people, who go their way in the simplicity of their hearts," but she does not say that she is prepared to cultivate altar and pulpit fellowship also with such, if they want to remain in the heterodox communions. The former concerns the faith that there exists an invisible church extending over the entire baptised Christendom; the latter, however concerns the right form of a true visible church. Immediately after the cited testimony from the Preface to our Book of Confession our church continues, speaking of those true believers in the sects, as follows:

It is furthermore to be hoped 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. Consequently the responsibility devolves upon the theologians and ministers 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.<sup>72</sup>

These last words must necessarily be taken together with those which deal with the erring persons within the sects who err from simplicity, if one does not wish deliberately to fabricate for our confession a doctrine which it does not have. According to the first citation our church is indeed far from condemning, for example, all Reformed who still err in the article of the holy supper, or all Baptists, who still

err in the doctrine of the marks of recognition of the state of grace; but our church is just as far from admitting a Reformed, Baptist, or Methodist to her altar, or yet a Reformed, Baptist, or Methodist preacher into her pulpit, without having first instructed, reminded, and warned them and prevailed upon them to "turn to the infallible truth of the divine word and unite with us and our churches and schools." Rather, our church declares that in the contrary case one blind person lets himself be misled by another. Therefore also our church has taken Luther's anti-unionistic judgment into her confession and made it her own, as "the explanation of the chief teacher of the Augsburg Confession": "I reckon them all as belonging together (that is, as Sacramentarians and Enthusiasts), for that is what they are who will not believe that the Lord's bread in the supper is His true, natural body, which the godless or Judas receive orally as well as St. Peter and all the saints. Whoever, I say, will not believe this, will please let me alone and expect no fellowship from me. This is final."<sup>73</sup> Hereby our church publicly and solemnly renounces ecclesiastical fellowship not only with the crass Zwinglians but also with the subtle Calvinists, and whoever does not do so with her appeals in vain to having subscribed all her confessions without reservation.

. . . Although the lax principles of the council . . . can be applied with full validity also to the Roman and Greek Catholic Churches, it is here something directly to do only with the Reformed communions. We for our part hold fast, with our orthodox doctrinal fathers and in full harmony with the emphatic rejections in the Augustana as well as in the Formula of Concord, to this, that the doctrinal difference between the Lutheran and the Reformed churches is indeed essential and fundamental to such a degree that what God's word says of the mandated separation between true and false prophets or churches is to be applied also to the relationship between Lutheran and Reformed churches and their members as such; so that this doctrinal difference by its nature essentially annuls also the bond of churchly-brotherly

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fellowship, and accordingly any cultivation of such fellowship, by way of pulpit and altar fellowship, working together for churchly purposes, and such things, is indeed a wrong and sin committed against God's express prohibition. The "true unity of the church," of which altar and pulpit fellowship are, after all, obviously an essential part and actual proof—and are therefore also practised in just this sense by the unionistically minded with those who believe differently—this true unity of the Christian church rests according to Article VII of the Augsburg Confession on this, "that the gospel is *unanimously* preached there *according to its pure understanding* and the sacraments are administered in accordance with the divine word." Does such unanimity in the pure teaching of the gospel perhaps exist, according to the confession of our church, between her and the Reformed communions? Has she not rather, by her ecclesiastical rejections of the Reformed teachings and teachers, at the same time erected the wall of separation, demanded by Scripture, between true and false church, with reference to external ecclesiastical fellowship and its essential parts and expressions?

. . . Either therefore we must, if with our church we acknowledge the distinguishing doctrines between Lutherans and Reformed as truly church-divisive, also hold fast, with our church and her faithful warriors, to the reprehensibility of all cultivation of ecclesiastical-fraternal fellowship [with the Reformed], especially by way of pulpit and altar fellowship; or else, in the contrary case, if we wish to hold on to the admissibility of such cultivation of ecclesiastical fellowship with the Reformed, we must at the same time also declare the doctrinal difference between Lutherans and Reformed to be not church-divisive at all, and we must thus also declare the whole separate existence of our Lutheran church—on the basis of her separate confession and the ecclesiastical implementation of such doctrines as are not in reality church-divisive—to be schismatic, unchristian, and ungodly, and we must earnestly press for the immediate dissolution of our church and for union with the Reformed.



For if it is sinful to turn away from our Lutheran altars and pulpits those in other communions whom one regards as Christians, then the separate existence of our Lutheran church generally is something sinful and reprehensible. But that the distinctive doctrines of our church set out in our symbols have been regarded as truly and summarily church-divisive, in the sense of the original authors of these symbols as well as in the sense of the church which adopted these as the banner of her unity and purity, about that there cannot exist the slightest doubt for him who is even only superficially acquainted with the history of our symbols and church.

. . . So long as the council rather tolerates without reproof ecclesiastical-fraternal fellowship with Reformed and Union [members] in its synods and congregations, especially in respect of the public administration of the means of grace, yes even strengthens and promotes this aberration by its silence or its waffling decisions and explanations—so long it is self-evident for us that we find ourselves, with our Lutheran hearts and consciences, entirely unable to connect ourselves with the council as members.<sup>74</sup>

These lucid excerpts, then, from the *Denkschrift* of 1871 say all which needs to be said; they form, therefore, without additional commentary, a fitting conclusion to this plea to rethink the whole conception and structure of "Inter-Christian Relationships."

### Endnotes

1. The Statement of the Overseas Committee on Fellowship, presented to the Convention of the Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference of May (17-19) 1961 (*Proceedings*, pp. 9-13) and appended to the present report as Appendix A.
2. CTCR, minutes of 18-20 February 1970, p. 3.
3. Werner Elert, *Eucharist and Church Fellowship in the First Four Centuries*, tr. Norman Nagel (St. Louis: Concordia

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Publishing House, 1966), p. 182.

4. Ibid., p. 164.
5. C. F. W. Walther, *The True Visible Church*, tr. J. T. Mueller (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1961), Thesis XXI. C.
6. Ralph Bohlmann, "The Celebration of Concord," in *Formula for Concord: Theologians' Convocation Essays*, ed. Samuel Nafzger (St. Louis: CTCR, 1977), p. 75.
7. *Essays on the Lutheran Confessions Basic to Lutheran Cooperation* (St. Louis and New York: The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod and the National Lutheran Council, 1961), p. 6.
8. Ibid., p. 14.
9. Ralph Bohlmann, in *Formula for Concord* (1977), pp. 75-76, 82-83.
10. Samuel Nafzger, "Levels of Fellowship," in *In Search of Christian Unity*, ed. J. A. Burgess (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), pp. 239, 249, 253. This is a volume of essays read at a conference held in Puerto Rico in 1987, under the sponsorship of the former Lutheran Council in the U.S.A. and the Institute for Ecumenical Research of the Lutheran World Federation (in Strasbourg). ". . . are there levels or degrees of visible unity and, if so, what are they? All participants seemed to assume that there are such levels" (p. 15).
11. Samuel Nafzger, *In Search of Christian Unity*, p. 239.
12. *Luther's Works*, 27 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1964), p. 38.
13. Ibid., p. 41.
14. Samuel Nafzger, *In Search of Christian Unity*, pp. 238-239.
15. *D. Martin Luther's Werke, Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Weimar, 1883- ), 7, p. 721.

16. "The Nature and Implications of the Concept of Fellowship," pp. 40-41.
17. Ibid., p. 4.
18. Ibid., pp. 15, 16.
19. Francis Pieper, *Vortraege ueber die Evangelisch Lutherische Kirche, Die Wahre Sichtbare Kirche Gottes auf Erden* (St. Louis: Seminary Press, 1916), p. 191, using this writer's translation.
20. Ralph Bohlmann, *Formula for Concord*, p. 65.
21. Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, V:3-6; Theodore Tappert, ed., *The Book of Concord* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), pp. 558-559.
22. Francis Pieper, "Of Unity in the Faith," presented to the Convention of the Synodical Conference of 1888, *Proceedings*, pp. 6-13, using this writer's translation.
23. *Luther's Works*, 27, pp. 36-42.
24. "The Nature and Implications of the Concept of Fellowship," p. 36.
25. Samuel Nafzger, "The LCMS and Joint Worship Services," *The Lutheran Witness*, June 1983, p. 28.
26. Letter from Hermann Sasse to H. Beach, 9 November 1969, circularized within the Darling Downs Pastors' Conference (Queensland District, Lutheran Church of Australia).
27. Large Catechism, Third Commandment, 91.
28. Thesis 12, Overseas Committee on Fellowship (Appendix A).
29. Augsburg Confession XXVIII:21.
30. *Denkschrift [Memorandum, Comprising a Thorough Presentation of the Reasons Why the Synods Joining Together into the Synodical Conference of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of North America, Could Not Join One of the Nomi-*

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nally Lutheran Associations of Synods Already Existing in This Country] (Columbus, 1871), p. 26, using this writer's translation.

31. Apology VII-VIII:5.
32. 2 Corinthians 3-5; Smalcald Articles III:VIII.
33. Large Catechism, Baptism, 19.
34. *Supra*, p. [12].
35. A. C. Piepkorn, "What the Symbols Have to Say about the Church," *Concordia Theological Monthly*, XXVI:10 (October, 1955), pp. 750-763.
36. Ralph Bohlmann, *Formula for Concord*, pp. 55-89, and *In Search of Christian Unity*, pp. 86-98.
37. Samuel Nafzger, *In Search of Christian Unity*, pp. 238-256.
38. Robert Preus, "The Basis for Concord," *Formula for Concord*, pp. 11-30.
39. C. F. W. Walther, *The True Visible Church*.
40. Francis Pieper, *Das Grundbekenntnis der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1880, 1930); "Unity in Faith," Synodical Conference, 1888.
41. A. Calov, *Exegema Augustanae Confessionis*, second ed. (Wittenberg, 1665).
42. Martin Franzmann, "A Lutheran Study of Church Unity," *Essays on the Lutheran Confessions Basic to Lutheran Cooperation*, p. 22.
43. Hermann Sasse, *We Confess the Church*, tr. Norman Nagel (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1986), p. 67.
44. Hermann Sasse, "Basic Theses on Church Fellowship," *The Australasian Theological Review*, XXXIV:1-2 (March-June 1963), p. 44.
45. Ralph Bohlmann, *Formula for Concord*, p. 76; see also

Samuel Nafzger, *In Search of Christian Unity*, pp. 248, 256.

46. Apology VII-VIII:5 (German).
47. Samuel Nafzger, *In Search of Christian Unity*, p. 249.
48. Ibid., p. 252.
49. Ibid., p. 249. The stress on external fellowship as quantitative is also found in Ralph Bohlmann, *Formula for Concord*, p. 64, and *In Search*, pp. 89, 91. The actual conclusions and applications here, especially in *In Search*, pp. 91-96, are clearly meant to defend the full, orthodox biblical gospel, "in all its articles"—including a strong stress on biblical authority, against historical criticism (pp. 94-95). Yet the trouble is with the interpretation of Augustana VII. On the one hand, this article is said to involve not only the *qualitative* but also a "*quantitative*" purity, in the sense that the gospel "ultimately" embraces all articles (*Formula for Concord*, p. 64). On the other hand, a problem with the word "fellowship" is said to be "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" (p. 75)—in other words, "fellowship" really is something "spiritual" (which is to say, invisible) and only secondarily something outward. Hence Augustana VII is not really about outward fellowship: "It 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.' This statement either requires too much for true spiritual unity or too little for altar and pulpit fellowship" (*Formula for Concord*, p. 67, note 13). Here internal and external fellowship are *quantified*, that is, related as less and more respectively—with the internal as the lesser quantity

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(compare Apology VII-VIII:5). For a truly biblical understanding of "fellowship," which keeps "inner" and "outer" aspects together, see Hermann Sasse, *Sanctorum Communio* (*We Confess the Sacraments*), especially pp. 140-141.

50. Tappert, p. 632.
51. H. P. Hamann, "An Examination of the Relation of Certain Passages of the New Testament to the Problem of Fellowship," unpublished paper, c. 1962, p. 6.
52. H. P. Hamann, official critique by the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Australia of the early version of "Theology of Fellowship," which was later edited and improved by the CTCR of the LCMS.
53. *A Brief Statement of the Doctrinal Position of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Missouri, Ohio, and Other States*. ICR, p. 27, cites the sentence which follows, minus its Bible texts, but omits the preceding.
54. Apology VII-VIII:9-11 (German); Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration XI:50.
55. See also *Luther's Works*, 40, pp. 231-234, 251, *re* true Christian believers under the papacy and under "enthusiast" heretics.
56. Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, III (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1953), p. 425.
57. Samuel Nafzger, *In Search of Christian Unity*, p. 245.
58. *Ibid.*, p. 244.
59. J. L. Neve, *Churches and Sects of Christendom* (Blair, Nebraska: Lutheran Publishing House, 1944), pp. 208-209.
60. *LCMS Report*, 1944, pp. 251-252.
61. *Ibid.*
62. Ralph Bohlmann, *Formula for Concord*, p. 83.
63. Henry Hamann, "Missouriana," *The Australasian Theologi-*

*cal Review*, XXXII:1 (March, 1961), p. 23.

64. It was described as "splendid" by the faculty of Concordia Theological Seminary of Fort Wayne, *Convention Workbook* (LCMS, 1977), p. 112.
65. See J. E. Andrews and J. A. Burgess, eds., *An Invitation to Action: The Lutheran-Reformed Dialogue: Series III, 1981-1983* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984).
66. David Preus, "Fellowship with Other Christians," *The Lutheran Standard*, 20 January 1984, p. 29.
67. David Preus, "Ecumenical Step of Joy," *The Lutheran Standard*, 13 June 1986, p. 37.
68. "Fear of Unionism—Missouri's Sin," *Missouri in Perspective*, 2 February 1976. Pastor Dorpat later became a founding member of "Renewal in Missouri."
69. Resolution 85-05-02 of the Convention of 1985 of the Southeastern District of the LCMS.
70. C. F. W. Walther, Thesis Ten (using this writer's translation) and Thesis Thirteen, as translated by L. White, in *Theses on Communion Fellowship with Those Who Believe Differently*, ed. P. T. McCain (Fort Wayne: Seminary Press, 1990), pp. 36, 49. (This essay was originally presented to the Western District of the LCMS in 1870.)
71. This portion is cited according to the translation in Tappert, pp. 11-12.
72. Ibid.
73. Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, VII:33; Tappert, p. 575.
74. *Denkschrift* [Memorandum], pp. 10, 22-28, using this writer's translation.