

FELLOWSHIP OR COMMUNION vs. UNIONISM OR SYNCRETISM

Churchly fellowship, or ecclesial communion, is a very special association or relationship. Since the church is “not only an association of outward things and rites, like other polities, but is mainly an association of faith and of the Holy Spirit in [people’s] hearts” (Apology VII/VIII,5, my translation), churchly fellowship or communion rests on both *internal* and *external* ties or bonds. The internal bond is faith itself, for it is by grace through FAITH ALONE [**sola fide!**] that anyone is a member of Christ and therefore of His Body, the Church (St. John 6:29-50; Eph. 2:8.19-22; 3:17-19; 4:4-6.11-16; 5:25-32). Only God can see this internal bond of faith, which binds us securely to Christ and to His church. We humans can only go by those external means (the **Gospel** in Word and Sacrament!) by which alone God Himself works the internal mysteries which, as such, are invisible to us. Therefore churchly fellowship in the outward sense is essentially the mutual acknowledgment of joint participation in the “ONE LORD, ONE FAITH, ONE BAPTISM” (Eph. 4:5). This means joint confession of “the faith that God has once for all entrusted to the saints” (Jude 3), that is, “the apostles’ doctrine” (Acts 2:42), on which the church is built (St. Mt. 16:18), and on which her whole life rests (Eph. 2:20).

This life-giving, church-creating divine truth (St. Jn. 8:31, 32) unites and divides. It unites those who confess it rightly, and divides them from those who persistently contradict and oppose it at any point, by word and/or deed. God bids us “beware of false prophets” (St. Mt. 7:15), and “avoid [turn away from]” those who cause divisions and offenses “contrary to the doctrine” we have learnt from the apostles (Rom. 16:17). Particularly severe are St. Paul’s warnings against twisted versions of the Gospel in Gal. 1:6-12. False doctrine has no rights in the church.

In I Cor. 5:9-13 St. Paul makes it quite clear what sort of separation is necessary. He does not demand social, commercial, or political separation from all sorts of evil people in this world: “In that case you would have to leave this world” (v. 10). Rather, it is the evil-doer who claims to be a “**brother,**” who must be refused that status, so that he might come to his senses and repent. The church is a spiritual “brotherhood” (I Pet. 2:17; 5:9, compare St. Mt. 12:48-50; 23:8). In his treatment of I Cor. 5 Dr. Gregory Lockwood, too, notes that it is here a matter not of all sorts of worldly relationships, but of “*Christian fellowship*” (*Concordia Commentary, First Corinthians*, C.P.H.,2000, p. 183, italics in original). Comments Lockwood: “Paul establishes the Scriptures as the basis for church fellowship. If a person or group refuses to comply with God’s Word, fellowship is to be terminated” (p. 184).

That, too, is the meaning of Gal. 2:9, where Sts. James, Peter, and John give to Sts. Paul and Barnabas “the right hand of fellowship.” The point here was mutual recognition of oneness in faith, doctrine, and confession. Without such agreement, there could be no joint mission work. With it, there is full communion in the church’s work and worship—including frank brotherly rebuke of St. Peter’s fear-induced lapse into false, hypocritical practice, and this precisely in order that the purity of the Gospel proclamation might be safeguarded! Note, too, that the public offense against the Gospel demanded prompt public correction, not endless secret negotiations!

The best current reference on this topic is *The Lutheran Understanding of Church Fellowship*, commended by our Synodical Convention in 2001. Far from intending to scuttle or weaken the Synod's well-known historic position on fellowship and unionism, the *Lutheran Understanding* document actually traced the biblical, confessional, and historical basis for that position. In commending that document, the Convention therefore also resolved "That the Synod reaffirm once again its position on joint worship" (Res. 3-07A, 2001 *Proceedings*, p. 138).

The great strength of *The Lutheran Understanding of Church Fellowship* is that it anchors everything in the "Marks of the Church" (the purely preached Gospel and the rightly administered sacraments, Augsburg Confession VII). Much of the confusion on this issue has been due to a loss of the clear categories "true or orthodox church" and "false or heterodox church." Instead, people were thinking and talking simply about individuals, so-called "other Christians." This led to loose, subjective, sentimental approaches. *Lutheran Understanding* reminds us that fellowship is first of all an aspect of the church. Christians are united with each other not directly, but by way of Christ, the Head (Col. 2:19). When the focus shifts from the church and her Gospel treasures to the individual and his or her personal qualities, the result is either total unionism and permissiveness, or else the exclusive narrowness of certain would-be conservative Lutherans who would forbid even joint table-prayers with family or friends of other synods or other churches!

Since the church is created, fed, united, and preserved only by God through His Gospel (Word and Sacrament), **church fellowship is essentially pulpit and altar fellowship.** Joint proclamation, and joint celebration of the sacraments, that is the essence and core of it. Except in emergencies (i.e. danger of death), private, individual Christians do not absolve, baptise, etc. Preaching and administering the sacraments are public, official acts of the church, ordinarily performed through the church's public ministry. But Christians can and do pray in their private lives. And although prayer is a great gift of God, it is not a means of grace. From this some appear to draw the conclusion that prayer is not a part of church fellowship and that it is therefore up to everyone's own discretion and whim when, where, and with whom to join in prayer. That is a dangerous illusion.

The 1961 theses on "Fellowship in Its Necessary Context of the Doctrine of the Church," favourably cited in *Lutheran Understanding*, conclude with a thesis on prayer:

13. Prayer is not one of the marks of the church and should not be co-ordinated with Word and sacraments, as though it were essentially of the same nature as they. As a response to the divine Word, it is an expression of faith and a fruit of faith, and when spoken before others, a profession of faith. As a profession of faith it must be in harmony with and under the control of the marks of the church (1961 Synodical Conference *Proceedings*, p. 12).

The formulators of the Theses conclude with some statements specifically on joint prayer, citing the following from the Australian Lutheran *Theses of Agreement*:

When joint prayer shows the marks or characteristics of unionism, it must be condemned and avoided. Such marks and characteristics of unionism are:

- a) failure to confess the whole truth of the divine Word (*in statu confessionis*);
- b) failure to reject and denounce every opposing error;
- c) assigning to error equal right with truth;
- d) creating the impression of unity in faith or of church fellowship where it does not exist.

Clearly, joining with official representatives of heterodox churches (ministers, bishops, etc.) in offering public prayers by turns, and on equal terms, is flagrant unionism. It fails to distinguish between true and false teachings and teachers and is therefore irresponsible. The 1927 *Concordia Cyclopaedia* stated under “Unionism”: “Religious unionism consists in joint worship and work of those not united in doctrine” (p. 774). Missouri’s greatest dogmatician, Francis Pieper, put it like this: “The disobedience against the divine command which forbids Christians [to have] fellowship with false teachers and false doctrine, is called in churchly usage ‘unionism,’ ‘mixing religions,’ ‘syncretism,’ etc” (*Christliche Dogmatik*, vol. 3, p. 490, my translation). Similarly, the Synodical constitution requires as a condition of membership the “Renunciation of unionism and syncretism of every description,” such as “b. Taking part in the services and sacramental rites of heterodox congregations or of congregations of mixed confession” (quoted in *Lutheran Understanding*, pp. 15-16).

Lutheran Understanding adds two details that may be of interest: (1) It cites Synod’s 1977 resolution “[t]hat we expect our pastors and congregations to follow this article with respect to mixed wedding ceremonies.” (2) Footnote 64: “‘Syncretism’ is the older word for mingling confessions, but now usually means joining with non-Christian religions” (p. 28).

The Lutheran Confessions do not hesitate repeatedly (*Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope*, 41; *Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration* X, 6 and 22) to cite against ecclesial fellowship, or even the appearance of it, with the papacy, II Cor. 6:14: “Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers. For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness?” Of course our Lutheran fathers were far from denying that there are true children of God in heterodox churches. The point is that misbelief is, to that extent, unbelief. If people who are personally Christians, also maintain errors contrary to the revealed truth, these errors are not “Christian” but rather anti-Christian. C.F.W. Walther was right, therefore, to cite also that text under his Thesis XXI C of *The Evangelical Lutheran Church, the True Visible Church of God on Earth*: “The Ev. Lutheran Church rejects all fraternal and churchly fellowship with those who reject its Confession in whole or in part” (*Walther and the Church*, p. 127).

But what of “civic events”? Yes, it is quite possible for a faithful Lutheran pastor to offer a prayer at a Right-to-Life dinner, or at the opening of a legislature, at a graduation, etc. Even there, however, he must not allow himself to be drawn into a joint “prayer-service” with official representatives of heterodox churches. It is one thing to offer a prayer, but quite another to make it a part of a “mini-service” on equal terms with official representatives of false doctrine.

Prof. David Adams has written a valuable paper (1 March 2002), “The Church in the Public Square in a Pluralistic Society.” The author shows that “civil” and “religious” are not airtight categories. There are also “civil religious events,” governed by the “civil religion” of our pluralistic society. And that

religion is inherently “polydox,” that is, idolatrous, syncretistic. See also Mark Noll’s *America’s God* (Oxford University Press, 2002), reviewed by Martin Marty in the January/February 2003 issue of *Books and Culture*. Noll traces the fundamental incompatibility between the Deistic, Jeffersonian religion of the *Declaration of Independence*, and the general Puritan-Trinitarian religion of most of the American people, especially before the Civil War.

Actually there is nothing really new here. Our Synod has always confronted that issue in the form of Freemasonry. A Masonic Bible (Chicago: The Masonic History Company, 1951) states in an introductory essay by H. L. Haywood:

it is the Book of the Old and New Testaments and at the same time represents each of the world’s Bibles, and may be replaced by the Koran, the Zend Avesta, the Vedas, etc.; it lies on the Altar and yet does not have possession of it because the Square and Compasses lie on the Altar with it . . .

there are in the membership of the Fraternity throughout the world Christians, Jews, Theists, Mohammedans, Parsees, Hindus, Confucianists, and many men who believe in God but are not identified with any one religion or Church (pp. 26, 29).

Joint prayers or services on such a basis are clearly in violation of St. Paul’s command to “flee from idolatry” (I Cor. 10:14). And a joint “interfaith” service, with official representatives of various Christian and non-Christian religions taking turns reading from their holy books, giving addresses, and praying, the whole thing bracketed between Christian and non-Christian “invocations” and “benedictions,” does not cease to be a service by the mere presence of civic dignitaries or celebrities! The suggestion that such participation has value as “witness” and paves the way for good relations and future mission work, must be resisted as Satan’s old temptation to religious pragmatism: “All these things I will give you if you will fall down and worship me” (St. Mt. 4:9).

Let me conclude with some words from Dr. Walther’s foreword to *Lehre und Wehre* of 1879: After all, it was never the pure doctrine in itself which provoked hostility towards its representatives; least of all is that the case in our indifferentist time. Rather taking it seriously, the exclusive holding on to it, the rejection and condemnation of the opposite doctrine, and above all the practical implementation of this doctrinal position, that was what at all times produced hostility. . . So it is still to-day. What doctrine isn’t one prepared to tolerate in our days, if only it takes its place peacefully next to the others! And just the would-be orthodox achieve the most incredible [feats] in this tolerance. Only observe the harmonious relationship which shows itself in the academic colleges, the peaceful sitting together in pastoral conferences, the tone in the reviews!

LORD, HAVE MERCY UPON US!

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