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Fellowship Issues and Missions

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The Ecclesio-political and Ecumenical Setting

Nowhere is the question of fellowship and unity more urgently raised than where it was thought that doctrinal squabbling and disunity among Christians would become a hindrance to a uniform message of the church to the world. Hermann Sasse illustrates the problem:

Four churches [*Andachtstätten*] stand a hundred yards distant from each other, in a large city in India. Each of these churches is, on any given Sunday, only half filled. Each has a pastor with insufficient members. Each finds itself all too often in endless controversy, not against the sin and the pain that rules around them, but rather against the supposed distortion of the faith and practice of the others. Seven mission societies work frantically among a population of a million people. Five of them maintain that they alone possess the truth of the gospel, and therefore claim the right to work and found churches everywhere. Where the gospel has found entrance, there the fragmentation of the church has placed an impediment in front of the non-Christian. Thoughtful men ask why we demand devotion to the one Christ and yet at the same time we worship separately and narrow-mindedly seclude ourselves from one another in these most holy dealings. These divisions perplex the thoughtful seeker. Which church should I join? This is the question the converted ask.¹

Divisiveness is not exclusively Christianity's problem, it is the problem of other religions as well. Christianity is concerned about its segregated existence because it stands in stark contrast to the unity Christ himself prays for: "that all of them may be one" (John 17:21). On what exactly should Christianity unite? Inter-denominational discussions of fellowship reveal the disturbing truth that there exists among Christians different ideas on what the church (ecclesiology) is and what constitutes its

¹ Hermann Sasse quotes these significant and marked words of an Anglican bishop of Dornakal, India uttered at Lausanne, World Conference, 1927. Hermann Sasse, "The Question of the Church's Unity on the Mission Field," *Logia* 7 (Holy Trinity 1998): 54.

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fellowship. In other words, the principles of orientation are not shared by all denominations. To be sure, all believe in something—non-confessionality does not exist—but this confession varies, which makes some principles of orientation more inclusive than others. Within Lutheranism, there is a general consensus that the marks of the church (*notae ecclesiae*), the preaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments, constitute the church and its fellowship. In terms of specifics, however, they disagree. The Wisconsin Synod, for example, would add to the marks prayer and “practices that demonstrate a common faith.”² The Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA) has made advances toward the Moravians and Episcopalians, making it seem to us in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) that they do not take the marks seriously. The Reformed would agree with us on the marks but would add a third component: church discipline. The Roman Catholics adopt the classical marks of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed—one holy, catholic, and apostolic—but would have them gravitate exclusively around the primacy of the pope and thus, remain, to be frank, only guardedly ecumenical. And finally, the Orthodox churches of the East argue for the visible principle for unity, namely, the apostolic succession of the sacramental centered office and faithfulness to tradition.

The most striking and perspicuous quests for unity and fellowship are those of a visionary nature. Movements whose principle of orientation painfully remind us of the provisional end of denominational separation in light of the *eschaton* (the end to come), which to varying degrees, seek to preempt the heavenly oneness in terms of a corporeal vision now. The World Missionary Conference of Edinburgh 1910 was the first grand scale initiative that incorporated as many church bodies as possible to materialize a vision of “world evangelization in this generation.” It never happened. Christianity is perhaps further removed from accomplishing world evangelization than it was in 1910. But such a vision spurned on ecumenical movements such as the World Council of Churches (WCC) which, together with its subsidiary bodies, the International Missionary Conference (IMC) and “Faith and Order,” pursues the grandest ideal of unity of all: a *koinonia* that culminates “in one faith and in one eucharistic fellowship, expressed in worship and common life in Christ, through

² The Wisconsin Synod’s understanding of church fellowship is based on a “unit concept, covering every joint expression, manifestation, and demonstration of a common faith.” *Four Statements on Fellowship presented by the constituent synods of the Synodical Conference for study and discussion* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1960), 9.44–47.

witness and service to the world.”³ The Lausanne Movement, founded in 1974, uniting all conservative evangelicals runs a close second, but with the intent of preserving a few more traditional doctrines for a united message to the world.⁴ The International Lutheran Council (ILC), has become the voice of all confessional Lutherans in this world of which the LCMS is an active member.⁵ It offsets the hegemony of the Lutheran World Federation’s (LWF) unifying agenda and is, unlike the LWF, more content with just being a union of partnership churches rather than staking claims for an ecclesiology.

Mission and Fellowship Converge in Ecclesiology

The Evangelical Lutheran Church places the question of fellowship in ecclesiology. The doctrine of the church is defined in the Augsburg Confession (CA), article VII: “Likewise they teach that one holy church will remain forever. The church is the assembly of saints in which the gospel is taught purely and the sacraments are administered rightly. And it is enough for the true unity of the church to agree concerning the teaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments” (CA VII, 1–2).⁶ Here the issue of fellowship also converges with the mission of the church, which according to CA VII is a “kerygmatic-sacramental act.” As the church reaches out to humanity, it, too, is bound to the purity of preaching the gospel and administering the sacraments. As it practices this, moreover, the question of unity and fellowship around these very marks

³ The WCC corporeal interests are evident: “It will be necessary to realize that the spiritual dimensions of catholic unity cannot be opposed to the visible manifestation of the Church as *koinonia*, but must be rethought to include all of its corporeal dimensions, including the intimate connection between the sacrament of the Eucharist and the sacramentality of the Church.” Patrick W. Fuerth, *The Concept of Catholicity in The Documents of the World Council of Churches* (Rome: Editrice Anselmiana, 1973), 247. One may also see, Peter Steinacker, *Die Kennzeichen der Kirche* (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1982), 50.

⁴ John Stott, ed., *Making Christ Known: Historic Mission Documents from the Lausanne Movement 1974–1989* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), xiii–xiv.

⁵ The ILC has a membership of twenty-nine confessional Lutheran churches that embraces approximately three million Christians. Though confessional Lutheran missions has taken a foothold all over the world for more than 150 years, many areas, as in former communist states, are encountering it for the first time. At the last convention in 2001, the LCMS declared fellowship with three churches: the Lanka Lutheran Church of Sri Lanka, the Lutheran Church of Latvia, and The Lutheran Church of Lithuania.

⁶ Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, tr. Charles Arand, et al. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 43.

become pertinent. This means that in pioneer situations where no other churches exist, Lutheran missions will speak on behalf of the church of Christ but it does so by purely preaching and rightly administering the sacraments. In this task, therefore, her goal is implied: Through preaching the Lutheran faith will emerge, and eventually develop fellowship around the truths of the gospel and the sacraments.⁷ Where other churches exist, Lutheran mission will seek ways to underscore the ecumenical witness of the gospel. Simultaneously, it will limit its fellowship to those who also emphasize the truth of the gospel and the sacraments as the means God chooses to bring salutary faith. The mission of the church thus becomes a litmus test of the church's sense for a clear message and true oneness in Jesus Christ.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church accepts an understanding of fellowship that plays itself out on a broader level, which embraces all Christians who truly believe and confess the triune God. Since violation of this fellowship would be syncretism, fellowship must be withheld from those who use the name of the triune God in blasphemy, and as I will demonstrate, must avoid syncretistic notions by constantly being reminded of her faith in the triune God.⁸ Second, there is also a concentrated ideal of fellowship that embraces believers' concerns for purity and clarity of message and, hence, seeks a visible fellowship with one another around a consensus of doctrines (*consensus de doctrina*). The practical expression of this fellowship materializes in a *communio sacris*, a fellowship around the holy or sacred things; a violation of this would be defined as unionism.⁹

⁷ The Confessional-Lutheran Mission Society called Lutheran Church Mission (formerly known as the Bleckmar Mission) adopted three important theses to indicate the confessional nature of her missionary task: "The Lutheran church can pursue only Lutheran mission work," "Lutheran mission work can only be pursued by the Lutheran church," and "Lutheran mission work must lead to a Lutheran church." Friedrich Wilhelm Hopf, ed., *Lutherische Kirche treibt Lutherische Mission: Festschrift zum 75 jährigen Jubiläum der Bleckmarer Mission, 1892, 14 Juni 1967*, Hrsg von Friedrich Wilhelm Hopf (Bleckmar üB Soltau: Mission Evangelisch-Lutherischer Freikirchen, 1967), 13.

⁸ Commission on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR), *Theology of Fellowship* (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1965), 11.

⁹ The main, official sources pertaining to the issue are: CTCR, *Theology of Fellowship*; CTCR, *A Lutheran Stance toward Ecumenism* (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1974); CTCR, *The Nature and Implications of the Concept of Fellowship* (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1981); CTCR, *Inter-Christian Relationships: An Instrument for Study* (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1991); CTCR, *The Lutheran Understanding of Church Fellowship: Study Materials and Summary* (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 2000); CTCR, *The Lutheran Understanding of*

I. The Broad View of Fellowship: The Doctrine of the Trinity in Ecclesiology

The One Holy and Catholic Church: Faith in the Triune God

According to the watershed statements on the church made in Articles VII and VIII in the Augsburg Confession—which, according to Sasse, were never as well articulated until that time in church history—the Evangelical Lutheran Church reflects a theological charity that acknowledges the existence of a body of true believers within the segregated denominations of Christianity.¹⁰ They share a common faith in the triune God. This church is defined as the *una sancta*, the *congregatio sanctorum*. The existence of the true faith that unites all believers is an article of faith and thus a *mysterion* known only to God.¹¹ And yet, while this true unity is seen only by God, the faith of this *una sancta* is believed to exist where there is a visible expression of faith, even if its lowest common denominator is the ecumenical creeds or similar statements made to that effect. It is no Platonic entity; rather it exists wherever there is the preaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments.

Theological concession to an ecclesial breadth stemming from the concept of the *una sancta* has always been part of the theological heritage of the Lutheran Church. It may be considered a provision of charity because it was, admittedly, defined against the backdrop of the declaration of Luther as a heretic. The Evangelical Lutheran Church of the Reformation emerged from a church body that cloaked Christology with mariology and justification with meritorious practices. Still, the Augsburg Confession confesses a fellowship of faith that crosses all boundaries. One of the first attempts to provide a concrete assessment of this broad fellowship, while at the same time also casting a missionary perspective on it, came from an influential authority in the seventeenth century: the orthodox theologian

Fellowship: Report on Synodical Discussions (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 2001). Further documents relating to fellowship issues are: CTCR, *Theology and Practice of the Lord's Supper* (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1983); CTCR, *Admission to the Lord's Supper: Basics of Biblical and Confessional Teaching* (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1999).

¹⁰ Hermann Sasse, "Kirche und Kirchen," in *Credo Ecclesiam* (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann Verlag, 1930), 307.

¹¹ The CTCR, *Lutheran Understanding of Church Fellowship* (2000), 4, for example acknowledges that the "the Holy Trinity is the source and pattern for the fellowship Christians have with one another in the 'one holy Christian and apostolic Church.'" Although much of that faith is assumed as a given and not explained any further.

and famous hymnologist at Hamburg, Philip Nicolai (1556-1608).¹² In his book entitled *Commentarii de regno Christi* (Commentaries on the kingdom of Christ, 1597), Nicolai offers a panoramic survey of all regions of the world and chronicles how the remotest regions have already heard the preaching of the apostles. With somewhat incredulous descriptions Nicolai perpetuates the common tradition that the apostles had reached all parts of the world.¹³ Newly discovered regions such as Brazil, Peru, and the West Indies were also in possession of the Christian gospel, even if it meant only a breeze of it.¹⁴

More important, however, is Nicolai's astounding ecumenical openness by recognizing the work of his opponents, the Roman Catholic Jesuits, who did work out of reach to Lutheran influence.¹⁵ He and others within orthodoxy had access to reports on mission work in the East such as those made in 1564 by a Jesuit missionary to Japan, Johannes Baptista Montius. What Nicolai established from these reports was that the Jesuit missionaries were actually making proper Christians. They ascertained from these reports that they were instructing heathens in the fundamental Christian doctrines such as the Decalogue, the Apostles' Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and Baptism; they also abstained from the erroneous doctrines on the primacy of the pope, purgatory, indulgences, and merits. The faculty of Wittenberg in 1651, almost one hundred years later, similarly concluded that the Jesuits were not making papists "much less a Jesuit, but a

¹² Willy Heß, *Das Missionsdenken bei Philip Nicolai* (Hamburg: Friedrich Wittig Verlag, 1962). Wolfgang Gröbel, *Die Mission und die evangelische Kirche im 17. Jahrhundert* (Gotha: Friedrich Andreas Perthes, 1997), 9.

¹³ This tradition rests on Ps 19:4-5; Rom 10:18, Col 1:6, and in historic reports attributed to the historian Eusebius of Caesarea (260-339). See Gröbel, *Die Mission und die evangelische Kirche*, 8; and Heß, *Das Missionsdenken bei Philip Nicolai*, 92.

¹⁴ He certainly displays innovative thought to prove his point: The Brazilians, though being under God's wrath for having rejected the preaching, still perpetuate a ritual that is reminiscent of the form of Baptism as can be seen from their pagan priests' conduct in their temples who still used the signing of the cross. See Walter Holsten, "Die Bedeutung der altprotestantischen Dogmatik für die Mission," in *Das Evangelium und die Völker. Beiträge zur Geschichte und Theorie der Mission* (Berlin-Friedenau: Verlag der Buchhandlung der Gosnerischen Mission, 1939), 148-166.

¹⁵ In the seventeenth-century, colonies and foreign lands remained in Spanish and Portuguese hands and, in accordance with the *cuius regio, eius religio* agreed upon in the peace of Augsburg of 1555, Lutherans had no claim on them. In contrast, the Roman Catholic Church pursued missions actively and expansively. To avoid disarray and confusion within the ranks of its monastic orders as to who is to go where, Pope Gregory XV in 1622 passed the "*Congregatio de propaganda fide*," to streamline its mission; Gröbel, *Die Mission und die evangelische Kirche*, 10.

Christian just as we are."¹⁶ Such ecumenism was not out of the ordinary for Lutherans, nor was it a wholesale dismissal of its own particular doctrines. Lutheran orthodoxy stood firmly rooted in the tradition of the Augsburg Confession (CA VII), and thus considered that the preaching and the sacrament were still going on, and people still had faith in the triune God.¹⁷

This professed unity is incredibly important for relations to remain conciliatory on the mission field. It would be a mistake to consider the existence of this Christian fellowship as totally invisible without to some degree requesting proof of the veracity of the faith in the triune God and its practices. For against a confessed faith to the triune God and on the basis of its practice, Lutheran mission measures all ecclesial acts such as Baptism, Holy Communion, ordination, and joint prayer. Generally, if they pass the test, we accept their validity and refrain from actively proselytizing such Christians. As is well known, Baptism performed by other denominations is accepted less grudgingly by Lutherans than Holy Communion. In the former, the validity rests on the words of institution in the name of the triune God, which we recognize is still confessed, whereas in the latter there are other weighing factors. Holy Communion as celebrated by Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox churches is generally accepted as efficacious, but whether the same applies to the Reformed is more difficult to say.¹⁸ In the case of the churches of the

¹⁶ Gröbel, *Die Mission und die evangelische Kirche*, 84–89. Johann Gerhard's evaluations are not much different "*Ex his apparet, Jesuitas in primis Christianae religionis rudimentis tradendis a Pontificiis traditionibus et superstitionibus sibi temperare ac fundamentalibus fidei Christianae articulis imbutos, decalogo, symbolo apostolico, oratione Dominica mediocriter informatos baptizare, ut dubium nullum sit, quam plurimos hac ratione Christo lucrificari, qui papalia dogmata vel non intelligunt, vel in tentationum igne abjiciunt.*" *Loci Theologici*, ed. Preuss (Berlin: sumtibus Gust. Schlawitz, 1864), II:432. See also Gröbel, *Die Mission und die evangelische Kirche*, 18, 89.

¹⁷ Heß, *Das Missionsdenken bei Philip Nicolai*, 160–161. Though Nicolai's missiological influence was lost during the Thirty Years War (1618–1648) and thereafter, his missionary ecclesiology received renewed attention some two hundred and fifty years later by Wilhelm Löhe who cited major portions of "*De Regno Christi*" in his *Three books about the Church*, tr. ed. James Schaaf (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969). Christian Weber, *Missionstheologie bei Wilhelm Löhe: Aufbruch zur Kirche der Zukunft* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1996), 295. Heß, *Das Missionsdenken bei Philip Nicolai*, 17–18. Werner Elert picks up this moment of both Nicolai and Löhe by calling it the "Gospel impact" (*evangelischer Ansatz*) of Protestant Lutheranism, *The Structure of Lutheranism*, tr. Walter A. Hansen (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1962), I:385.

¹⁸ Hermann Sasse, "Abendmahlsgemeinschaft, Kirchengemeinschaft und kirchliche Föderation," *In Statu Confessionis*, ed. Friedrich Wilhelm Hopf (Berlin and Schleswig-Holstein: Verlag die Spur GMBH & Co. Christliche Buchhandels, 1976), II:240. The

Radical Reformation, any notions of a possible presence of Christ are completely removed by their disuse of the words of institution.¹⁹

What makes matters more confusing is that syncretistic churches have emerged all over the world, particularly in Africa and South America, where the confession of the triune God, the centrality of Christ, and the sacraments merge with active ancestor worship and animal sacrifice.²⁰ The missionary sacrament of Baptism and the faith in the triune God is often concealed by such questionable practices. Upon close examination *in concreto*, one discovers both confession and practices that are far removed from the faith confessed at the ecumenical councils and Chalcedon. One wonders, whether under such instances the salutary faith of the *una sancta*, could even exist. We would do well as Lutheran Christians to respond to our mission obligation and alert others where such dangers lurk. The church of today, is challenged more than ever in the area of Christian faith and fellowship in the triune God. Modern discussions on this subject draw our attention to this fact as well.

Revisiting the Doctrine of the Trinity in Contemporary Discussions

Karl Rahner in his seminal tract, *The Trinity*, observes that Christians are basically impotent to confess their faith in the triune God lucidly on the basis that: "Christians are in their practical life, almost mere 'monotheists.' We must be willing to admit that, should the doctrine of the Trinity have to be dropped as false, the major part of religious literature could well remain virtually unchanged."²¹ Rahner has a point, especially in view of popular Unitarian expressions of God found even among Lutherans.

incongruity between the two sacraments would be less evident, if one were to accept the validity of both Sacraments on the basis of Luther's (and Augustine's) principle that "when the word is added to the element, a sacrament results" (SA III, vi, 1).

¹⁹ In South Africa the Reformed Anabaptists (known as the Doppers) celebrate communion without the use of the words of institution.

²⁰ See J. N. Amanze, *Botswana Handbook of Churches* (Gaborone: Pula Press, 1994).

²¹ Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, tr. Joseph Donceel (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), 10–11; Carl E. Braaten, *No Other Gospel: Christianity among the World's Religions* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 105. Carl Braaten quotes Dietrich Bonhoeffer who, after his visit to the United States, observed this about American theology, which is by and large in want of a definitive Christology: "The rejection of Christology is characteristic of the whole of present-day American theology. Christianity basically amounts to religion and ethics in American theology. Consequently, the person and work of Christ fall into the background and remain basically not understood in this theology." Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Protestantismus ohne Reformation," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Eberhard Bethge (Munich: Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1958), 353–354, quoted in Braaten, *No Other Gospel*, 15.

Naturally, classical Christianity is categorized as a monotheistic form of belief, but if it is not careful, warns Rahner, Christianity's monotheistic form of belief could become its Achilles' heel. The root of this problem lies in Christianity's dogmatic system wherein, Rahner claims, the doctrine of the Trinity

occupies a rather isolated position. . . . To put it crassly . . . when the treatise [on the Trinity] is concluded, its subject is never brought up again. . . . It is as though this mystery has been revealed for its own sake, and that even after it has been made known to us, it remains, as a reality, locked up within itself. We make statements about it, but as a reality it has nothing to do with us at all.²²

For other contemporary scholars such as Wolfhart Pannenberg, Robert Jenson, and Carl Braaten, Rahner's invective has struck a cord, and in debating the subject further they have encountered a basic deficiency in the doctrine of the Trinity that applies to both the theologies of the East and West.²³ The doctrine of the Trinity in Western Christendom rests on a platform of struggles against false concepts of the Trinity as three separate and independent gods, which resulted in the defense of the unity of God: a monotheism that argues for an essential union of all three persons in the one true God. The Trinity thus becomes only of interest insofar as they *ad se* agree with the one divine essence of the triune God: Christ is *homousios* with the Holy Spirit and to preserve the third person's essential union he is confessed as "proceeding from both Son and Father."²⁴ From this divine unity, which is either viewed as Spirit (John 4:24) or as love (1 John 4:8), the West derived the plurality of the trinitarian persons. The East in turn sees the unity in the monarchy of the Father. In the end, the Father is the personal God who is the source of both Son and Spirit. The Father alone has the freedom and privilege to be irreducible and becomes the only *fons* (source) in the divinity.

²² Rahner, *The Trinity*, 14.

²³ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, tr. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1991), I:256–336; Robert W. Jenson, "Die trinitarische Grundlegung der Theologie. Östliche und westliche Trinitätslehre als ökumenisches Problem," *Luther und die trinitarische Tradition. Ökumenische und Philosophische Perspektiven*, Veröffentlichungen der Luther-Akademie Ratzeburg, Vol. 23 (Erlangen: Martin Luther Verlag, 1994), 9–23. See also Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, eds., *Christian Dogmatics* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), I:135–161.

²⁴ See the decisions made by the Council of Nicea (325) and the Council of Constantinople (381).

Both of the above presentations have their shortcomings: that of trying to derive the Trinity from the person of the Father, or the unity of the divine substance. The East looked at the West dumbfounded, unable to accept their scheme as anything other than modalism; the West equally perplexed looked at the East as supporting subordinationism.²⁵

Consequently, Pannenberg raises his concerns over the systematic procedure the West has so readily assumed, namely, that of deriving the Trinity from the divine substance. Any talk about God that puts the doctrine of unity first that then advances by way of derivation to the Trinity could lead to the false assumption "that the trinitarian statements must seem to be more or less superfluous and an external addition to the doctrine of the one God."²⁶ If one actually follows this method, one should guard against the possible misconception of stating explicitly beforehand "that what is said about the unity is in itself insufficient" and "that trinitarian statements [must] supplement what is said about the one God."²⁷ Even the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century church fathers of Lutheran Orthodoxy, though speaking of God within the framework of special revelation, began with Old Testament monotheism and derived the attributes of God from the concept of God as supreme being or spirit. Only then would they advance to the doctrine of the Trinity. Thereby they, too, could not protect themselves from a misconception "that the one God can be better understood without rather than within the doctrine of the Trinity." This in turn conveyed the false impression that "the latter seems to be a superfluous addition to the concept of the one God even though it is reverently treated as a mystery of revelation."²⁸

Within a mission context, moreover, one is reminded of the words of Count Nicolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf (1700-1760), who, as far as his

²⁵ Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, I:298: "Any derivation of the plurality of trinitarian persons from the essence of the one God, whether it be viewed as spirit or love, leads into the problems of either modalism on the one hand or subordinationism on the other". Similarly, Braaten, *No Other Gospel*, 112: "The . . . method of starting with the assumption of unity in the interest of a strict monotheism—whether of Jewish, Greek, or Roman provenance—led to the Arian and Sabellian heresies. Because the Western Latin tradition began with the assumption of unity and then proceeded to inquire into the Trinity it has produced an unstable record on the Trinity that has threatened to unravel into unitarianism with its lower accompanying Arian Christology, in which Christ is something lower than God."

²⁶ Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, I:283.

²⁷ Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, I:281-283.

²⁸ Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, I:291.

Christology is concerned, may still be considered a Lutheran.²⁹ He addressed his missionaries overseas, who were in the process of compiling a general catechism for the heathen (1740) with the following instructions and cautionary words. He alerts them to two false methods of proclaiming the gospel among the heathen: 1) that one tells them too much about God and nothing about the Lamb and his reconciliation; 2) that in proclaiming the gospel one tells them first about the Father and then about his Son. "Therefore" he advises,

we want henceforth to preach to the heathen first that the Creator of all things, God, in whom they believe from nature, became man and poured out His blood for us. Afterwards, when they believe in His death and wounds, one says to them that God has a Father, etc. . . . If one tells the heathen first about the Father and then about the Son, then one makes them into Arians who want to go directly to the Father and pass by the Son, but certainly no one comes to the Father except through Him. At the same time, they get an idea of subordination (i.e. that the Son is less than the Father). Although to some extent it has a basis, it is fitting only before brothers and sisters who look into the depth of the mystery.³⁰

I do not plan to equivocate the doctrine of the Trinity. To be sure, Christianity's talk of God is always reflective of who God is as it engages the unbelief on the mission field. The nature of that talk depends on the context and is certainly different from a pure systematic reflection on the triune God in the classroom. Nevertheless, Zinzendorf and contemporary discussions do at least bring to our attention that the widely accepted procedure of talking about God ontologically in seeking common views on the identity of God has its shortcomings. The dialogue of seeking to build bridges is riddled with problems if the discussion precludes the economy of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and, especially, the status of Christ. If Christ is inserted at a later point, how could he be understood other than subordinate or peripheral to the common notion of a god?³¹

²⁹ Hans Schwarz, *Christology* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 179.

³⁰ ed. Werner Raupp (Hrsg.), *Mission in Quellentexten. Von der Reformation bis zur Weltmissionskonferenz 1910* (Erlangen: Verlag der Evang.-Luth. Mission and Bad Liebenzell: Verlag der Liebenzeller Mission, 1990), 167.

³¹ Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, I:299. Studies in the comparison of religions do in fact demonstrate that most religions have incorporated Christ in some form or another into their belief system. This would potentially open up the economic Trinity for inter-religious dialogue. God could simply be spoken of as the New Testament Gospel narratives portray him, rather than being caught up in the usual philosophic debates about the being of God. Certainly, Christian talk of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit may

Any talk of God, therefore, should speak of him as he revealed himself in the economy of salvation (*Heilsökonomie*). Speaking about the divine unity before the revealed economy of the triune God is provisional talk. Only after it has been presented in detail should one proceed to the unity and attributes of the divine essence. Pannenberg suggests this procedure and actually follows it for his own *Systematic Theology*:

To find a basis for the doctrine of the Trinity we must begin with the way in which the Father, Son, and Spirit come on the scene and relate to one another in the event of revelation...Christian statements about the one God and his essence and attributes relate to the triune God whom we see in the relation of Jesus to the Father. They can thus be discussed only in connection with the doctrine of the Trinity.³²

In the economy of salvation, moreover, the persons do not function as mere modes of being but actually as centers of action. They present a concrete and intrinsically differentiated life within the unity but never beyond its essence. The Cappadocian rule guards against possible tri-theistic notions: "the external operations of the Trinity are indivisible," that is, they do not divide the essence of God. In this sense, "the doctrine of the Trinity is in fact concrete monotheism."³³

Learning from Luther and the Confessions

The preceding presentation was not inserted merely for the sake of adding length. While it simply broaches the topic of modern discussions and forgoes the important task of discussing its scriptural and doctrinal propriety, its sentiments resonate with much of what Luther says about God in the Large Catechism, though with one important distinction: the nature of fellowship with God. We are given insight into the vestiges of the Trinity (*vestigia Trinitatis*): how he enacts fellowship and how he maintains it with the believer. Though often scorned for flirting with tri-theism and for breaking the traditional twelve-fold division for a threefold, Luther did so, I believe, not only for pedagogical reasons but to offer insight into God, which was until then argued more or less in an almost philosophical way (as monotheistic). The external trinitarian works, as he describes them, are not just incidental or salient variables. On the contrary, Luther makes

presuppose a prior understanding of god. It is obviously the God of Israel who revealed himself as the one and only God for whom they struggled against the prevalent gods in their religious surrounding, and then, more specifically and especially, the same Christian God who revealed himself in Jesus Christ.

³² Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, I:299.

³³ Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, I:335.

concrete statements of God, statements which CA I makes only in abstract ways. Luther opens up a scheme that brings the believer concretely and existentially into a fellowship with the triune God and not only in a purely conceptual way. As Rahner notes: "The Trinity is not for us a reality which can only be expressed as a doctrine. The Trinity itself is with us; it is not merely given to us because revelation offers us statements about it. Rather these statements are made to us because the reality of which they speak is bestowed upon us."³⁴ In Luther's threefold presentation, the mystery of the Trinity is a mystery of salvation. The conversation here is about how God is not removed from us in heaven but is here on earth in fellowship with us. To use modern terminology: God is discovered in discourse.³⁵ This begins christocentric, or better crucicentric, centering on the redeeming work of Christ in whom we see a loving God and not the angry and terrible judge.³⁶ But Luther does not remain a christomonist, engaging in a "unitarianism of the second article;"³⁷ he is quick to add the economy of the Spirit "neither could we know anything of Christ, had it not been revealed by the Holy Spirit."³⁸ For without the Spirit even Christ's work would have "remained hidden and no one knew of it, it would have been all in vain, all lost" (LC II, 38).³⁹ The believer is thus told that he is taken up into the fellowship with the triune God as he relates to ecclesiology. The church functions as mother, it incorporates and nurtures the faith of every Christian "through the Word of God" "which takes place through the holy sacraments and absolution as well as through all the comforting words of the entire gospel" (LC II, 42, 54).⁴⁰ For this reason the triune God and the community of believers cannot be separated; their connection has missiological and soteriological implications.⁴¹ The believer is brought into

³⁴ Rahner, *The Trinity*, 39, 21.

³⁵ Jenson suggests this term in place of the term *conversation*; Braaten and Jenson, *Christian Dogmatics*, I:470.

³⁶ "... we could never come to recognize the Father's favor and grace were it not for the LORD Christ, who is the mirror of the Father's heart. Apart from him we see nothing but an angry and terrible judge" (LC II, 65); Kolb and Wengert, *Book of Concord*, 440.

³⁷ A phrase coined by H. Richard Niebuhr, see Braaten and Jenson, *Christian Dogmatics*, I:469.

³⁸ Braaten and Jenson, *Christian Dogmatics*, I:469.

³⁹ Kolb and Wengert, *Book of Concord*, 436. "For where Christ is not preached, there is no Holy Spirit to create, call, and gather the Christian church, apart from which no one can come to the Lord Christ" (LC II, 45); Kolb and Wengert, *Book of Concord*, 436.

⁴⁰ Kolb and Wengert, *Book of Concord*, 436, 438.

⁴¹ "Of this community I also am a part and member, a participant and co-partner in all the blessings it possesses. I was brought to it by the Holy Spirit and incorporated into it through the fact that I have heard and still hear God's Word, which is the beginning point for entering it" (LC II, 52); Kolb and Wengert, *Book of Concord*, 438.

this fellowship and any separation from it would be an exclusion also from salvation (LC II, 66).⁴² Where the church remains true to its proclamation, salvation is found. One is amazed today how this premise is abandoned across denominations, even among Evangelicals, for a greater inclusiveness.⁴³ Against the backdrop of an economic Trinity and an ecclesiology along with it, Christianity confesses an exclusive trinitarian faith of an ecclesiocentric nature, which is explicitly defended already in the Athanasian Creed against monotheistic proposals of other kinds.⁴⁴

II. The Concentrated View of Fellowship: A Doctrinal and Sacramental Reality

Establishing Criteria for Fellowship

Luther backs his ecclesiocentric perspective with a trinitarian theology. The church serves as the custodian over the word through which the

⁴² Kolb and Wengert, *Book of Concord*, 440. To be sure, Luther's doctrine of vocation reminds us that Christians are in every facet of their life in worship and fellowship with the triune God as his explanation to the First Commandment holds: "*Anything on which your heart relies and depends, I say, that is really your God*" (LC I, 3); Kolb and Wengert, *Book of Concord*, 386.

⁴³ Though a Roman Catholic, Paul F. Knitter, in *No Other Name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Toward the World Religions* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1996) represents Protestant views. A notable evangelical is John Sanders, *No Other Name: An Investigation into the Destiny of the Unevangelized* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1992). A survey of the position of Evangelicals is given in Gregory A. Boyd and Paul R. Eddy, *Across the Spectrum: Understanding Issues in Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002). For the more traditional, exclusive arguments, one may see Peter Beverhaus, "Theologisches Verstehen nichtchristlicher Religionen," *Kerygma und Dogma* 35 (April/Juni 1989): 106-127. See especially his appraisal for past traditional christocentric supporters such as Karl Heim, Karl Hartenstein, Hendrik Kraemer, and Gerhard Rosenkranz.

⁴⁴ Unlike Luther, CA I confesses God abstractly: "... there is one divine essence Yet, there are three persons, coeternal and of the same essence and power" (CA I, 2-3); Kolb and Wengert, *Book of Concord*, 37. In doing so, however, it does not dismiss the ecclesiological implications. For an exclusion from fellowship with the triune God is, at the same time, also an exclusion from the catholic faith (from which the Mohammedans are also dismissed). After all, the article frames its statement with "the churches among us teach . . ." (*Ecclesiae magno consensu apud nos docent . . .*; CA I, 1); Kolb and Wengert, *Book of Concord*, 37. The Athanasian Creed repeatedly makes statements to the effect that "whoever wants to be saved must, above all, hold the catholic faith" (Athanasian Creed, 1-2, 26, 27, 40); Kolb and Wengert, *Book of Concord*, 24-25. People might object and insist that individuals could also live as Christians without being in immediate contact with the church. Such lone individuals with a faith in Christ probably exist. It would, nevertheless, be difficult to fathom that they became Christians without any contact with the church. See Otto Zänker, "Die evangelische Kirchenfrage der Gegenwart," in *Credo Ecclesiam*, ed. Hans Ehrenberg (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1930), 87.

triune God bestows his fellowship (CA XIII).⁴⁵ It should be obvious then why the Evangelical Lutheran Church has singled out the marks (*notae ecclesiae*) to define her doctrine of fellowship. Unlike all other activities, the preaching of God's word and the administration of the sacraments are the source and definitive means for other activities. Fellowship is theocentric not anthropocentric, dynamic not static, a gift rather than a work. The marks are the dividing line in the church between that which is holy and that which is profane. They establish an eternal *communio in sacris*. To be sure, there is often a broadening of the marks with what one may call other attributes.⁴⁶ A classic case of contention is prayer, as Hermann Sasse reminds us:

The question when and under what circumstances joint prayer is possible cannot be answered for certain. But it should be stated that the celebrated prayer in the church's liturgy as prayer of the body of Christ was seen since early times part of the *communicatio in sacris*, as the practice of the early church shows in which the prayer together with the eucharist was held behind closed doors and argued from Mt. 6:6.⁴⁷

The clarity with which fellowship around the marks is argued is noticeably absent in the question of prayer.⁴⁸ This is partly because the history of the LCMS reveals that its leaders at official meetings would at times abstain

⁴⁵ Kolb and Wengert, *Book of Concord*, 47.

⁴⁶ Peter Steinacker, *Die Kennzeichen der Kirche: eine Studie zu ihrer Einheit, Heiligkeit, Katholizität und Apostolizität*, Theologische Bibliothek Töppelmann 38 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1982), 28–29. In this sense, the rejection of the LCMS's Constitution of all forms of unionism and syncretism relates directly to the marks of the church. These prohibitions are "a) serving congregations of mixed confession by ministers of the church; b) Taking part in the services and sacramental rites of heterodox congregations or of congregations of mixed confession; c.) Participating in heterodox tract and missionary activities are all related to the preaching of the Gospel and the means of grace. (Art. VI, 2)" *The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1998 Handbook* (St. Louis: Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1998), 11; CTCR, *Lutheran Understanding of Church Fellowship*, 2000, 28.

⁴⁷ Sasse, *In Statu Confessionis*, II:240. In fact the CTCR corroborates this observation with references to the Council of Laodicea, latter half of fourth century, which forbade prayer with heretics in its Canon XXXIII: "No one shall join in prayer with heretics or schismatics." CTCR, *Theology of Fellowship*, 22.

⁴⁸ From discussions with the Wisconsin Synod, especially Lutheran churches define it as an activity that results from fellowship already in place with God and with one another. Prayer is a fruit of faith, and thus a level lower than that of the preaching of God's word and the administration of the sacraments. This point continues to be made by Lutheran churches in view of the Wisconsin Synod's understanding of church fellowship as a "unit concept, covering every joint expression, manifestation, and demonstration of a common faith." See *Four Statements on Fellowship*, 9.44–47.

from joint prayer with leaders of other denominations, even as close as those from the Iowa and Ohio Synods. Abstinence from prayer in such instances was used as a tool to express one's dissatisfaction with the doctrinal positions of the other party.⁴⁹ Prayer is God talk, addressing the triune God and thus demands a context where such God talk is possible. By implication, joint prayers taking place beyond such a context would have to be dismissed.⁵⁰ Unfortunately, this view is easily abandoned for the sake of making prayer an evangelistic tool to witness one's faith to others. That would broaden the context considerably. But to have it assume a role as a means of grace, the preaching of the gospel, is indeed problematic.⁵¹ At best, one should regard it as a *preparatio evangelica*, a petition to the triune God in the context of worship that he may open the hearts and minds of the callous for the truth found only in Jesus Christ.

Fellowship is seen particularly under the aspect of worship and the means of grace, but it is understood confessionally and doctrinally.⁵² Though the *doctrina evangelii* in CA VII is a singular term and primarily associated with the doctrine of justification, it permeates and influences all other articles.⁵³ Moreover, the *doctrina evangelii* is the apostolic teaching,

⁴⁹ This was argued with the use of Scripture and from articles on that subject, see examples in Erwin L. Lueker, ed., *Lutheran Cyclopedia* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1954), 296.

⁵⁰ The Independent Lutheran Church in Germany (known as the SELK) has in its recent official statement on Christian relations with Muslims in Germany explicitly dismissed any joint services and prayer with adherents of the Islam religion; see Selbständigen Evangelisch-Lutherischen Kirche (SELK), *Wegweisung für Evangelisch-Lutherische Christen für das Zusammenleben mit Muslimen in Deutschland* (Hannover: Selbständigen Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirche, 2002), 7.

⁵¹ Unfortunately, the CTCR opens the door to such a thought by stating in regards to joint prayers at civic events: "These occasions may provide opportunity to witness to the Gospel." CTCR, *Lutheran Understanding of Church Fellowship* (2001), 10.

⁵² Such indications were always part of the church, as Elert rightly points out with regard to the early church. See CTCR, *The Lutheran Understanding of Church Fellowship* (2000), 12.

⁵³ CTCR, *Theology of Fellowship*, 25. Hermann Sasse sees unity possible only in an agreement on all the articles of the Lutheran Confessions as they relate to the churchly acts of preaching, teaching, and the sacraments. His negative opinion on the Brief Statement of the LCMS is renowned; see Sasse, *In Statu Confessionis*, II:257. Leif Grane holds a minimalist approach and dismisses any confessional reading of the *doctrina evangelii* because it stands in violation to Melancthon's original intent, which considers the *consentire de doctrina evangelii* (to agree concerning the teachings of the gospel) as referring to proclamation alone and not to correct doctrine or something similar. Rather, according to Grane, the CA could be characterized as pre-confessionalistic and pre-schism, and thus in no way envisions nor encompasses the idea of a confession as a line of demarcation of one denomination from another. Leif Grane, *The Augsburg Confession:*

the *ta didaskalia*, that is truthfully explained in all articles of the Lutheran Confessions. CA X is, therefore, not an illegitimate aggrandizement of the *doctrina evangelii* but its corroboration: "For this reason the churches are not to condemn one another because of differences in ceremonies when in Christian freedom one has fewer or more than the other, as long as these churches are otherwise united in teaching *and in all the articles of the faith*" (SD X, 31).⁵⁴

Fellowship demands a confessional agreement in all articles of the faith as the church preaches (teaches) the gospel and administers the sacraments, which is pulpit and altar fellowship. From this emerged the *noli tangere* (do not touch) policy that also took effect on the mission field. Ties with Lutheran mission societies of Leipzig, Hermannsburg, and Neuendettelsau were severed. The LCMS mission work began with missionaries who defected to it from the Leipzig mission society. Franz Mohn and Theodor Näther among others disagreed with former mission colleagues on the mission field in India over doctrines such as verbal inspiration, *Übertragungslehre* (conferring the office), the status of the congregation in relation to church, and whether the pope is the antichrist. Both missionaries were enthusiastically embraced and supported by the LCMS.⁵⁵ Since then the mission field became the testing grounds for confessionalism in practices such as Baptism, exchange of pulpits, Holy Communion, and mixed marriages.⁵⁶

In the discussion of fellowship the Evangelical Lutheran Church pays close attention to the body of doctrines (*corpus doctrinae*). The LCMS also has adopted the traditional orthodox division of the articles of faith (*articuli fidei*). They were divided into a hierarchy of doctrines: secondary

A Commentary, tr. John H. Rasmussen (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1987), 97.

⁵⁴ Kolb and Wengert, *Book of Concord*, 640; emphasis added.

⁵⁵ William J. Danker, "Into All the World," in *Moving Frontiers: Readings in the History of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod*, ed. Carl S. Meyer (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1964), 299–303; Wilhelm Oehler, *Geschichte der Deutschen Evangelischen Mission* (Baden-Baden: Wilhelm Fehrholz, 1949), I: 221–222.

⁵⁶ Fred W. Meuser's analysis also includes the LCMS's and its partnership churches' opinion of practice on the mission field, see "Das Problem der Kanzel- und Abendmahlsgemeinschaft unter Lutheranern in Amerika," *Kirche und Abendmahl. Studien und Dokumentation zur Frage der Abendmahlsgemeinschaft im Luthertum*, ed. Vilmos Vajta (Berlin and Hamburg: Lutherisches Verlagshaus, 1963), 211. Notwithstanding frequent criticisms from within such as Edward L. Arndt (1864–1929), in *Moving Frontiers*, 306; and Dean Lueking, *Mission in the Making* (St. Louis, Concordia Publishing House, 1963), which is the embodiment of a constant implicit critique of the Missouri Synod's confessional mission enterprise.

fundamental articles such as Baptism and Holy Communion were sorted around the primary fundamental articles like the doctrine of justification and the doctrine of the Trinity (*articuli fundamentales et non fundamentales*). Around the fundamentals were clustered the non-fundamental doctrines, such as usury, which, though not a matter of indifference, do not if held in error necessarily terminate fellowship. These distinctions within the articles of faith underscore the felicity extended to those who, despite being subjected to abhorrent errors, were still believed to be in possession of the salutary faith.⁵⁷ More importantly, however, this hierarchy in the fundamental articles of faith does not establish the rules for fellowship,⁵⁸ that is, as if the primary fundamental ones were all that is needed. Certainly, Lutheran orthodoxy and the Lutheran Confessions always put Jesus first, but fellowship was not addressed with a minimalistic approach. Fellowship practices on the mission field also reflected that concern. Baptism, even if it was defined as secondary fundamental, or only an ordained necessity, became the missionary sacrament for enacting fellowship: the wages of original sin and the Lord's command to baptize never removed its urgency. It remains the first visible enactment of fellowship with the triune God and the switch in dominion (*Herrschaftswechsel*).⁵⁹

Thus the following rule for fellowship holds: Where the truth of the gospel and the sacraments are distorted through heresy, fellowship should not be practiced. At the same time, moreover, where the gospel has not been completely obliterated and the sacraments are still administered, there the *una sancta* also exists.⁶⁰ Such a distinction is important for the practice of an inter-Christian relationship. Since missions takes its place in CA VII as a kerygmatic-sacramental act it belongs to the *communio in sacris*, and thus can only be done by a Lutheran Church. In distinction to this,

⁵⁷ Lueker, *Lutheran Cyclopedia*, 320. See also Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950), I:80–93; and W. Rohnert, *Die Dogmatik der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche* (Braunschweig and Leipzig: Hellmuth Wollermann, 1902), 20.

⁵⁸ CTCR, *Lutheran Understanding of Church Fellowship* (2001), 4.

⁵⁹ The Lutheran Confessions also have not yet appropriated such a distinction of the articles of faith. Baptism still remains an absolute necessity. The CA II and the SD XII, 11 dismiss all thoughts of diminishing Baptism, even for children. But the Evangelical Lutheran Church never followed that stringent line. Siding with Luther, it always took exception to the death of unbaptized children of Christian parents who are to be commended to the God of infinite mercy. See Martin Luther, "Sermon on John 19: 25–37," in *Luthers Werke*, Erlangen Second Edition (Frankfurt am Main and Erlangen: Verlag von Heyder & Zimmer), 2, 152.

⁶⁰ Sasse, *In Statu Confessionis*, II:227.

however, there are the matters of externals making a *cooperatio in externis* with other church bodies possible, where the true Evangelical Lutheran Church does not see its doctrine and confession compromised or necessary for such inter-Christian action. This cooperation becomes a matter of discretion and casuistry and thus demands careful evaluation case by case.⁶¹

Testing Fellowship with Holy Communion

The celebration of Holy Communion always becomes a test for the practice of church fellowship because of its central place in ecclesiology and is generally associated as the seal of agreement.⁶²

Against the backdrop of those who belong to heterodox church bodies or among those who know the name of the triune God except in ignorance, a common missiological question is always this: "Should we admit someone who is not of our confession but who desires Christ in Holy Communion to participate in the altar" (1 Cor 10:18), or should we dismiss him and send him back to where the individual comes from, to the false gods or to a church with heterodox doctrines? Such a question really poses two false alternatives, assuming a *tertium non datur*. Practices of fellowship governed by missionary visions often propose Gordian-knot solutions to a complicated issue. It should be obvious, nevertheless, that lax practices in fellowship result ultimately in a counter-productive missionary witness of

⁶¹ After careful evaluation of certain practices, Lutheran mission would not engage in absolute separatism or isolation such as in matters of Bible translations and humanitarian aid efforts. Naturally, concessions to such joint practices must be applied with discretion because it, too, could become subject to confusion and misconception. See CTCR, *A Lutheran Stance toward Ecumenism*, 11; and CTCR, *Inter-Christian Relationships*, 29, 33. Martin Franzmann's distinction between the *res externae* and the *res internae* in this regard are not helpful. For the *notae ecclesiae* were externals, too, but they do not fit that category because of their indispensability; see "What Kind of Cooperation Is Possible of Discussions to Date?" in *Toward Cooperation Among American Lutherans* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1961), 18–22.

⁶² Across denominations the Eucharist is given central place in the discussion of fellowship. This is evident for the WCC in its CWME statement *Mission in Christ's Way*: "Mission in unity requires Christians to work for the authenticity of the apostolic faith. Doctrinal divisions, especially those that prevent the sharing of the eucharist . . . keep Christians from making a common witness. The eucharist, which is the most central sacrament of our faith, also is the place where our divisions become most painfully apparent. . . . At the same time, in light of the fact that many people around us do not even know the name of the Triune God except in blasphemy, we call in question the endless debates and time-consuming preoccupations demanding an 'open' eucharist." Lesslie Newbigin, *Mission in Christ's Way* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1987), 77.

the church: It conveys the idea that variants to the gospel are allowed to coexist. Holy Communion and its practice presuppose ordinarily a preexisting ecclesial fellowship, and an *a priori* full agreement in doctrine. Ordinarily because in view of confessional groups emerging within the state churches of Scandinavia, this principle might some day be challenged. Even though the prospect that the LCMS and a Scandinavian church may enter fellowship, is highly improbable.⁶³

Gunther Wenz, in his *Theology of the Confessions of the Lutheran Church*, twists the ecclesiology of the Augsburg Confession to such a degree that it supposedly condones a heterodox communion fellowship. Standing in the tradition of the Leuenberg Concord of 1973, he concludes that participants have no obligation to cede any of their doctrines or traditions while attending the Eucharist.⁶⁴ Holy Communion is thus a declaration of fellowship that unites all those in Christ (i.e. faith in the triune God), but simultaneously stands above all differences in doctrine, confessions, and teaching. In this sense, communion fellowship is considered as a remedial means to assist in overcoming ecclesial differences, if not also a means to ignore them.

Equally disturbing are concepts of communion fellowship that are eclectic in their choice of doctrines and dismissive of others. Robert Jenson, for example, in his much discussed *Systematic Theology* approaches Roman Catholicism in proposing a Eucharist ecclesiology (what he calls also an ecumenical *communio*-ecclesiology) that gives the Eucharist central place. Protestants will have little remaining reason to sacrifice unity for truth if a few doctrinal differences were to be erased. In order to achieve the goal, he advances innovative corrections to a selected array of doctrines of his choice, which he considers as obstacles—the saints, Mary, and the papal office—while other doctrines are made more or less dispensable.⁶⁵ Conversely and just as problematic is the proposal from an evangelical front where the centrality belongs to preaching, but the Eucharist is placed on the hatchet block with the practice of open fellowship. Often the *manducatio impiorum* (partaking of unbelievers) is invoked in this discussion, namely, that faith does not make the sacrament or the holiness

⁶³ Would the only interim solution then be a form of selective fellowship? That, too, must also be dismissed as the false alternative; CTCR, *The Nature and Implications of the Concept of Fellowship*, 27–32.

⁶⁴ Günther Wenz, *Theologie der Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-luthersichen Kirche* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1996), I:14.

⁶⁵ Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology: The Works of God* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), II:189–249. See also Braaten and Jenson, *Christian Dogmatics*, II:349–354.

of the communicant. One is then referred to the great meals of Christ, his fellowship with sinners, and the large banquet to which people from all corners and streets were asked to come in. Yes, thereby the ultimate criteria for admission becomes Christ's unlimited grace or unlimited gospel. Consequently, that would eliminate all attempts towards a practice of admission and discipline.⁶⁶

Naturally, one should not make fellowship an issue of theological sophistry or academic research. The LCMS's *consensus doctrinae* could invite the thought of inquisition, including that of its own members. To use a helpful Roman Catholic distinction, the *fides implicita* (blind obedience to the doctrinal position of the church) and the *fides explicita* (the faith that knows exactly all the doctrines of the church) often coexist.⁶⁷ In regard to the reality of a discerning faith, may a *non liquet* (not all is clear) policy even be considered, that is to say: When should a confession be considered good enough?⁶⁸ With regard to the fellowship of the altar, Luther's quest to explain Christ's real presence as passionately as he did shows that a clear discerning faith between the Antiochenian or Alexandrian theology matters in the practice of fellowship,⁶⁹ which would also include a proper distinction of Christ's bodily presence (διακρίνων τὸ σῶμα, 1 Cor 11:29). Pannenberg erroneously takes 1 Corinthians 11:27-31 far more leniently, proposing a Melancthonian solution, so to speak, to the mode of presence: "Prerequisite for admission can only be that one seeks fellowship with Christ, that is the faith in the presence of Christ in the meal, but not this or that theological interpretation of the mode of presence." On that basis it would also be far easier, as has become the fad in many circles, to support infant communion: "It is permissible as soon as a child can grasp the thought that Jesus is present in the celebration of the meal as

⁶⁶ CTCR, *Theology and Practice of the Lord's Supper*, 8.

⁶⁷ The CTCR raises the important reality of "ambiguous denominationalism" within the LCMS: "Contemporary denominations tend to cling to their traditional official formulations of doctrine and confession, but without taking them literally or expecting their constituents to believe, teach, and confess them with any degree of consistency." *Inter-Christian Relationships*, 5.

⁶⁸ CTCR, *Admission to the Lord's Supper*, 47.

⁶⁹ I find it rather odd that a church historian such as Alister MacGrath fails to see the connection between sacramentology and Christology in the discussion between Lutherans and the Reformed. Differences in the sacrament inevitably also lead to Christology. That connection was made soon enough in the Formula of Concord, Articles VII and VIII. See "Christology: On Learning from History," in *Who do you say that I am? Christology and the Church*, ed. Donald Armstrong (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999), 84.

mysterious as it may still seem."⁷⁰ Others in this connection seek to establish a self-examination of sorts that preempts confirmation and to validate their case draw attention to Luther's statement in the Large Catechism to the effect that Baptism and not confirmation is admission (*baptismus est admissio*) to Holy Communion (LC V, 87).⁷¹

Communion fellowship is thus tossed between two crucial questions, should the Lord's Supper be considered a means of grace or a means of church discipline? Certainly the former is preferred over the latter, but then again it is for those who repent of their sins and seek a life in forgiveness. It is not a means to cheap grace that makes concession to a murky fideism. Communion fellowship also has ethical ramifications. On the mission field, there is the tendency to over-moralize the issue of fellowship: non-smoking and abstinence from alcohol often become criteria as well (e.g. Botswana, Haiti, and in large areas of Asia). How one walks this path between church discipline (doctrinal or moralism) and grace is a difficult one. Perhaps, one could solve this issue from the doctrine of justification itself: Repentance is important and not the works or virtues of an individual.

The early church practice of communion fellowship has taught us to draw distinctions between the *missa catechumenorum* and the *missa fidelium*. This was done precisely with the purpose in mind that while the church pursued its missionary obligation to the world outside, it was also responsible to its own people.⁷² As the preaching of the word and Baptism establishes a fellowship in the triune God, the fellowship wrought in the Lord's Supper is confessed as special to the unbelieving world.⁷³

⁷⁰ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematische Theologie* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1988), III:364, 359, 362; my translation of the original German text.

⁷¹ Kolb and Wengert, *Book of Concord*, 476. Suggestions to this effect are made by Gottfried Martens, "Die Teilnahme von Kindern an der Heiligen Kommunion nach dem Urteil der Lutherischen Bekenntnisschriften," *Lutherische Beiträge* 7 (February 2002): 97-108.

⁷² "The proclamation of the Gospel extends to all people, over the unbaptized and baptized. In the proclamation of the word the worship service is open for all people. Holy Communion is only for the baptized. When the church celebrates Holy Communion, the doors to the world are closed . . . Holy Communion is the specific means of grace for the already constituted community of disciples. The most essential (*Eigentümlichste*) of the worship service is recognizable only in Holy Communion," Peter Brunner, "Das Wesen des kirchlichen Gottesdienstes," *PRO ECCLESIA* (Berlin and Hamburg: Lutherisches Verlagshaus, 1962), I:133.

⁷³ Walter Freytag, *Reden und Aufsätze: Herausgegeben von Jan Harmelink und Hans Jochen Margull*, TB 13/1-2 (München: C. Kaiser, 1961), 228; and "Verleiblichung des Lebens aus

Nonetheless, the church has recognized certain openings and exceptions to the practice of closed communion.⁷⁴ The clearer the church preaches and teaches, the more it is willing to address individual cases. But what kind of concessions should apply and to whom? Apart from campus and wartime situations, the LCMS allows also for rare and difficult situations of personal need and of being in a state of confession. Discretion to such exceptional cases resides with the church's pastors.⁷⁵ Hermann Sasse will have none of these apply not even in the case of *periculo mortis* (in the peril of death). He considers participation a confession. If exceptions apply, these would declare the important distinctions between the Lutheran and Reformed sacramentology as irrelevant.⁷⁶

III. Conclusion

Amid a diverse mix of denominational and religious pluralism, indifference, apostasy, and political theism, we are to acknowledge a broader fellowship, based on the existence of salvific faith in the triune God. This faith is in constant jeopardy and should not be presumed a given, as most fellowship documents do. It must be a constant topic of discussion in all facets of the church's life in order to be explained succinctly and lucidly in the ecclesial and mission environment. More importantly, such discussions are ecclesialogically (and missiologically) grounded for the believer. In the economy of the Holy Spirit, the church becomes, through its marks of word and sacrament, the instrument of salvation and fellowship. Such fellowship takes place in its concentrated form, where, particularly in worship, it becomes a matter of confession to this triune God. This confession, moreover, embraces the doctrine of justification with all other articles of the gospel. Fellowship is a matter of a confessional custodianship over the marks through which this triune God works. As was demonstrated from the practice of the fellowship of the altar, the church is, nevertheless, never free from its challenges and complications.

Christus. Die Bedeutung des Abendmahls für die Gemeinde, vom Missionsfeld her gesehen," *Reden und Aufsätze* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1961), 1:236–244. Though, as previously stated the sacraments might find a formal parallelism in other religions, they are unique to Christianity in terms of content and the combination of word and action. One may see Hans-Martin Barth, *Dogmatik: Evangelischer Glaube im Kontext der Weltreligionen* (Gütersloh: Christian Kaiser/Gütersloher Verlag, 2001), 587–588.

⁷⁴ See the cases of discretion in CTCR, *Inter-Christian Relationships*, 30–31; and CTCR, *The Lutheran Understanding of Church Fellowship* (2001), 11.

⁷⁵ CTCR, *Inter-Christian Relationships*, 31–32, 43; CTCR, *Admission to the Lord's Supper*, 47.

⁷⁶ Sasse, *In Statu Confessionis*, 1:118.

I have chosen to speak of the mission of the church by task rather than locality. There is some truth in the fact that “[m]issions is no longer understood as a thing which plays itself out chiefly on the outer edges of Christendom, but instead as a way of life or, rather, as a lifestyle for every Christian congregation within its particular surrounding.”⁷⁷ Placing missions into the definition of the church obliges both pastors and missionaries as overseers of the word and the sacraments to address issues of both missions and fellowship irrespective to their locality.⁷⁸ In 1965 the LCMS convention expressly passed a resolution that “the local Church and pastor are ultimately responsible for preaching of the Gospel, maintaining pure doctrine, and practicing fellowship.”⁷⁹ Preaching and the gospel are not mere incidentals in the life of the church, jumbled together at good will; the three are all inextricably linked in the life of the church. Later, the 1971 LCMS convention passed a resolution to this effect stating: “[d]ifficult problems on the mission field are to be answered within the framework on the Synod’s confessional stance.”⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Volker Stolle, *The Church Comes from All Nations: Luther Texts on Mission*, tr. Klaus Detlev Schulz and Daniel Thies (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2003), 3; See also David J. Bosch, *Witness to the World: The Christian mission in theological perspective* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1980), 46. “After all, the Great Commission (Matt 28:19) explicitly says: ‘Go ye therefore . . .’ The locality, not the task, decided whether someone was missionary or not; he is a missionary if he is commissioned by the Church in one locality to go and work elsewhere. The greater the distance between these two places, the clearer it is that he is a missionary.”

⁷⁸ The CTCR observes: “one finds, all too often, that professing Lutherans hold positions and policies at variance with the official confessional positions of traditional Lutheranism”. It then concludes that “[i]n contrast to the mid-19th century situation when the Missouri Synod was founded and its church-relations principles were first articulated, we can no longer assume that denominational membership clearly and directly identifies one’s doctrinal positions and convictions.” *Inter-Christian Relationships*, 4.

⁷⁹ CTCR, *Theology of Fellowship*, 46–105a.

⁸⁰ CTCR, *A Lutheran Stance toward Ecumenism*, 49–108b.