

LCMS on Inter-Christian Relationships

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Basic Considerations

Coram Deo: Spiritual Unity of the Church (unitas)

1. The unity of the church *coram deo* is a gift and work of the Holy Spirit. It is given “in, with, and under” the gift of justifying faith for at the same time I am made a child of God I am also made a brother or sister of others who have also come to faith.
2. As the Spirit creates the church through the Word, so the Spirit binds it together in unity through the same Word. Thus when AC 7 states that it is sufficient to agree in the preaching of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments. These create justifying faith in Christ and thus bind us together in unity under one head, Jesus Christ.
3. The unity of the church *coram deo* is thus a unity of faith in the faith. Thus the Small Catechism describes the Spirit as gathering the church and “keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one common, true faith.” In the Large Catechism he describes it as being “called together by the Holy Spirit in one faith, mind, and understanding. It possesses a variety of gifts, and yet is united in love without sect or schism” (LC II, 51).
4. The unity of the church is hidden reality. Thus it is an object of faith that we confess in the creeds when we affirm that there is “one holy Christian church.”

Coram Mundo: External Unity of the Church (concordia)

1. The church has the responsibility to manifest *coram mundo* (within the world) the hidden unity that it possesses *coram deo*. Thus we can say that the church possesses an ecumenical responsibility within the world. This applies to the church as it expresses itself in congregations or in larger regional and national gatherings of congregations.
2. The church expresses its *concordia* within the world through altar and pulpit fellowship. As word and sacrament create the true unity of the church, as all believers agree (*consentire*) on the Gospel and sacraments (which means to have them in common), we can extract two non-negotiable principles with regard so church unity and fellowship. Thus church fellowship is always altar and fellowship within the world (*coram mundo*).
3. Second, altar and pulpit fellowship is always dependent upon agreement in the confession of the Word. As the unity created by the Spirit is hidden from view to human eyes, we know only that we have heard the same Word in common with one another to the extent that we confess it and test it against the Scriptures. And so church fellowship always flows out of unity in confession.

4. But it is doctrine put into practice, for no other doctrine creates the church *coram deo* than that doctrine which is actually proclaimed by preachers and heard by people. Subscription to the Confessions is implemented by “corresponding public teaching (*publica doctrina*) in pulpit, instruction room, seminary, and in the church’s publications, and that all who departed from this norm were to be disciplined” (*Concept of Fellowship*, 35)

Issues and Questions Today

1. How do we enter into fellowship *coram mundo*? In the early centuries of the church, circular letters were distributed throughout the church informing others about those who had been received into communion or about those who had been excommunication. “Letters of Peace” or “Letters of Fellowship” were required of Christians traveling to other countries (*Concept of Fellowship*, 19). The counterpart to this practice in American Lutheran history has been the ecclesiastical declaration of altar and pulpit fellowship following formal doctrinal discussions to assess our confessional agreement.
2. The ecumenical responsibility of a church (*coram mundo*) entails several priorities. First, it seeks to preserve the unity of faith among its members. Second, it seeks to preserve the unity with its sister/partner churches around the world. Third, it seeks every opportunity for dialogue with those churches within whom we are not in fellowship.
3. How churches *coram mundo* choose different ways of organizing themselves or structuring themselves. In other words, different forms in and of themselves of polity are not obstacles to establishing church fellowship.