

# The Lutheran Understanding *of* Church Fellowship



Study Materials

Office of the President  
and  
Commission on Theology and Church Relations  
of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod

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Citations from the Lutheran Confessions are taken from *The Book of Concord* edited by T.G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959). The following abbreviations have been used:

- AC — Augsburg Confession
- Ap — Apology of the Augsburg Confession
- Ep — Epitome of the Formula of Concord
- FC — Formula of Concord
- LC — Large Catechism
- SA — Smalcald Articles
- SC — Small Catechism
- SD — Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord

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# THE LUTHERAN UNDERSTANDING OF CHURCH FELLOWSHIP

## INTRODUCTION

The 1998 convention of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod [LCMS] noted that a growing problem regarding fellowship exists among pastors and congregations<sup>1</sup> and asked its president and the Commission on Theology and Church Relations [CTCR] to prepare a study to explain the Synod's position. Though the word "fellowship" describes a wide range of activities among Christians, this study concentrates on altar and pulpit fellowship that allows the pastors of one church to preach and celebrate Holy Communion in the church of another. Similarly, when altar and pulpit fellowship exists the laity of one church may receive Holy Communion from the other church's pastors.<sup>2</sup> Churches in altar and pulpit fellowship share all spiritual things including a joint responsibility in maintaining a common confession of faith.<sup>3</sup>

It is important to note that this study is offered in its present form to the District conventions meeting in 2000. The President of the Synod and the CTCR will receive reactions to this study through the Discussion Reporting Instrument included at the end of this booklet.

As we begin this study of fellowship we call attention to the following basic assumptions:

- a. *The Holy Trinity is the source and pattern for the fellowship Christians have with one another in "the one holy Christian and apostolic church" (Latin: una sancta).*

The unity that exists among Christians finds its foundation in the unity that exists among the three persons in the Trinity. The Son and the Holy Spirit share in the deity of the Father. As the Nicene Creed states it: the Son is "of one substance with the Father" and the Holy Spirit "together with the Father and the Son is worshipped and glorified." The triune God, therefore, is an indivisible communion of persons by virtue of their common participation in the one divine substance.

Through the coming of the divine Son into the flesh, this communion of persons in the Trinity is proffered to us. For when Christ was incarnated, He united Himself indivisibly with human flesh, so that His flesh became the very instrument for the communication of His divine nature.

When, therefore, Christians are buried and raised with Christ in Baptism and when they partake of Christ's flesh and blood under the bread and wine in the Lord's Supper, they become participants "in the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4) that Christ shares with the Father and the Holy Spirit. By union with Christ, we believers become one with the triune God and so become one with one another.

b. *The one church, the assembly of believers, is an article of faith.*

Like other articles of faith, the church's unity cannot be seen but is believed: "I believe in one holy Christian and apostolic Church" (Nicene Creed). As Christ's mystical body and temple (Eph. 2:20–22), the church's unity is as invisible as her holiness. Hermann Sasse writes, "The Christians in Corinth had to believe that they were God's people and that in, with, and under their visible assembly the spiritual body of Christ was present—just as they could not see, taste, or feel that the consecrated bread and the consecrated wine in the Lord's Supper were the true body and true blood of Christ. They had to believe that."<sup>4</sup> The Gospel and sacraments are the church's marks through which the Holy Spirit creates faith in Christ who is present in them and joins Himself to us as His church. The one church, the fellowship of all believers, expresses herself outwardly as the assembly around the Gospel and sacraments. The internal and external fellowship are facets of the one church. Internal fellowship is constituted by faith and the external fellowship is expressed by confession.

c. *The church's internal unity, known only to God (Eph. 1:4), is expressed by an external or outward fellowship based on confession.*

While the church's internal unity is perfect and known only to God (Eph. 1:4), the limits of external fellowship are determined by whether the Gospel is preached purely and the sacraments are administered according to Christ's institution. The Gospel and the sacraments are in themselves always pure. In this way they create and preserve the church in her hidden unity throughout the world. Yet, when church bodies make public confession of the Gospel and the sacraments, tragically some obscure or explicitly contradict the teaching of the Gospel and the proper administration of the sacraments.<sup>5</sup> For this reason the limits or boundaries of the external fellowship are creeds and confessions. Churches in altar and pulpit fellowship share the same confession, including the rejection of errors that contradict this confession. Where churches cannot agree on a common confession, the basis for church fellowship does not exist. The original form of the Nicene Creed condemned those who did not believe that the divinity of the Son was equal to the divinity of the Father. Twelve centuries later the Lutheran Confessions identified agreements and disagreements with the Roman Catholic Church. But they also listed their differences with the Reformed, and in the case of the Formula of Concord, with other Lutherans.

## 1. Fellowship in the Scriptures

a. In English the word “fellowship” is commonly understood to refer to friends coming together. In New Testament teaching, however, one first has fellowship *in* something or someone, and then fellowship with others who have fellowship in the same thing. The Greek term *koinonia* (fellowship) refers to joint participation in a common thing: Christians share in the Gospel, Christ, the Holy Spirit, the one faith, Baptism, Christ’s body and blood, and through these they have *koinonia* or fellowship with one another.<sup>6</sup> Our fellowship is “with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ,” through whom we have fellowship with one another (1 John 1:3). Jesus prayed that all Christians may “be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us” (John 17:21). Jesus establishes fellowship with us by the Gospel and the sacraments: “This is he who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ, not with the water only but with the water and the blood. And the Spirit is the witness, because the Spirit is the truth. There are three witnesses, the Spirit [the preaching of the Gospel], the water [Baptism], and the blood [the Lord’s Supper]; and these three agree” (1 John 5:6–8).

By first uniting us with Himself, Christ unites us with one another. He is the Vine and we are the branches (John 15:1–8). Life flows from Him to the church so that it can bear fruit (John 15:4, 5). Unity among Christians is derived from the unity that connects God, faith, and Baptism: “There is one body [the church] and one [Holy] Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord [Jesus], one faith [doctrine], one baptism, one God and Father of us all” (Eph. 4:4–6). In this sense we can no more speak of many “churches” than we could speak of many “gods” or many “baptisms.” By Baptism believers dwell in Christ, in whom God fully dwells bodily, and so believers are united with God Himself (Col. 2:9–12; cf. 1 John 5:11, 20). Christ is the head of the body and we are its members (Rom. 12:4–8; 1 Cor. 6:15–17; 12:12–27; Eph. 4:1–16; 5:22–32; Col. 1:15–20).

b. “Denominations” are not a new phenomenon.<sup>7</sup> At the dawn of the apostolic age, Christians were divided into competing sects with differing doctrines.<sup>8</sup> Some Christians, however, were united in their adherence to the apostles’ teaching that preserved the word of Jesus. James, Peter, and John received Barnabas and Paul into their fellowship because they held the same teachings. This mutual recognition was necessary for joint preaching and missionary activity (Gal. 2:9). Churches that accepted the apostles’ teaching (Acts 2:42) formed one fellowship throughout the civilized world and welcomed each other’s members to the Lord’s Supper.<sup>9</sup> In our terms, they were in altar and pulpit fellowship. Other churches like the Nicolaitans who did not hold to apostolic teachings were not in fellowship with apostolic churches (Rev. 2:6, 15; 1 John 2:19). In warning against false prophets Jesus predicted this splintering (Matt. 7:15; 24:11, 24).<sup>10</sup>

c. The necessity of creeds or confessions as a basis for church fellowship can be traced to Jesus who made a true confession of Himself before Pontius Pilate. He also requires it of us. It is not optional (1 Tim. 6:13). “So every one who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 10:32). Peter’s confession that Jesus is the Christ is the church’s foundation and stands in contrast to false confessions that He was merely a man (Matt. 16:13–18). Confession follows faith. “If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For man believes with his heart and so is justified, and he confesses with his lips and so is saved” (Rom. 10:9–10). To distinguish truth from false teaching (1 John 4:1–3), and for the sake of church unity, this confession must be made (John 17:17–23).

d. Any discussion about absolute truth is outdated to many. One commentator has remarked that “almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative.”<sup>11</sup> Opinions have taken the place of absolutes, but for Christianity truth is essential. Mere opinions will not do (cf. 1 Tim. 1:13; 4:3; Titus 1:9; 2:1, 8). The apostles identify some ideas as myths (1 Tim. 4:7; Titus 1:14; 2 Peter 1:16) and others as fiction (cf. 1 Cor. 15:13–20). Even scholars who do not believe that there is such a thing as revealed doctrine admit that the Bible speaks of such a thing.<sup>12</sup>

Since the church lives from the Gospel, she must contend for its truth. That is to say, doctrine is necessary for the church’s welfare. The New Testament shows throughout that the confession of what is true and the rejection of what is false were taken seriously not merely for the sake of being right but for the sake of preserving saving faith (Titus 1:13; 2:2). Distinguishing Christ’s voice from other voices spells the difference between life and death for believers (John 10). His Gospel Word is the power of God unto salvation (Rom. 1:16).<sup>13</sup> The truth of the Gospel founds the church (John 14:26; 15:15, 20; 16:13–15; Acts 2:42; Eph. 2:20) and must remain inviolate (Matt. 7:15; 24:35; 28:20; Rom. 16:17).

Pastors in particular have a responsibility in this regard. By remaining in Paul’s teaching Timothy would save himself and his hearers (1 Tim. 4:16). A bishop must be able not only to teach (1 Tim. 3:2), but must guard the true and saving doctrine (1 Tim. 6:20). Pastors must be able to refute all doctrines that contradict the apostles’ teachings (1 Tim. 1:3; 6:3–5, 20; 2 Tim. 2:25; 3:5; Titus 1:9; 3:10; 2 Peter 3:2–4).

Sadly, scriptural exhortations to preserve right teaching often require separation between Christians (1 Cor. 11:18–19). Church fellowship cannot be extended where false doctrine persists. Paul’s words, “A little yeast leavens the whole lump” (Gal. 5:9), allow no deviation from the Word.<sup>14</sup> False teachings merit God’s wrath (Gal. 1:6–9). Thus, true teachings identify orthodox churches and separate them from heterodox churches with their false teachings.

e. For some time after Christ's resurrection, Christians continued to pray with the Jews in their synagogues and the temple (Acts 2:46; 3:1; 21:26 ff.), even though their leaders did not believe Jesus was the Christ and had been raised from the dead (Matt. 28:11–15; Acts 4:1 ff.). However, Holy Communion was celebrated not in the temple but only in the homes of Christians that served as their churches (Acts 2:46). Unbelieving Jews were excluded from the Sacrament: "We have an altar from which those who serve the tent have no right to eat" (Heb. 13:10). For Christians Communion was the highest form of fellowship (1 Cor. 10:16–21). It was their Holy of Holies (Heb. 9:11; 12:24) through which they were united with Christ and with each other.

Receiving the Sacrament was more than an individual expression of belief. It was a solemn confession made in the presence of God and all the saints in heaven and earth. By participating in Christ's body and blood (1 Cor. 10:16–17),<sup>15</sup> Christians proclaimed His death.<sup>16</sup> Agreement in the apostles' doctrine was necessary for the breaking of the bread (Acts 2:42).<sup>17</sup> *Church fellowship is altar and pulpit fellowship in the New Testament.*

Refusing Communion to non-Christians seems reasonable, but refusing it to other professing Christians is a problem for some. However, the New Testament contains especially straightforward and severe condemnations that still apply to false teachers and their churches.<sup>18</sup> Some of these passages (e.g., Rom. 16:16–18) are written quite likely in a eucharistic context. That warnings to avoid the false teachers are given within the context of the Lord's Supper,<sup>19</sup> is a view supported by the widely respected Lutheran theologians as Werner Elert,<sup>20</sup> Hermann Sasse,<sup>21</sup> and Martin Franzmann.<sup>22</sup> A case in point may be Rom. 16:16–18. Verse 17 clearly warns against false teachers. On the basis of v.16, "Greet one another with a holy kiss," some scholars put these warnings in the context of the Eucharist. The kiss of peace was shared just before the celebration of Communion and this practice is the origin of the words "the peace of the Lord be with you" in our liturgy.

A problem arises in interpreting v.18 of Romans 16: "For such persons do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by fair and flattering words they deceive the hearts of the simple-minded." The King James Version translates: "For they that are such serve not our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly." At first glance, "belly-servers" could hardly refer to other Christians regardless of what they believed. It seems as if we are faced with two unacceptable choices: 1) If this passage forbids altar and pulpit fellowship with other Christian churches, then it follows that they are not Christian. But to make such a claim is schismatic (for further discussion see endnote 40). 2) On the other hand, if they are Christians, they are not "belly-servers." They are simply mistaken and there is no reason to refuse them Holy Communion.<sup>23</sup>

However, we should interpret the harsh designation "belly-servers" in view of Jesus' even harsher designation of Peter as "Satan" (Matt. 16:23).

For a moment, Peter let himself become Satan's voice to divert Jesus from the cross (compare Luke 4:13), but Jesus did not thereby consign His chief disciple to the ranks of the unbelievers. As uncomplimentary as "belly-server" is, the false teachers are not by this designation necessarily eternally condemned. More severe than Rom. 16:17–18 is Gal. 1:8–9, where Paul curses those who preach any other gospel than that which he proclaimed.

Satan, who appears as an angel of light (2 Cor. 11:14), is the author of all false doctrines (see Eph. 6:12), which can be appealing and sound biblical. Tragically, in deceiving others false teachers deceive themselves (2 Tim. 3:13). In spite of their sincerity, their doctrines do not come from the Spirit of truth (John 15:26) but oppose the one faith (Eph. 4:5).<sup>24</sup> Even in those who err the Holy Spirit can work faith, yet never through or because of their errors but in spite of them. Our task is not to untangle the heart's mixed motives or to pass judgment on the presence and quality of the faith of others, but to apply the apostolic standard to their doctrines and practices.<sup>25</sup>

f. Some false teachers face eternal separation from Christ (Matt. 7:21–23), but others are saved by clinging to the Gospel by faith. In building the church, they put the straw of their false teachings on top of the solid foundation of the Gospel truth (1 Cor. 3:11–15).<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, their false teachings exclude them from the fellowship with the apostolic churches.

## **2. Fellowship in the Lutheran Confessions**

Luther did not intend to break with the Roman Catholic Church. As long as he lived, his conscience was troubled that he had split the church. And after his death, his successors earnestly desired unity—but not by sacrificing doctrine.<sup>27</sup> However, long before the Reformation the church had experienced divisions. Bishops and church councils routinely contradicted one another. In 1054 A.D. the pope excommunicated the patriarch of Constantinople, dividing Christendom into the East and West. In the century before the Reformation, Rome's three rival popes excommunicated one another and a fourth replaced them. In addition, sects resembling our denominations arose. Though the principle of agreement in doctrine for church fellowship was operative wherever the church had condemned false doctrines (for example at Nicea in 325), the Lutherans were the first to define the church.<sup>28</sup> "The church is the assembly of saints in which the Gospel is taught purely and the sacraments are administered rightly" (AC VII, 1; Latin translation). Luther put it in another way: "[a] seven-year-old child knows what the church is, namely, holy believers and sheep who hear the voice of their Shepherd" (SA III, xii, 2). Decisive in both definitions is that the one church is not an organization but believers whose fellowship is in the Gospel and the sacraments.

The Apology of the Augsburg Confession provided this interpretation of Article VII of the Augsburg Confession:

The church is not merely an association of outward things and rites, like other governments, but it is mainly an association of faith and of the Holy Spirit in the hearts, which however has outward marks, so that it can be recognized, namely, the pure teaching of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments in accord with the Gospel of Christ (Ap VII/VIII, 5; our translation).<sup>29</sup>

People pretending to be Christians can belong to the church's external fellowship but not to the *una sancta*. The church "properly speaking" is "mainly an association of faith and of the Holy Spirit in men's hearts (Ap VII/VIII, 5). Wherever the Gospel is preached and the sacraments are administered, the Spirit gathers believers into Christ's one church."<sup>30</sup>

The church appears to be in constant peril. Even those entrusted with her care at times oppress her. The devil is in her midst and the world fights her (Ap VII/VIII, 9).<sup>31</sup> However, under her tribulations the true church (the *una sancta*) is present, though hidden (Ap VII/VIII, 9, 10, 18, 19). But she is in no sense an abstract idea like Plato's non-existent republic or Thomas More's *Utopia*, or Shangri La. She "actually exists, made up of true believers and righteous men scattered throughout the world. And we add its marks, the pure teaching of the Gospel and the sacraments" (Ap VII/VIII, 20).<sup>32</sup> Augsburg Confession VII provides this definition of church unity:

For the true unity of the church it is enough to agree concerning the teaching of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments. Nor is it necessary that human traditions or rites and ceremonies instituted by men be everywhere alike, as Paul says: one faith, one Baptism, one God and Father of all, etc. (VII, 2-3; our translation of Latin).<sup>33</sup>

Unlike Roman Catholics and the Reformed, for church fellowship the Lutherans required agreement in the Gospel and sacraments without ceremonial and organizational uniformity. The Formula of Concord states: "[C]hurches will not condemn each other because of a difference in ceremonies, when in Christian liberty one uses fewer or more of them, as long as they are otherwise agreed in doctrine and in all its articles and are also agreed concerning the right use of the holy sacraments...." (FC SD X, 31). The Gospel comprised the entire Christian faith and not a simple affirmation that Jesus is Lord.

Popes and bishops often allowed doctrinal differences and only required that people and priests submit to their authority.<sup>34</sup> Lutherans, however, insisted on doctrinal agreement. Matters of church organization were ultimately inconsequential and not a deterrent to church fellowship, but doctrine was another matter. Since what is confessed either offers or hinders the Gospel, false teachings had to be condemned. In his explanation of the First Petition of the Lord's Prayer, Luther states that false teachers profane God's

name (SC III, 5).<sup>35</sup> God answers prayers for pure teaching because “[the] Word of God is the true holy thing above all holy things...the treasure that sanctifies all things” (LC, I, 91). Therefore “the chief worship of God is the preaching of the Gospel” and not following human observances (Ap XV, 42). The Smalcald Articles confess that “the Word of God shall establish articles of faith and no one else, not even an angel” (SA II, ii, 15).<sup>36</sup> A confession of the truth includes rejecting the contrary errors. The Formula of Concord notes that like the Nicene Creed, the Augsburg Confession has condemnations: it “distinguishes our reformed [Lutheran] churches from the papacy and from other condemned sects and heresies” (FC SD, Rule and Norm, 5).<sup>37</sup> The Augsburg Confession and the Apology confronted Roman Catholic error on the one side and Reformed and Anabaptist error on the other.<sup>38</sup> The Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope [1537] also renounces error.<sup>39</sup>

The Formula of Concord, the last of the Lutheran Confessions (1577), contains condemnations in all its articles and calls attention to the Smalcald Articles and the Treatise, where “the grounds and reasons are set forth at necessary length for renouncing the papistic errors and idolatries, for having no communion with the papists, and for neither expecting nor planning to come to an understanding with the pope about these matters” (FC SD, Rule and Norm, 7).

In condemning the Anabaptist-Reformed denial of the sacramental presence of Christ in the Supper, the Formula took over Luther’s confession which he wrote anticipating his death:

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 (FC SD VII, 33).

Luther’s words may sound harsh, but they express the seriousness with which the Lutheran Confessions reject false doctrine.

The Formula also rejects sects that took advantage of “the poor, simple people” who “unfortunately accepted in their innocence what called itself evangelical and was not papistic” (FC SD XII, 8). However, the Formula was primarily directed against Lutherans who gave Roman and Reformed twists to the Augsburg Confession.

The Preface to the *Book of Concord* specifies who is included in its condemnations:

...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.... 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. 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 (Tappert, 11–12).<sup>40</sup>

The Preface does not condemn individual members of heterodox church bodies, but this does not mean that they should receive Holy Communion at Lutheran altars.

The *Book of Concord* is the “single, universally accepted, certain, and common form of doctrine which all our Evangelical churches subscribe and from which and according to which, because it is drawn from the Word of God, all other writings are to be approved and accepted, judged and regulated” (FC SD, Rule and Norm, 10). Its confessions comprise the Lutheran church's solemn and official confession of the Gospel and sacraments and provide the basis and limits of church fellowship.<sup>41</sup> Professing allegiance to the Lutheran Confessions while practicing altar and pulpit fellowship with those who oppose their doctrine is a denial of them.<sup>42</sup>

### **3. The Historic Christian and Lutheran Consensus on Church Fellowship**

Common today, even among some Lutherans, is the practice of church fellowship without agreement in confession. This was not the practice of the ancient church, where altar and pulpit fellowship required doctrinal and confessional unity.<sup>43</sup> Werner Elert writes:

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>44</sup>

Zwingli, the father of the Reformed churches, did not consider his differences with Luther an obstacle to sharing the Lord's Supper with him.

Luther refused. In the early 1800s Friedrich Schleiermacher, a Reformed theologian, departed from the practice of the ancient church and of Luther in supporting the union of Prussian Lutheran and Reformed Churches into altar and pulpit fellowship without doctrinal agreement. For Schleiermacher the church was a fellowship held together by what people did and not by what they believed: “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.”<sup>45</sup> For Schleiermacher people came together to form the church, which was simply a subcategory under the category of fellowship.<sup>46</sup> The church for him was only one organization among others. Luther taught, however, that the church was a divine fellowship created by Christ through the sacraments.

Luther had confronted a similar situation in Frankfurt where Lutherans and Reformed received the Lord’s Supper together. He found it “appalling to hear in one and the same church or at one and the same altar both sides should come for and receive of one and the same Sacrament, yet with the one side believing that it receives only bread and wine, while the other [believes] that it receives the true body and blood of Christ.”<sup>47</sup> Luther, who required confessional agreement for church fellowship,<sup>48</sup> urged the congregation to resolve whether or not the body of Christ was received with the mouth.<sup>49</sup>

About the same time that Lutherans in Prussia were being forced into altar and pulpit fellowship with the Reformed, some Lutherans in America were voluntarily doing the same thing. The followers of Samuel S. Schmucker in the General Synod identified five alleged errors in the Augsburg Confession.<sup>50</sup> It accepted Methodist revivalism, joined interdenominational mission societies and promoted the Evangelical Alliance (1846), whose goal was “to make the invisible church visible.”<sup>51</sup> In commending the Prussian Union, the General Synod distanced itself from the classical Lutheran position.

In most of our church principles we stand on common ground with the Union Church of Germany [Prussia]. The distinctive doctrines which separate the Lutheran and the Reformed Churches we do not consider essential. The tendency of the so-called Lutheran party seems to us to be behind the time. Luther’s peculiar views concerning the presence of the Lord’s Body in the Communion have long been abandoned by the majority of our ministers.<sup>52</sup>

The LCMS was not alone in resisting the tide of unionism.<sup>53</sup> In 1875 the General Council adopted the Galesburg Rule: “Lutheran Pulpits for Lutheran ministers only—Lutheran altars for Lutheran communicants only.”<sup>54</sup> In 1925 the Buffalo, Iowa, and Ohio Synods placed the same principle in the Minneapolis Theses:

[C]hurch fellowship, that is, mutual recognition, altar and pulpit fellowship, and eventually cooperation in the strictly essential work of the church, presupposes unanimity in the pure doctrine of the Gospel and of the confession of the same in word and deed.

Where the establishment and maintenance of church fellowship ignores present doctrinal differences or declares them a matter of indifference, there is unionism, pretense of union which does not exist.<sup>55</sup>

In establishing the original American Lutheran Church, these synods put the Galesburg Rule in their constitution: "The Synod regards unity in doctrine and practice the necessary prerequisite for church fellowship, and therefore adheres to the rule, 'Lutheran pulpits for Lutheran pastors only, and Lutheran altars for Lutheran communicants only,' and rejects unionism in all its forms."<sup>56</sup> In 1956 Franklin Clark Fry, president of the United Lutheran Church in America, said: "Insistence upon agreement in doctrine as a precondition for church fellowship is the distinguishing mark of Lutherans among all Protestants and should never be relaxed."<sup>57</sup>

#### **4. The Official Position of The Lutheran Church— Missouri Synod on Church Fellowship**

Since its founding in 1847 the LCMS has insisted on agreement in doctrine for altar and pulpit fellowship. Its first president, C.F.W. Walther, set forth the LCMS position in Thesis XXI of his *The Evangelical Lutheran Church, The True Visible Church of God on Earth*:

- A. The Ev. Lutheran Church is sure that the teaching contained in its Symbols is the pure [divine] truth because it agrees with the written Word of God in all points....
- B. The Ev. Lutheran Church requires its members and especially its teachers unreservedly to confess and vow fidelity to its symbols....
- C. The Ev. Lutheran Church rejects all fraternal and churchly fellowship with those who reject its Confessions in whole or in part.<sup>58</sup>

The *Brief Statement of the Doctrinal Position of the Missouri Synod* (1932) presents the consistent position of the LCMS on fellowship.

28. *On Church-Fellowship*. — Since God ordained that His Word *only*, without the admixture of human doctrine, be taught and believed in the Christian Church, 1 Pet. 4:11; John 8:31, 32; 1 Tim. 6: 3, 4, all Christians are required by God to discriminate between orthodox and heterodox church-bodies, Matt. 7:15, to have church-fellowship only with orthodox church-bodies, and, in case they have strayed into heterodox church-bodies, to leave them, Rom. 16:17. We repudiate *unionism*, that is, church fellowship with the adherents of false

doctrine, as disobedience to God's command, as causing divisions in the Church, Rom. 16:17; 2 John 9, 10, and as involving the constant danger of losing the Word of God entirely, 2 Tim. 2:17-21.

29. The orthodox character of a church is established not by its mere name nor by its outward acceptance of, and subscription to, an orthodox creed, but by the doctrine which is *actually* taught in its pulpits, in its theological seminaries, and in its publications. On the other hand, a church does not forfeit its orthodox character through the casual intrusion of errors, provided these are combated and eventually removed by means of doctrinal discipline, Acts 20:30; 1 Tim. 1:3 (emphasis in original).<sup>59</sup>

Francis Pieper, author of the *Brief Statement*, also wrote the *Christian Dogmatics* that was published in English translation by resolution of the LCMS' 1944 convention. This standard LCMS doctrinal textbook develops in detail the LCMS position that church fellowship with false teachers is not allowed.<sup>60</sup>

To resolve growing differences in the old Synodical Conference over church fellowship, LCMS president John W. Behnken convened a conference of theologians from the LCMS' sister churches throughout the world. This group in 1961 presented to the Synodical Conference a statement titled *Fellowship in Its Necessary Context of the Doctrine of the Church* in 1961. Thesis 11 stated:

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.<sup>61</sup>

The same position is set forth in the explanations of the LCMS' catechism: "we should avoid false teachers, false churches, and all organizations that promote a religion that is contrary to God's Word."<sup>62</sup> Under Question 305, "Who must not be given the Sacrament?" the answer includes: "C. Those of a different confession of faith, since the Lord's Supper is a testimony of the unity of faith."<sup>63</sup>

Finally, as one of the "conditions of membership" the LCMS Constitution requires:

Renunciation of unionism and syncretism<sup>64</sup> of every description, such as:

- a. Serving congregations of mixed confession, as such, by ministers of the church;

- b. Taking part in the services and sacramental rites of heterodox congregations or of congregations of mixed confession;
- c. Participating in heterodox tract and missionary activities (Art. VI, 2).<sup>65</sup>

In spite of growing differences on some important issues, the LCMS has reaffirmed its position in its convention resolutions. At its 1977 convention the Synod affirmed the validity of Article VI of its Constitution with reference to joint wedding services with heterodox churches and resolved “[t]hat we expect our pastors and congregations to follow this article with respect to mixed wedding ceremonies.”<sup>66</sup> In terminating church fellowship with the ALC in 1981, the LCMS stated:

[F]or the LCMS (and traditionally, for many other Lutheran church bodies as well) altar and pulpit fellowship between church bodies is the deepest and closest possible relationship precisely because it is based on comprehensive agreement in the Biblical and confessional doctrine of the Gospel and in all its articles, and in the right administration of the holy sacraments. In the LCMS view, doctrinal differences cannot be tolerated either within or between church bodies and are by their very nature disruptive and divisive of altar and pulpit fellowship.<sup>67</sup>

## 5. Postscript

This document is offered as a study of the Synod’s position on church fellowship (altar and pulpit fellowship) on the basis of the Scriptures and the Confessions, with reference also to church history—including the Synod’s own history. It does not discuss the many questions that remain concerning the various ways individual Christians might relate to each other. The President of the Synod and the CTCR eagerly await the responses from the District conventions in the year 2000. Above all, this study is presented in the conviction that true unity in the doctrine of the Gospel is a priceless, undeserved gift to be treasured and cultivated in humility. “Let him who boasts, boast of the Lord” (1 Cor. 1:31; Jer. 9:24).

Rekindle for this end-time stress  
Faith’s ancient strength and steadfastness  
That we keep pure till life is spent  
Your holy Word and Sacrament.  
May glorious truths that we have heard,  
The bright lance of your mighty Word,  
Spurn Satan that your Church be strong,  
Bold, unified in act and song.

“Lord Jesus Christ, Will You Not Stay”  
Hymn 344, vv. 2 and 4  
*Lutheran Worship*

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> 1998 Resolution 3-03B "To Study Fellowship Principles and Practices," *Convention Proceedings*, 114. 1998 Resolution 3-10C "To Endeavor to Keep the Unity of the Spirit in the Bond of Peace" further called for an extensive program of study on the subject at District conventions and various conferences during the next triennium. *Convention Proceedings*, 118.

<sup>2</sup> For an extended discussion of this matter see *Admission to the Lord's Supper: Basics of Biblical and Confessional Teaching*, A Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations, 1999.

<sup>3</sup> The merging of church organizations or denominations does not belong to our discussion here, but it remains true that churches that share pulpits and altars often eventually establish one organization.

<sup>4</sup> Hermann Sasse, "Article VII of the Augsburg Confession in the Present Crisis of Lutheranism" [April 1961], in *We Confess the Church*, trans. Norman Nagel (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1986), 47.

<sup>5</sup> An example may be helpful. When a person receives a trinitarian Baptism in a Reformed congregation (such as a Baptist church), that Baptism is valid and true. Tragically, however, Baptist doctrine explicitly rejects the biblical teaching that Baptism brings the Holy Spirit and the forgiveness of sins.

<sup>6</sup> See J. V. Campbell, "Koinonia and Its Cognates in the New Testament," in *Three New Testament Studies* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1965). Werner Elert, *Eucharist and Church Fellowship in the First Four Centuries*, trans. Norman Nagel (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1966) See especially chapter 2 and Excursus III in this latter work.

<sup>7</sup> So Hans Asmussen, cited in Elert, *Eucharist and Church Fellowship*, 43.

<sup>8</sup> Richard Bauckham, "For Whom Were Gospels Written?" in *The Gospels for All Christians*, ed. Richard Bauckham (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998), 43.

<sup>9</sup> Unity and division on account of the true doctrine were from the beginning not simply local, but in principle global, "ecumenical" ("*oikoumene*" [Mt. 24:14] = habitable world): "The greetings attached to such passages [1 Cor. 16:20; 2 Cor. 13:12; Rom. 16:16; 1 Thess. 5:26; 1 Peter 5:14] testify to the fellowship that tied the local church to churches elsewhere and to the entire 'brotherhood throughout the world' (1 Peter 5:9). Thus, Holy Communion becomes the great Sacrament of the true unity of the Church." Hermann Sasse, *This Is My Body* (Adelaide: Lutheran Publishing House, 1977), 322. For a scholarly treatment of how widespread these churches were see Michael B. Thompson, "The Holy Internet: Communication Between Churches in the First Christian Generation," in *The Gospels for All Christians*, 49-70.

<sup>10</sup> Among the possible options for "the false prophets" are the Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, Zealots, Simon Magus, Bar Kokba, Gnostics and legalistic Jewish Christians. Absence of a specific group may indicate that a variety of false teachers had already plagued the early Christian community. See W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, Jr., *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, The International Critical Commentary, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988-1998), 1:701-2.

<sup>11</sup> Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), 25.

<sup>12</sup> “The fundamental error, which equates the revelation with revealed doctrine begins with the Apologists but has its beginnings even in the Pastoral Epistles and with the Apostolic Fathers (cf. Titus 2:10, and the emphasis on ‘sound doctrine’). The expression in 2 Tim. 3:16, ‘Every scripture inspired of God is also profitable for teaching,’ which, wrongly translated, became the locus classicus [classic proof-text] for the doctrine of verbal inspiration, betrays the beginnings of this unfortunate identification.” Emil Brunner, *Revelation and Reason*, tr. Olive Wyon (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1946), 8–9, notes 12 and 13.

<sup>13</sup> See also John 1:17, 18; 6:63, 68; 8:31–32; 2 Cor. 3:6–4:18; Gal. 3:2–5; 1 Peter 1:23–25.

<sup>14</sup> Luther wrote: “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 this 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 (Matt. 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.... We are surely prepared to observe peace and love with all men, provided that they leave the doctrine of faith perfect and sound for us. If we cannot obtain this, it is useless for them to demand love from us. 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.!... 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. 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.... In the issue of salvation...when fanatics teach lies and errors under the guise of truth and make an impression on many, there love is certainly not to be exercised, and error is not to be approved. For what is lost here is not merely a good deed done for someone who is unthankful, but the Word, faith, Christ, and eternal life. 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. Therefore when the Sacramentarians accuse us of neglecting love, we continually reply to them with this proverb of Paul’s: ‘A little yeast, etc.’ [Gal.5:9].” Martin Luther, “Lectures on Galatians” (1535), *Luther’s Works* (hereafter *LW*), American Edition (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1964), 27:36–39.

<sup>15</sup> “The fellowship is not brought about by the actions of blessing and breaking, but by the content of the cup and the bread: ‘For *one* bread (it is), *one* body we are, the many, for we all partake of *one* bread’ (v17).” Hermann Sasse, “*Sanctorum Communio*,” in *This Is My Body*, 355.

<sup>16</sup> “We are perfectly willing for the Mass to be understood as a daily sacrifice, provided this means the whole Mass, the ceremony and also the proclamation of the Gospel, faith, prayer, and thanksgiving. Taken together, these are the daily sacrifice of the New Testament; the ceremony was instituted because of them [German adds: “it was instituted for the sake of preaching”] and ought not be separated from them. Therefore St. Paul says (1 Cor. 11:26), ‘As often as you eat this bread and

drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death.'" Ap XXIV, 35; Tappert 256.

<sup>17</sup> The Lord's Supper is the Church's Supper—not the supper of private individuals (see 1 Cor. 11:20–22). "The 'either-or' of Lord's Supper or Church's Supper presupposes a certain degeneration . . . this can consist in seeing in the Lord's Supper solely a gift of Christ to the individual, giving an individualistic misinterpretation." Edmund Schlink, "Lord's Supper or Church's Supper," in *Intercommunion*, Donald Ballie and John Marsh, eds., (London: SCM, 1952), 298. The Lord's Supper is not the property of the individual Christian. It is not the Christian's feelings, thoughts, opinions, views, or even theology, which decides what the Lord's Supper is. Such misunderstandings come from Schleiermacher's view of the church (see Elert, *Eucharist and Church Fellowship*, 2). Charles Porterfield Krauth expressed it well: "Christ is the centre of the [Evangelical] system, and in the Supper is the centre of Christ's revelation of Himself. The glory and mystery of the incarnation combine there as they combine nowhere else. Communion with Christ is that by which we live, and the Supper is 'the Communion.'" *The Conservative Reformation and Its Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1963), 655.

<sup>18</sup> "Surely one must see that the true counterpart in our day to the false teachers of the New Testament age are the heterodox church-bodies themselves. . . . For in them heterodoxy, false teaching, 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 refuge in heterodox bodies are every bit as bad as the false teachings known in the New Testament. . . . And in all heterodox bodies it is just their characteristic false teaching that makes them what they are, and that is their *raison d'être* ["reason for existence"]. 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." H. P. Hamann, cited in *Crossroads*, A Report by the Parish Education Committee of the Queensland District, Evangelical Lutheran Church of Australia, 1965, 49–50.

<sup>19</sup> I. Howard Marshall who does *not* believe that the bread is Christ's body agrees that "avoiding" means refusing them the Lord's Supper. He states: "[I]f 1 Corinthians was meant to be read as part of the proceedings at the church meal, the use of the curse against those who do not love the Lord (1 Cor. 16:21) may be seen as reinforcing the sense of community among those who in the meal confessed their love of the Lord and their separation from others, specifically those who proclaimed another gospel (cf. the similarly placed warning in Rom. 16:17–18 and also Gal. 1:8–9 for the use of the curse)." "Lord's Supper," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, Gerald F. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin, eds. (Downers Grove, IL and Leicester, England: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 573.

<sup>20</sup> Elert concludes: "The separation from false teachers which we find in the epistles (already Rom. 16:17), . . . obviously applies in the first place to the divine service which includes the Eucharist." *Eucharist and Church Fellowship*, 114.

<sup>21</sup> *This Is My Body*, 322. See also Sasse's "Observations on Romans 16:17–18 (1955)" in *Scripture and the Church: Selected Essays of Hermann Sasse*, Jeffrey J. Kloha and Ronald R. Feuerhahn, eds., Concordia Seminary Monograph Series, Number 2 (St. Louis: Concordia Seminary, 1995), 253–59. Sasse argues that whenever we find the exhortation in the New Testament "Greet one another with a holy kiss" (1 Cor. 16:20; 2 Cor. 13:12; Rom. 16:16; 1 Thess. 5:26; 1 Peter 5:14), this indicates that the reading of an apostolic epistle (otherwise, a sermon) was followed by the celebration of the Lord's Supper (254).

<sup>22</sup> Martin Franzmann, *Romans*, in Concordia Commentary series (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1968), 277.

<sup>23</sup> Franzmann argued that the doctrine or teaching referred to in verse 17 “is best left in its broadest and fullest sense: all that the Christians of Rome had heard, learned, believed, obeyed, and said yea to, all that had made *mathetai* [disciples] of them—that is the norm by which the divisions and offenses, and the creators of them, are to be measured and rejected. The point of cleavage is, in a word, the Gospel.” “Exegesis on Romans 16:17 ff.,” *Concordia Journal* 7 (January 1981), 15. Franzmann noted, “If we study occurrences of *skandalon* and *skandalizo* in the New Testament, we shall find that in almost every instance where men cause (or are) offenses, they are within the church visible.” (19). He then concluded: “Our findings suggest that the interpretation traditional in our circles is essentially sound” (19). By “our circles” Franzmann meant the old Synodical Conference. But the same view of Rom. 16:17 was held already by Luther, who spoke of “[a]ll of St. Paul’s warnings, Romans 16 [:17–18], I Corinthians 10 [:14], Galatians 3, 4, and 5, Colossians 2 [:8], and elsewhere, and all the sayings of the prophets in which they teach us to avoid human teaching.... Thus we conclude that wherever there is a Christian congregation in possession of the gospel, it not only has the right and power but also the duty—on pain of losing the salvation of its souls and in accordance with the promise made to Christ in baptism—to avoid, to flee, to depose, and to withdraw from the authority that our bishops, abbots, monasteries, religious foundations, and the like are now exercising. For it is clearly evident that they teach and rule contrary to God and his word.” LW, 39:308–309. Franzmann, incidentally, also commends (14) the “careful and objective study” of Robert Hoerber, *A Grammatical Study of Romans 16:17* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1948). Hoerber had shown the grammatical untenability of the argument that what the text really means to reject as “contrary to the doctrine [the Romans] had learned” is not false doctrine but divisiveness.

Sasse writes: “[T]his word of Paul [Rom. 16:17f.] can only be applied in the sense in which the Apostle used it. It is a word which is directed against heretics, against every heresy which destroys the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Such heresies are the great heresies of the ancient church; and also the great heresies which are rejected by the ‘condemnations’ of the Book of Concord are meant, as well as the false teachings of our day such as Rationalism, Liberalism, and the great sects of the present...A church which calls itself Lutheran and yet has fellowship with the false doctrines that are rejected in our confessions would cease to be an orthodox church.” “Observations on Romans 16:17–18,” 257.

<sup>24</sup> Sasse notes that “heresy is always a denial of Christ, even if the heretic doesn’t want that.” “Observations on Romans 16:17–18,” [see note 15], 256.

<sup>25</sup> Martin Franzmann wrote regarding Rom. 16:17–18: “Verse 17 takes no cognizance of intentions at all; it states with the utmost objectivity that the errorists to be avoided do in fact occasion divisions and offenses counter to the received teaching...But does not verse 18 give us further characteristics to aid us in identifying the errorists to be avoided? The exegete will have to point to the form and the content of the sentence and answer, ‘No.’ ...the attitudes here ascribed to them are such as are not empirically verifiable, and the methods attributed to them are exactly the kind that make identification difficult.” “Exegesis on Rom. 16:17 ff.,” 16.

<sup>26</sup> H. P. Hamann examined some typical anti-heresy texts and concluded that most of them are “so wide and general in their form that they must apply directly” to false doctrine in all times and places. In the other two texts (Titus 3:10 and 2 John 9–11) Paul and John are “applying to specific situations what was to them axiomatic for all false doctrine.” 1 Timothy 4:1–6 “is interesting in that it shows the same

principle at work in respect of teachings which strike us, on the face of things, as comparatively minor matters...the abstaining from meats, in fact being a wrong teaching in respect of adiaphora even." He added: "Actually Rom. 16:17, 18 is no more difficult than the rest of the texts quoted so far, and could easily have been treated in the same group, with parallel phrases to Matt. 7:15; Tit. 3:10; Gal. 1:8, 9...What better solution of the problem is there than that which resolutely denies fellowship to perverters of the truth, false teachers, heretics, refuses them the hand of fellowship, brotherly recognition, support for their false teaching (2 John 9-11), but which at the same time leaves the matter of their soul's salvation to God's perfect judgment...Our texts 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." "An Examination of the Relation of Certain Passages of the N.T. to the Problem of Fellowship," unpublished essay, ca. 1962, 5-6.

<sup>27</sup> "We should have preferred, and we besought and petitioned the Almighty, that our churches and schools might have been preserved in the teaching of God's Word and in agreeable Christian concord and that they might have been well managed and carried on in a Christian fashion and in harmony with God's Word, as they were while Dr. Luther was alive. Nevertheless, just as, while the holy apostles were still alive, it happened that false teachers insinuated perverted teachings into the churches in which the apostles themselves had planted the pure, unadulterated Word of God, so such teachers were also inflicted on our churches because of our own and the ungrateful world's impenitence and sin." Preface to the *Book of Concord*, Tappert, 4.

<sup>28</sup> The Nicene Creed simply confesses that the church is "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic." John Meyendorff remarks: "Curiously enough, the ecclesiological problem was never formally posed as a real issue in the medieval debate between Constantinople and Rome." *The Orthodox Church* (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1981), 209.

<sup>29</sup> Tappert divides these words from the Apology into two sentences (169).

<sup>30</sup> The "true unity of the church" is defined thus in the German of paragraph 31: "We say that those are called one harmonious church who believe in one Christ, have one Gospel, one Spirit, one faith [creed], the same sacraments, and so are speaking of spiritual unity, without which faith and a Christian ethos cannot exist." Compare paragraph 10 (German): "[T]hat number and those people are the right church, who, here and there in the world, from the rising of the sun to its setting, truly believe in Christ, who then have one Gospel, one Christ, one and the same Baptism and Sacrament, are governed by one Holy Spirit, even though they have differing ceremonies." See also XX, 6 (German): "[T]he opponents condemn the manifest divine truth and the right, Christian, blessed, holy doctrine, without which no Christian church can at all exist, which every Christian, so far as his body and life extend, is bound to confess, to save, and to defend, to the glory of God." In addition, see IV, 400: "Although our opponents arrogate to themselves the name of the church, therefore, we know that the church of Christ is among those who teach the Gospel of Christ, not among those who defend wicked opinions against the Gospel, as the Lord says, 'My sheep hear my voice' (John 10:27)" (Latin text; Tappert, 168). In speaking of one Christ, one Spirit, etc. the German version of the Apology seems to be reflecting on Eph. 4:4-6, a position that we have outlined in the body of the paper.

<sup>31</sup> The German adds: “In all this [darüber] the true doctrine and church [*rechte Lehre und Kirche*] is often so utterly oppressed and lost, as happened under the papacy, as though there were no church, and it often appears as though she had quite perished” (Ap VII/VIII, 9). Reformed theology uses “visible church” of those associations that are committed to God’s ordinances. The “invisible church” are those individuals who are elected and called directly by the Holy Spirit and not through the means of grace. Thus, for the Reformed the invisible and visible churches are really two separate churches and not one church with two different aspects as in Lutheran theology.

<sup>32</sup> German: “[T]his self-same church has these external signs: the office of preaching [*Predigtamt*] or Gospel and the sacraments” (Ap VII/VIII, 22).

<sup>33</sup> “For this is sufficient for the true unity of the Christian church, that the Gospel be harmoniously preached there according to [its] pure understanding, and that the sacraments be administered in accordance with the divine Word. And it is not necessary for the true unity of the Christian church that uniform ceremonies, instituted by men, be everywhere observed, as Paul says to the Ephesians in chapter 4: ‘One body, one Spirit, as also you are called to one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one Baptism’” (VII, 2–3; our translation of the German).

<sup>34</sup> Luther dubbed this “collier’s faith” (a blind faith in “what the church believes” without knowing what that is). “An Open Letter to Those in Frankfurt on the Main, 1533,” trans. Jon D. Vieker, *Concordia Journal* 16 (October 1990) 339. See also F. Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 3:429.

<sup>35</sup> In the Large Catechism, Luther goes further. He writes: “See, then, what a great need there is for this kind of prayer! Since we see that the world is full of sects and false teachers, all of whom wear the holy name as a cloak and warrant for their devilish doctrine, we ought constantly to cry out against all who preach and believe falsely and against those who attack and persecute our Gospel and pure doctrine and try to suppress it, as the bishops, tyrants, fanatics, and others do.... For there is nothing [God] would rather hear than to have his glory and praise exalted above everything else and his Word taught in its purity and cherished and treasured” (LC III, 47–48; Tappert 426).

<sup>36</sup> The alternative is “enthusiasm” or “spiritualizing,” elsewhere called “fanaticism” [*Schwärmerei*]: “All this is the old devil and the old serpent who made enthusiasts of Adam and Eve. He led them from the external Word of God to spiritualizing and to their own imaginations.... It is a poison implanted and inoculated in man by the old dragon, and it is the source, strength, and power of all heresy, including that of the papacy and Mohammedanism” (SA III, viii, 5, 9; Tappert 312–13).

<sup>37</sup> Regarding the Augsburg Confession, its Apology, the Smalcald Articles (including the Treatise), and the two Catechisms, the Formula confesses: “The pure churches and schools have everywhere recognized these publicly and generally accepted documents as the sum and pattern of the doctrine which Dr. Luther of blessed memory clearly set forth in his writings on the basis of God’s Word and conclusively established against the papacy and other sects” (FC SD, Rule and Norm, 9; Tappert, 505). The decree of Nicea, which forms the basis for our Nicene Creed, did not have the lengthy article on the Holy Spirit that was added later in 381 at Constantinople. Rather, it condemned several phrases which the Arians had used to show that the Son was not God in the same sense as was the Father.

<sup>38</sup> “We should forsake wicked teachers because they no longer function in the place of Christ, but are antichrists. Christ says (Matt. 7:15), ‘Beware of false prophets’; Paul says (Gal. 1:9), ‘If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to

that which you received, let him be accursed” (Ap VII/VIII, 48; Tappert, 177). “Most of what our opponents maintain, on the other hand, does overthrow faith, as when they condemn our doctrine that forgiveness of sins is received by faith” (21; Tappert, 172).

<sup>39</sup> “To dissent from the consensus of so many nations and to be called schismatic is a serious matter. But divine authority commands us all not to be associated with and not to support impiety and unjust cruelty” (Treatise, 42; Tappert, 328). “The errors of the pope are manifest, and they are not trifling.... And it is the clear command of God that we should flee from idolatry, impious doctrines, and unjust cruelty.... On the other hand, those who agree with the pope and defend his doctrines and forms of worship defile themselves with idolatry and blasphemous opinions...detract from the glory of God, and hinder the welfare of the church by so strengthening errors and other crimes as to impose them on all posterity” (58, 59; Tappert, 330).

<sup>40</sup> A classic commentary on this passage is given in the *Memorandum [Darlegung]* of 1871, which stated the reasons for forming the Lutheran Synodical Conference of North America: “...so that our little Lutheran Zion is by no means that church . . . outside of which there would be no salvation.... But the question whether true believers and children of God exist also outside the Lutheran church, and the question whether one may cultivate pulpit and altar fellowship with members of a heterodox communion, are quite different, so that our church just as resolutely answers the second question with a No as she answers the first with a Yes.... Our church is indeed far from condemning [*verdammen*], for example, all Reformed, who still err in the article of the Holy Supper, or all Baptists, who still err in the doctrine of infant Baptism, or all Methodists, who still err in the doctrine of the signs of the state of grace; but our church is just as far from admitting a Reformed, a Baptist, a Methodist to its altar, let alone a Reformed, Baptist, or Methodist preacher into her pulpit, without having first ‘reminded, instructed, warned’ 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 would let himself be misled by another.’” *Proceedings Ev. Lutheran Synodical Conference of North America*, 1 (1871–92), 24–25.

<sup>41</sup> “As soon as a congregation no longer wishes to recognize the deciding authority of the *Symbolical Books* of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, it ceases to be a Lutheran congregation; but if it does not wish to subject itself even to the clear statements of *Holy Scripture*, as the Word of the eternal God, it becomes a *school of Satan*. Rev. 3, 9.” C.F.W. Walther, *Die Rechte Gestalt* [The Right Form of an Evangelical Lutheran Congregation Independent of the State] (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1890); 62 (our translation; emphases in original).

<sup>42</sup> This study must take note of the recent alliances that involve the majority of the world’s Lutheran churches and Reformed and Episcopal churches. These agreements rested on those critical methods of biblical research that erroneously find different, competing theologies within the New Testament. In 1981 the LCMS took official notice of an essay that had argued “that the whole traditional Christology, from Nicaea and Chalcedon to Art. III of the Augsburg Confession, is unbiblical and untenable in light of modern historical-critical scholarship.” 1981 Resolution 3–20 “To Ask LCUSA to Study Implications of Historical Criticism,” *Convention Proceedings*, 160. Loyola University Professor Thomas Sheehan wrote in *The New York Review* (June 14, 1984) of a developing “liberal consensus” in Roman Catholic biblical scholarship to the effect that “Jesus of Nazareth did not assert any of the divine or messianic claims the Gospels attributed to him and that he died without believing he was Christ or the Son of God.” Also at the root of the recent

Lutheran/Reformed/Episcopal agreements are views that no longer speak of truth but only of opinions. In this environment Scripture is deprived of its authority and the creeds and confessions, which depend on the Scriptures for their authority, are seen as little more than milestones in church history and thus for them the confessions have no binding authority. In 1997 the northern European Lutheran churches established altar and pulpit fellowship with the Church of England and her sister churches. In 1997 the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America [ELCA] entered into altar and pulpit fellowship with three churches that explicitly hold to Reformed teachings, including the denial that Christ's body and blood are actually received by mouth in the Lord's Supper. One of these Reformed churches has no binding creed or confession. This action by the ELCA was followed by two more alliances in 1999 that further compromised Lutheran teachings: 1) the establishment of full communion (altar and pulpit fellowship) with the Episcopal Church, with the understanding that in the future its pastors would be ordained by bishops who stand in the apostolic succession as it is defined and practiced by the Episcopalians; 2) the signing of the *Joint Declaration on Justification* by member churches of the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church. See the study guides prepared by the Commission on Theology and Church Relations titled *The Formula of Agreement in Confessional Lutheran Perspective*, *The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification in Confessional Lutheran Perspective*, together with *The Porvoo Statement and Declaration in Confessional Lutheran Perspective* prepared by the seminary faculties (St. Louis: Office of the President and The Commission on Theology and Church Relations, LCMS, 1999).

In an essay titled "The Historical-Critical Method and the Method of the Lutheran Confessions," Duane A. Priebe noted: "Ernst Käsemann argues that denominational diversity is rooted in theological diversity within the [biblical] canon." *The Function of Doctrine and Theology in Light of the Unity of the Church* (Lutheran Council in the USA, 1978), 80. In an essay on "Perspectives on the Hermeneutics Debate" American Lutheran Church (ALC) theologian Harold H. Ditmanson wrote: "It is compatible with the ALC position to hold that the Confessions contain a true exposition of the Bible, but not *the* true exposition (Quanbeck)...we affirm the relative character of Scripture, tradition, and experience by seeing in them witnesses to the ultimate authority." John Reumann, ed., in collaboration with Samuel H. Nafziger and Harold H. Ditmanson, *Studies in Lutheran Hermeneutics* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 92, 98. ALC theologian Warren Quanbeck wrote: "The truth of God lies beyond any and all theological statements.... The study of language has removed some of the pretensions of theology, taking away its claim to be the truth or to present truths and showing it to be symbols or signs pointing to the truth which is in Jesus Christ.... The discovery of the different theologies of the Bible opened theologians to the possibility of theologies which differ but complement each other rather than contradict or oppose each other.... The differences that exist between the traditions are no longer seen as divisive." *Search For Understanding* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1972), 48, 54, 64, 66-67.

<sup>43</sup> In the early church, says Werner Elert, "[t]here was either complete fellowship or none at all." *Eucharist and Fellowship*, 164. "Altar fellowship was possible only where there was confessional unity" (169). "The modern theory that anybody may be admitted 'as a guest' to the Sacrament in a church of a differing confession, that people may communicate to and fro in spite of the absence of full church fellowship is unknown in the early church, indeed unthinkable" (175).

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 182.

<sup>45</sup> Quoted in Elert, *Eucharist and Fellowship*, 2.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 2–5. What Luther meant by fellowship, then, is diametrically opposed to what Schleiermacher meant by the term 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.” Unlike Schleiermacher, Luther did not get an idea of fellowship from somewhere and then derive the nature of the church from the nature of fellowship. He first asked what is the church, and what is the Sacrament, and then sought to determine in what way each might be called a *communio*.

<sup>47</sup> “Open Letter to Those in Frankfurt on the Main,” 341.

<sup>48</sup> Armin-Ernst Buchrucker, *Wort, Kirche und Abendmahl bei Luther* (Bremen: Stelten & Co., 1972), 175 (out translation). A footnote adds: “...to accede to the doctrine of the other [party], that is church fellowship. For church fellowship is doctrinal fellowship, which exists for Luther only where sameness [*aequitas*] in doctrine obtains.”

<sup>49</sup> Luther wrote, “It is quite true that wherever the preacher administers only bread and wine for the Sacrament, he is not very concerned about to whom he gives it, what they know or believe, or what they receive.... However, because we are concerned about nurturing Christians who will still be here after we are gone, and because it is Christ’s body and blood that are given out in the Sacrament, we will not and cannot give such a Sacrament to anyone unless he is first examined regarding what he has learned from the Catechism and whether he intends to forsake the sins which he has again committed. For we do not want to make Christ’s church into a pig pen [Matthew 7:6], letting each one come unexamined to the Sacrament, as a pig to its trough. Such a church we leave to the Enthusiasts!...And all of this we have received from the beginning of Christendom.” “An Open Letter to Those in Frankfurt on the Main,” 343.

<sup>50</sup> These errors are: ceremonies of the mass, private confession and absolution, denial of the divine obligation of Sunday, Baptismal regeneration, and the real presence of the Lord’s body and blood in the Eucharist. The “Definite Synodical Platform, 1855,” in Richard C. Wolf, *Documents of Lutheran Unity in America* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 103.

<sup>51</sup> Ruth Rouse and Stephen Charles Neill, eds., *A History of the Ecumenical Movement 1517–1948*, 2nd ed. (London: S.P.C.K., 1967), 322.

<sup>52</sup> S. E. Ochsenford, *Documentary History of the General Council of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in North America* (Philadelphia: General Council Publication House, 1912), 63.

<sup>53</sup> “Unionism” referred at first to the Lutheran-Reformed “unions” of the 19th century, but later came to mean inter-confessional fellowship generally.

<sup>54</sup> Wolf, *Documents of Lutheran Unity in America*, 171. Sometimes the “rule” was worded to provide for exceptions: “*The Exceptions* to the rule belong to the sphere of *privilege*, not of *right*” (170). F. Pieper criticizes this: “When Lutheran synods in America indeed wanted to cling to the rule, ‘Lutheran altars for Lutheran communicants only,’ but then wanted exceptions to the rule granted, they were again making admission to the Lord’s Supper a matter of human caprice and were thus in fact dropping the divine rule.” *Christian Dogmatics*, 3:386, n. 138. But see C. P. Krauth’s very rigorous definition of “exceptions” (Wolf, 172–177). Elsewhere Krauth wrote: “Every Christian is bound either to find a Church on Earth, pure in its whole faith, or to make one. On the other hand, he who says that the Church is wrong, confesses in that very assertion, that if the Church be right, he is an errorist; and that in

asking to share her communion while he yet denies her doctrine, he asks her to adopt the principle that error is to be admitted to her bosom, for as an errorist and only as an errorist can she admit him." The result would be that error claims first toleration, then equality, then supremacy. Krauth, *The Conservative Reformation and Its Theology*, 195–96.

<sup>55</sup> Wolf, *Documents of Lutheran Unity*, 341.

<sup>56</sup> Wolf, 336.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 547. The same principles for altar and pulpit fellowship were in place in the founding of the Lutheran Church of Australia in 1965: "[A]ccording to the Word of God and our Lutheran Confessions, Church fellowship, that is, mutual recognition as brethren, altar and pulpit fellowship and resultant co-operation in the preaching of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments, presupposes unanimity in the pure doctrine of the Gospel and in the right administration of the Sacraments.... We declare that wherever continued co-operation in the preaching of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments and worship exists, there we have a witness to the world of unity in the faith and a profession of Church fellowship." *Theses of Agreement*, 1966, V, 26–27. See also V, 21: "The outward unity of the Church as 'the fellowship of outward ties and rites' must rest upon the same basis on which the spiritual unity of true believers rests and depends, viz., upon the marks of the One Church.... Where there is truth, there is unity."

<sup>58</sup> Cited in Wm. Dallmann, W. H. T. Dau, and Th. Engelder (Editor), *Walther and the Church* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1938), 127.

<sup>59</sup> A reprint of the *Brief Statement* is available from Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, MO.

<sup>60</sup> Under the heading "**Orthodox and Heterodox Churches**," F. Pieper writes the following: "It is God's will and command that in His Church His Word be preached and believed in purity and truth, without adulteration. In God's Church nobody should utter his own, but only God's Word (1 Pet. 4:11). Chaff and wheat do not belong together. All 'teaching otherwise,' ἑτεροδιδασκαλεῖν, is strictly forbidden. 1 Tim. 1:3 '...charge some that they teach no other doctrine.' ...in all Scripture there is not a single text permitting a teacher to deviate from the Word of God or granting a child of God license to fraternize with a teacher who deviates from the Word of God.... And all Christians without exception are commanded to avoid such (Rom. 16:17; 1 Tim. 6:3 ff.)."

"The distinction between orthodox and heterodox church bodies and congregations is based on this divine order. A congregation or church body which abides by God's order, in which therefore God's Word is taught in its purity and the Sacraments administered according to the divine institution, is properly called an orthodox church (*ecclesia orthodoxa, pura*). But a congregation or church body which, in spite of the divine order, tolerates false doctrine in its midst is properly called a *heterodox church (ecclesia heterodoxa, impura)*." *Christian Dogmatics*, 3:422.

In note 29 on the same page, Pieper said: "Orthodox churches in our day are those Lutheran congregations and church bodies which profess and actually teach the doctrines laid down in the Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, because these doctrines, on examination, are found to be the teaching of God's Word. Impure and heterodox churches are the Roman Catholic Church, the Eastern Catholic Church, the Reformed Church with its many subdivisions, and, moreover, also the church bodies which, though bearing the Lutheran name, do not profess and actually teach the doctrine of the Church of the Reformation."

Pieper continues: "All children of God should be earnestly concerned to see how real and serious this difference between the church bodies is, because indifference as to the Christian doctrine is rampant today among professed Christians,...Not the "official" doctrine, but the actual teaching determines the character of a church body.... A church body loses its orthodoxy only when it no longer applies Rom. 16:17, hence does not combat and eventually remove the false doctrine, but tolerates it without reproof and thus actually grants it equal right with the truth." (422-23).

In the sections following his discussion of orthodox and heterodox churches, Pieper continues:

#### **"Children of God in Heterodox Churches**

Though God desires that all congregations be orthodox, and though all heterodox communions exist only by God's sufferance and contrary to God's gracious will, still it is a fact that also in the heterodox communions there are believing children of God.... Though Christ denies to the Samaritan Church the right of existence as a separate church organization (John 4:22), still He repeatedly acknowledged individual Samaritans as true children of God (Luke 17:16 ff; 10:33)....

#### **Church Fellowship with Heterodox Churches (Unionism) Is Prohibited by God**

It is common knowledge that the presence of children of God in heterodox churches is urged to prove that it is right, even demanded by charity, to fellowship heterodox churches. This is the exact opposite of what Scripture teaches, for Scripture says, 'Avoid them' [Rom. 16:17; 1 Tim. 6:3 ff.; 2 John 10-11; etc.].

The argument of unionists is contrary even to *natural reason*. The old Lutheran teachers point to 2 Sam. 15:11 as an illustration. Just as the fact that two hundred citizens of Jerusalem in their ignorance joined Absalom did not give the rest of Israel the right to desert their king and join the rebels, nor even to connive at the rebellion, so the circumstance that some Christians, from ignorance and contrary to God's orders, follow false teachers does not give license to other Christians to do the same thing....

If Christians, against the divine prohibition, fellowship false teachers and tolerate false doctrines, they commit the sin which the Church calls "unionism," "syncretism"....

The Christian Church can and should have patience with the erring and seek through instruction to remove the error. But never can or should the Church grant error equal right with the truth. If it does, it renounces the truth itself. It is the very nature of truth to antagonize error. Truth which no longer excludes error, but grants it domicile, is eo ipso resigning as truth. Pertinently Luther remarks: 'Whoever really regards his doctrine, faith, and confession as true, right, and certain cannot remain in the same stall with such as teach or adhere to false doctrine (St. L. XVII:1180)'" (423-26).

<sup>61</sup> "Statement of the Overseas Committee," *Proceedings of the Recessed Forty-sixth Convention*, Lutheran Synodical Conference, 1961, 9-13, reprinted in August R. Suelflow, ed., *Heritage in Motion* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1998), 113. See also Thesis 12: "The fellowship created by Word and Sacrament 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 fel-

lowship created by Word and Sacrament 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*)" (113).

<sup>62</sup> *Luther's Small Catechism with Explanation* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1986), 159. The texts cited are Matt. 7:15-16; Rom. 16:17-18; 2 Cor. 6:14; Gal. 1:8; 2 Tim. 4:3; and 1 John 4:1.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 241. This answer is supported by Acts 2:42; 1 Cor. 10:17; 1 Cor. 11:26; and Rom. 16:17.

<sup>64</sup> "Syncretism" is the older word for mingling confessions, but now usually means joining with non-Christian religions.

<sup>65</sup> 1998 *Handbook*, 11.

<sup>66</sup> 1977 Resolution 3-25, "To Speak Regarding Lutheran/Non-Lutheran Weddings," *Convention Proceedings*, 136.

<sup>67</sup> 1981 Resolution 3-01, "To Declare LCMS Not in Altar and Pulpit Fellowship with ALC," *Convention Proceedings*, 154.

# THE LUTHERAN UNDERSTANDING OF CHURCH FELLOWSHIP

## A SUMMARY

At its 1998 convention The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod noted that a growing problem exists in its midst regarding the understanding, application, and practice of fellowship. The Synod asked the President and the Commission on Theology and Church Relations to prepare a study of our church's confessional nature (why we are who we are) and our fellowship principles and practices (why we do what we do).

As we begin this study of fellowship we call attention to the following basic assumptions:

a. *The Holy Trinity is the source and pattern for the fellowship Christians have with one another in "the one holy Christian and apostolic church" (Latin: una sancta).* Just as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit have an internal fellowship with each other, so all believers have fellowship with God in Christ and therefore with each other. As three persons are one God, so many Christians are one church (Eph. 4:4–5)—whose unity with God and with each other is created and preserved by the Gospel and sacraments.

b. *The one church, the assembly of believers, is an article of faith.* Since only God can look into the heart, we cannot see the one holy Christian church. Nevertheless, we believe that it exists and can know where it is present. The church is known audibly in the preached Gospel and visibly in the sacraments, for through these means the Holy Spirit creates faith in Christ.

c. *The church's internal unity, known only to God (Eph. 1:4), is expressed by an external or outward fellowship based on confession.* The external unity of the church's visible fellowship is determined by whether the Gospel is purely preached and the sacraments are administered according to Christ's institution. The Gospel and sacraments are in themselves pure. But when church bodies state publicly what they believe, tragically some obscure or explicitly contradict the teaching of the Gospel and the proper administration of the sacraments. For this reason the limits or boundaries of external fellowship are creeds and confessions.

## 1. Fellowship in the Scriptures

a. The New Testament term for “fellowship” (*koinonia*) refers to joint participation in a common thing (e.g., Gospel, Christ, Holy Spirit, faith, Baptism, Christ’s body and blood). Christian fellowship originates when Christ through His Word unites us to Himself (John 17:20). He is the vine and we are the branches (John 15). When Christians are united to Christ and His Father they are also one with each other (1 John 1:3; John 17:20–21). Christ is the head of the body and we through Baptism are its members (Rom. 12:4–8; Eph. 4:1–16; 5:22–32; Col. 2:9–12).

b. The church’s internal fellowship (*una sancta*) is constituted by faith in Christ and is a completed reality, but external unity is not. Earliest Christianity was divided and marked by conflict, splintered because of different doctrine—a situation not unlike modern denominationalism. Churches and pastors were united in an external fellowship by accepting the apostles’ teaching, sharing a common confession of faith, and participating together in Holy Communion (Gal. 2:9; Acts 2:42; Rom. 16:17). But not all churches belonged to the apostolic fellowship (e.g., the Nicolaitans—Rev. 2:6, 15; cf. 1 John 2:19). Hence, already in New Testament times some churches were orthodox, others heterodox. As Jesus predicted in his warning against false prophets (Matt. 7:15; 24:11, 24), Christianity would be fragmented, troubled by false teachers.

c. For the sake of church unity Jesus and the apostles required that Christians confess the faith and that this confession be true (Matt. 10:32; 16:13–18; Rom. 10:9–10; 1 John 4:1–3; John 8:31–32; John 17:17–23; Tit. 1:9; 3:10; 1 Tim. 1:3; 6:3–5, 20; 2 Tim. 2:25; 3:5). Distinguishing between the Good Shepherd’s voice and other voices spells the difference between life and death for the sheep ((John 10). Thus, the New Testament shows throughout that the confession of what is true and the rejection of what is false was taken seriously—not merely for the sake of being right but for the sake of preserving saving faith (1 Tim. 1:9–16; 6:3; 2 Tim. 1:13; 4:3; Titus 1:9, 13; 2:1–2, 8). Sadly, this may sometimes require separation (Acts 19:9; 2 Cor. 6:17). But since the church lives from the Gospel, she must contend for its truth (Gal. 2:5, 14).

d. Faithfulness to apostolic doctrine sets both the basis and the boundary for church fellowship in the New Testament, for true teaching identifies orthodox churches and separates them from heterodox churches with their false teachings.

e. For early Christians Communion or participation in Christ’s body and blood was the highest form of fellowship on earth (see 1 Cor. 10:16–21). Altar fellowship was preeminently church fellowship in the New Testament. (See *Admission to the Lord’s Supper: Basics of Biblical and Confessional Teaching*, A Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations, 1999.) Participation in Christ’s body and blood is a proclamation of His death

(1 Cor. 11:26), a solemn and public confession made in the presence of God and all the saints. On account of this, false teachers and their followers were excluded from the Lord's Supper in apostolic churches. Without agreement in the apostolic doctrine (Acts 2:42) there was no church fellowship.

Certain passages in the New Testament contain especially straightforward and severe condemnations that still apply to false teachers and their churches (Rom. 16:17–18; Gal. 1:6–9). According to many respected Lutheran theologians these passages occur within the context of the Lord's Supper. In applying these and other scriptural passages that speak of errant teachers and teachings that come not from the Spirit of truth (John 15:26) but from Satan who deceives (2 Cor. 11:14; 2 Tim. 3:13), our task is not to untangle the heart's mixed motives or to pass judgment on the presence and quality of another's faith. Rather, we are to apply the apostolic standard to doctrines and practices of our own and other churches.

f. Some false teachers face eternal condemnation (Matt. 7:21–23), while others may be saved if they cling by faith to the Gospel foundation (1 Cor. 3:11–15). Nevertheless, their false teachings exclude them from the fellowship with the apostolic churches.

## **2. Fellowship in the Lutheran Confessions**

Luther and the other confessors desired church unity, but not at the price of doctrine or through political solutions. Decisive was their definition of the one church. They defined the church not organizationally, but in the words of the Augsburg Confession as “the assembly of saints in which the Gospel is taught purely and the sacraments are administered rightly.” As the Apology of the Augsburg Confession explains, “the church properly speaking” is the assembly of believers and it is seen where the external church gathers around the marks, the Gospel and sacraments. Wherever Christ's Gospel is preached and His sacraments are administered, the Spirit gathers believers into Christ's one church. Though presently hidden under suffering, the church is in no sense an abstract idea as some might imagine.

The writings in the *Book of Concord* under the norm of Holy Scripture comprise the Lutheran church's solemn and official confession of the pure Gospel and Christ's sacraments and provide the basis for and limits of fellowship among Lutheran churches. Unlike the Roman Catholics and Reformed, Lutherans did not require uniformity in certain ceremonies and church polity for external fellowship. Nor did Lutherans consider it necessary to submit to the authority of popes and bishops. Sufficient was agreement in the Gospel, which they understood to be all of Christian doctrine derived from the Scriptures. That is to say, the

Gospel was more than a minimal confession that Jesus died and rose for all, but it comprised the entire Christian faith (FC SD, X, 31).

Since for the Lutheran confessors a church lives by pure doctrine, false teachings had to be recognized and condemned or rejected. The Preface to the *Book of Concord* makes it clear that the object of its condemnations was not persons “who err ingenuously and who do not blaspheme the truth of the divine Word,” nor “entire churches inside or outside the Holy Empire of the German Nation,” but “only false and seductive doctrines and their stiff-necked proponents and blasphemers.” Nevertheless, though heterodox church members who err because of ignorance are exempted from condemnation, this does not mean that they should receive Holy Communion at Lutheran altars.

### **3. The Historic and Lutheran Consensus on Church Fellowship**

In the ancient church altar and pulpit fellowship required doctrinal agreement and confessional unity. Lutheran theologian Werner Elert states:

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.

Similarly, and contrary to the practice of Reformed churches in his day, Luther required confessional agreement for church fellowship.

Some Lutherans in America were in favor of external unity with Reformed churches (as coerced in the Prussian Union of 1817 in Europe) and distanced themselves from the classical Lutheran position. Others (who were not directly associated with the Missouri Synod) sought to resist the tide of unionism. For example, the General Council in 1875 adopted the Galesburg Rule: “Lutheran pulpits for Lutheran ministers only. Lutheran altars for Lutheran communicants only.” (See also statements in the *Minneapolis Theses* of the Buffalo, Iowa, and Ohio synods [attached to the constitution of the old American Lutheran Church], predecessor bodies of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Note as well the statement by Franklin Clark Fry, president of the United Lutheran Church in America [also a predecessor body of ELCA]: “Insistence upon agreement in doctrine as a precondition for church fellowship is the distinguishing mark of Lutherans among all Protestants and should never be relaxed.”)

#### 4. The Official Position of The Lutheran Church— Missouri Synod on Church Fellowship

Since its founding in 1847 The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod has insisted on agreement in doctrine for altar and pulpit fellowship. Its first president, C.F.W. Walther, set forth the Missouri Synod's position in Thesis XXI of his *The Evangelical Lutheran Church, The True Visible Church of God on Earth*:

A. The Ev. Lutheran Church is sure that the teaching contained in its Symbols is the pure [divine] truth because it agrees with the written Word of God in all points...B. The Ev. Lutheran Church requires its members and especially its teachers unreservedly to Confess and vow fidelity to its symbols...C. The Ev. Lutheran Church rejects all fraternal and churchly fellowship with those who reject its Confessions in whole or in part.

In 1932 the Synod set forth its historic position on church fellowship in *A Brief Statement of the Doctrinal Position of the Missouri Synod* (prepared by Francis Pieper):

28. *On Church-Fellowship.* – Since God ordained that His Word only, without the admixture of human doctrine, be taught and believed in the Christian Church, 1 Pet. 4:11; John 8:31,32; 1 Tim. 6:3,4, all Christians are required by God to discriminate between orthodox and heterodox church-bodies, Matt. 7:15, to have church-fellowship only with orthodox church-bodies, and, in case they have strayed into heterodox church-bodies, to leave them, Rom. 16:17. We repudiate *unionism*, that is, church fellowship with the adherents of false doctrine, as disobedience to God's command, as causing divisions in the Church, Rom. 16:17; 2 John 9, 10, and as involving the constant danger of losing the Word of God entirely, 2 Tim. 2:17–21.

29. The orthodox character of a church is established not by its mere name nor by its outward acceptance of, and subscription to, an orthodox creed, but by the doctrine which is *actually* taught in its pulpits, in its theological seminaries, and in its publications. On the other hand, a church does not forfeit its orthodox character through the casual intrusion of errors, provided these are combated and eventually removed by means of doctrinal discipline, Acts 20:30; 1 Tim. 1:3.

This understanding of church fellowship is further delineated in the standard dogmatics textbooks of the Synod.

Finally, as one of the “conditions of membership” the Constitution of the Synod requires:

Renunciation of unionism and syncretism of every description, such as:

- a. Serving congregations of mixed confession, as such, by ministers of the church;
- b. Taking part in the services and sacramental rites of heterodox congregations or of congregations of mixed confession;
- c. Participating in heterodox tract and missionary activities (Art. VI, 2).

While disagreement exists in the Synod regarding the application of its position on church fellowship, the Synod has adopted resolutions over the years affirming and applying its position to special situations (e.g., joint wedding services—1977 Res. 3–25).

## **5. Postscript**

This document is offered as a study of the Synod’s position on church fellowship on the basis of the Scriptures and the Confessions, with reference also to church history— including the Synod’s own history. It is presented in the conviction that true unity in the doctrine of the Gospel is a priceless, undeserved gift to be treasured and cultivated in humility. “Let him who boasts, boast of the Lord” (1 Cor. 1:31; Jer. 9:24)

# The Lutheran Understanding of Church Fellowship

## Questions for Discussion

### Fellowship in the Scriptures

1. Fellowship is having something in common with someone. How does this definition apply to church fellowship?
2. What does the New Testament say concerning church fellowship with those who teach false doctrine?
3. Discuss this statement concerning altar and pulpit fellowship: “The church’s internal unity, known only to God (Eph. 1:4), is expressed by an external or outward fellowship based on confession.”

### Fellowship in the Lutheran Confessions

4. The Lutheran Confessions say that churches should not condemn each other over differences in ceremonies “as long as they are otherwise agreed in doctrine and in all its articles and are also agreed concerning the right use of the holy sacraments” (Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, X 31; Tappert, 616). Discuss the implications of this statement for church fellowship today.

### Official Position of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod on Church Fellowship

5. The *Brief Statement of the Doctrinal Position of the Missouri Synod* says:  

28. *On Church-Fellowship.* – Since God ordained that His Word only, without the admixture of human doctrine, be taught and believed in the Christian Church, 1 Pet. 4:11; John 8:31,32; 1 Tim. 6:3,4, all Christians are required by God to discriminate between orthodox and heterodox church-bodies, Matt. 7:15, to have church-fellowship only with orthodox church-bodies, and, in case they have strayed into heterodox church-bodies, to leave them, Rom. 16:17. We repudiate *unionism*, that is, church-fellowship with the adherents of false doc-

trine, as disobedience to God's command, as causing divisions in the Church, Rom. 16:17; 2 John 9, 10, and as involving the constant danger of losing the Word of God entirely, 2 Tim. 2:17-21.

29. The orthodox character of a church is established not by its mere name nor by its outward acceptance of, and subscription to, an orthodox creed, but by the doctrine which is *actually* taught in its pulpits, in its theological seminaries, and in its publications. On the other hand, a church does not forfeit its orthodox character through the casual intrusion of errors, provided these are combated and eventually removed by means of doctrinal discipline, Acts 20:30; 1 Tim. 1:3.

Are these paragraphs in harmony with the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions? Discuss.

6. The 1995 LCMS convention adopted Resolution 3-08 which states:

*Resolved*, That the Synod reaffirm 1967 Res. 2-19 that 'pastors and congregations of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, except in situations of emergency and in special cases of pastoral care, commune individuals of only those synods which are now in fellowship with us;' and be it further

*Resolved*, That the Synod reaffirm 1986 Res. 3-08, 'that pastors and congregations of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod continue to abide by the practice of close communion, which includes the necessity of exercising responsible pastoral care in extraordinary situations and circumstances' and beseech one another in love to remember that 'situations of emergency and special cases of pastoral care' or 'extraordinary situations and circumstances' are, by their nature, relatively rare."

Discuss this statement in the light of your study and the practice of your congregation.

## Case Studies

1. A new pastor arrives in a congregation and discovers that it has been participating for a number of years in joint worship services on Good Friday and Thanksgiving with congregations of church bodies with which our Synod is not in church fellowship. What should the new pastor say to his congregation and to the other churches involved in the joint service? What should this pastor say to his fellow pastors and to neighboring congregations? Why?
2. An LCMS pastor receives a request from a young family. They would like “Uncle Bill” to baptize their new baby. Uncle Bill is an ELCA pastor. All the relatives are going to be there and everyone would love to have Uncle Bill perform the baptism. Uncle Bill represents the ELCA, a church body with which the Synod is not in church fellowship due to doctrinal disagreements. What should the pastor say and do? Why? What if the young couple is not having a baby but is just now getting married and requests that Uncle Bill deliver the sermon in the wedding service to be held by the Missouri Synod congregation? What should the pastor say and do? Why?
3. On confirmation Sunday there will be Holy Communion. The baptismal sponsors of one of the confirmands will be present for the occasion. When they moved five years ago, they joined a Presbyterian church. The family now wants them to receive Communion at the confirmation service. “After all, they were confirmed as Lutherans.” Should they commune? Why or why not?
4. An earthquake has caused great destruction and loss of life in a small community. The Baptist church is the only one in town still standing. Its pastor invites the other clergy in the community, including the local Missouri Synod pastor, to participate as leaders in a community service to be held two days after the tragedy. What should be done by the Missouri Synod pastor and the members of the congregation he serves? Should the pastor consider any alternatives besides participating in the service like other clergy on the one hand, or not attending on the other hand? Why?
5. Just before the installation service for a new Missouri Synod pastor, the local United Church of Christ minister and a local ELCA pastor present themselves as ready to vest and join the other clergy in the service. What should the circuit counselor say to them? Why?



# The Lutheran Understanding of Church Fellowship

## Discussion Reporting Instrument

I am a(n)     Ordained Minister  
                   Layperson  
                   Commissioned Minister

Please respond to each question by assigning a numeric value to each, according to the following scale:

5 = Definitely Yes      4 = Mostly Yes      3 = Undecided  
2 = Mostly No          1 = Definitely No

1. The document helps me understand how the LCMS relates to other Christian churches. \_\_\_\_\_
2. After reading the document, I understand the synodical position on church (altar and pulpit) fellowship. \_\_\_\_\_
3. After reading the document, I agree with the synodical position on church (altar and pulpit) fellowship. \_\_\_\_\_
4. The position set forth in these materials is faithful to the Scriptures. Please explain. \_\_\_\_\_

**These completed Reporting Instruments are to be forwarded to the CTCR/Office of the President by the District President following the District Convention.**

5. The position set forth in these materials is faithful to the Lutheran Confessions. Please explain. \_\_\_\_\_

6. These materials help provide a foundation for addressing such situations as presented in the sample case studies. \_\_\_\_\_

7. Are there any weaknesses in the document or areas that need to be strengthened?

8. What additional situations would you like to see addressed in the report of the synodical President and the CTCR to the 2001 LCMS convention? Please provide details if possible. Use additional pages for your comments if necessary.

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