

The Orthodox Lutheran Heritage of Confessional Fellowship:

What Does This Mean Today?

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The Augsburg Confession provides a good introduction to the confessional Lutheran view of church fellowship. While the topic is not explicitly expressed until Article VII, everything that precedes sets the foundation for it. We confess the Holy Trinity. We confess that since the fall of Adam all men born in the natural way are born out of fellowship with God, and since they by nature constantly desire what is evil, can expect only eternal death unless they are born again. We confess that the Son of God assumed human nature and as true God and true man was born, suffered, was crucified, died, and was buried. This is how He reconciled the Father to us so that we may be justified through faith alone when we believe that for Christ's sake our sins are forgiven. That we may obtain the faith through which we are justified, God has instituted the preaching office to preach the gospel and administer the sacraments so that where and when He pleases God may bring people to faith. This faith will issue in good works, but not in order that anyone should trust in them. We cannot trust in anything that comes from men. Therefore, the unity of the church cannot be based on rites and ceremonies instituted by men. It is sufficient for the true unity of the church that the gospel be preached purely and the sacraments be administered according to the gospel. This is the confessional Lutheran doctrine of church fellowship as it is presented in the Augsburg Confession.

The Fellowship of the Holy Trinity

God is one. There is only one God. The one God exists from eternity as one God. God alone is eternal. The Muslim appeals to this truth to refute the Christian faith. Christians confess that God is love. Love is of the very essence of God. The Muslim will not deny that God loves but he will deny that love is of God's very essence. If God cannot be God unless He loves someone, then God cannot be God without someone to love. How can the eternal God be dependent

upon His creation in order for Him to be God? The Muslim knows that, while God does love, love cannot be of God's very essence.

What the Muslim knows, however, is a lie. A unitarian lie is no better than a polytheistic lie. There is no difference between having one idol and having a few dozen. Idols are idols. The god of Muhammad is an idol. The true God is one, but the mere acknowledgement of this fact does not constitute a confession of the true God. The one true God is also triune. The only God who exists is the Triune God. Any god who is not triune is not God because a god who is not triune cannot be love, and God is love.

Only the Triune God can be love. The Muslim is perfectly correct in insisting that if God is love God must have an object of His love. This is what we sing:

Of the Father's love begotten,
Ere the worlds began to be,
He is Alpha and Omega,
He the Source, the Ending He
Of the things that are, that have been,
And that future years shall see,
Evermore and evermore. (ELH, 181, verse 1)

The love of God is not an attribute that makes Him dependent on us. It is the eternally defining attribute of God with respect to His essence as God and with respect to the relationship between the persons within the Godhead. We cannot define God generically and then proceed to add certain Christian particulars to our definition. No! We say God is love because God is love, but God could not be love unless He were Triune. There is an eternal unity of love between the Father who begets and the Son who is begotten. This eternal unity of pure divine love exists as well between the Father and the Holy Spirit who proceeds from the Father and the Son.

But this is too high for us to grasp. Why am I talking about an eternal relationship of love into which you and I cannot find our way?

The Fellowship with the Holy Trinity

Because God has brought this love to us! In so doing He has established fellowship with us. This is what Jesus teaches. In St. John's Gospel Jesus consistently appeals to His eternal relationship with His Father when He

preaches the gospel to us. The Father/Son relationship is eternal. The love that is revealed to us in time is always joined to the eternal love enjoyed by the persons of the Godhead. But the Trinitarian foundation of the gospel cannot be explored by means of human speculation or spiritual effort. The unity of the divine persons is revealed to us in a covering that we may apprehend. The covering is twofold. It is the covering of Christ's incarnation and suffering. It is the covering of the gospel and sacraments.

Consider the historic Gospel Lesson for Trinity Sunday. Jesus teaches us that God is Triune but He does not do so by an explicit doctrinal assertion. The Trinitarian theology is implicit. What is explicit is that He – Jesus – will be lifted up. By directing our attention to His crucifixion he makes God known. Where are we to look to find the One who is begotten of the Father before all worlds? We are to look at where He is lifted up. Faith looks up to Jesus suffering for us. There it sees God in the way God wants to be seen.

Apart from the suffering and death of Jesus, the incarnation becomes a mere metaphor for something else. We hear of incarnational this and sacramental that as if the incarnation of Christ and His holy sacraments are to be understood adjectivally. The incarnation of the Son of God becomes a theological motif to remind us that God cares about His creation and the sacraments of Christ are then illustrative of our need to touch, taste, smell, and otherwise use our created senses. Well, that's all very nice, but quite beside the point. The incarnation of God was necessary because it is only in the shedding of the God-man's blood as the propitiatory sacrifice that we sinners can have fellowship with the one true God. The Shepherd who gives eternal life to His sheep by means of the words He speaks to them can do so and does do so because He lays down His life for those same sheep.

God is eternally Triune. At a moment in time Jesus offered up His life on the cross. Until the end of time Jesus gives us eternal life in His gospel and sacraments. The eternal fellowship that exists between the persons of the Godhead is revealed on the cross. Is it not there that Christ is glorified? See how the Father sacrifices His Son and condemns Him to die. Yet, He loves Him. He makes Him who knew no sin to be sin for us. Even as He imputes to His Son the sin of us all and turns away from the sin-bearer as from sin itself, He does not and cannot break fellowship with His beloved Son, eternally begotten in love. Their intimate fellowship of perfect love that exists from eternity to eternity cannot be broken even when Christ is forsaken in His suffering. In fact, it is precisely as He is forsaken that divine love swallows up all the hatred of humanity. There it is that the glory of the only begotten of the Father is fully revealed. He sanctifies Himself in His suffering as He bears the sin of the world all alone. He sanctifies us by His suffering as He washes away all sin by His blood. This is how His word can sanctify the Holy Christian Church. He said that His words were spirit

and life. He claimed the authority to send the Holy Spirit and to give eternal life. He poured out that very life upon the cross, and while neither the Father nor the Holy Spirit could suffer with Him, they were there with Him, for when He died He committed His Spirit to the Father. The Father, who has life in Himself and who has granted the Son to have life in Himself received the offering up of that life. It is the life of God. It is the life of mankind. It is offered for those who were condemned to death. It is offered in love. And in that offering, the pure and holy fellowship that has existed from eternity between the three persons of the Godhead is now established in a place and time from which the whole world will be invited to partake.

The fellowship the Church enjoys is Trinitarian. It begins at the font because it is there that the Triune God puts His name upon us and declares fellowship with us. We become partakers of the divine nature, as St. Peter says. This is not a process or a goal for which we strive. It is a blessed reality that is ours by faith. In Holy Baptism we are joined to the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. On the cross the Holy Trinity is revealed once and for all. In Holy Baptism we are brought to Calvary where we wash our robes and make them white in the blood of the Lamb.

The fellowship the Church enjoys is established, strengthened, and made known by means of the apostolic doctrine of the gospel. In His high priestly prayer Jesus prays for those who will believe in Him through the apostolic word. He said, "I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me." The word Jesus gave to the apostles is the word the apostles preach to the world. The Holy Spirit, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, leads them into all truth. Those who receive the apostolic preaching receive Jesus. Since it is Jesus who says that man shall live on every word that proceeds from God's mouth and since it is Jesus who teaches us to hold on to everything he has commanded we receive the Holy Scriptures when we receive Jesus. The apostolic writings and the apostolic preaching are inseparable.

That apostolic preaching cannot be disjoined from the crucifixion of Jesus. This is where the word of God receives its power to save. It is true that the gospel is inherently powerful because it is from God and God is almighty. But the grace by which God justifies sinners flows from the wounds of Jesus. The kingdom of God and His righteousness are bound to the cross. There it is that all righteousness is fulfilled and there it is that Jesus claims His kingdom. This is why the preaching sends us to the Supper where we eat Christ's body and drink His blood.

Neither Confusing the Persons nor Dividing the Substance

The fellowship that Christ's church enjoys here on earth is fellowship with the Holy Trinity. The doctrine of the Trinity is a mystery. This does not mean that we cannot confess the true Trinitarian faith. We do so in the words of the Athanasian Creed. Rather, it means that we may not subject this mystery to the canons of human reasonableness. Efforts to do so will inevitably lead us into serious error. In the Creed we confess: "And the true catholic faith is this, that we worship one God in Trinity and Trinity in Unity, neither confusing the Persons nor dividing the substance." An example of confusing the Persons is the heresy of Modalism. Modalism teaches that there are not three distinct persons in the Godhead, but rather one person who manifests himself in three distinct ways or modes. Modern Modalism can be found in certain Pentecostal sects as well as in a book published in 2001 by a Missouri Synod clergyman who, after failing to make the Missouri Synod functional, has now set his sights a bit higher and has tried to make God a bit more functional by suggesting that the Holy Trinity should be understood as three ways that God has revealed Himself or three manners of being or three levels of reality or three forms of address or, well, you get the idea. However, a person of the Holy Trinity is not a manner, or a level, or a form of anything. He is a person. We must not confuse the persons.

We must not divide the substance. This is done by teaching that the Persons of the Holy Trinity are separate from each other. We confess three distinct Persons but they are not separate from each other. Were they separate from each other there would be three gods. There are not three gods. There is only one God. Interestingly enough, the same man who is now promoting Modalism was promoting Tri-theism a decade earlier. In those days he was defending the assertion that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit were three separate persons. Church Growth entrepreneurs tend to have a little difficulty teaching such impractical matters as the mystery of the Holy Trinity. Maybe some day he'll stumble upon the true doctrine. As Tammy Wynette used to sing: "I'll just keep on falling in love until I get it right." One can only hope.

Confessional Lutherans should think of church fellowship in a Trinitarian way. It is Jesus who has taught us to think of church fellowship always in connection with the eternal unity of love that has existed between the distinct yet inseparable persons of the Holy Trinity. We can know this holy mystery only as we look at Jesus lifted up on the cross where He suffers and dies for our sins. We can know Jesus crucified for us only by means of the purely preached gospel and the rightly administered sacraments that He has instituted for His Church on earth.

This is also how we can know and recognize the fellowship the Church enjoys with God and within herself.

See what is joined together. The mystery of the Holy Trinity is joined to the vicarious atonement of Jesus. The atonement is joined to the pure gospel and sacraments of Christ that bring us by faith into fellowship with God. Different theological terms are used to refer to the pure proclamation of the gospel and the right administration of the sacraments. We call the pure gospel and sacraments the means of grace because they are the means through which God gives us grace. The preaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments constitute the sole duties of Christ's ministers and so define the public preaching office. The means of grace are called the marks of the church because they enable us to recognize where the church, by God's grace, exists. These pure marks are also the basis for acknowledging those with whom we enjoy Christian fellowship, that is, church fellowship. Christian fellowship and church fellowship are the same thing. We cannot separate Christians from the church any more than we can separate the church from Christians.

The Communion of Saints: the Church as She Receives

We can think of the church as she receives and as she gives. The church as she receives is the sheep who hear the voice of their Shepherd. She is the communion of saints in which each individual saint is justified by faith alone. The church as she receives is the bride of Christ that He has washed in Holy Baptism "that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish. (Ephesians 5:27) Jesus, whose blood is joined to the water of Holy Baptism, sees the beauty of this church, but she cannot see it and the world cannot see it. It remains hidden. It is invisible. Who can see the righteousness that avails before God? Who can see Jesus? Who can see faith?

Our Confessions talk about the church as she receives, that is, as her individual members are justified by faith. In the Smalcald Articles (III, XII, 2) Luther provides us with this familiar definition of the church: "For, thank God, [to-day] a child seven years old knows what the Church is, namely, the holy believers and lambs who hear the voice of their Shepherd." Here Luther defines the church as she receives, that is, as she believes the gospel. Similarly, in the Augsburg Confession (AC VII), the church is defined as the congregation of saints or believers. When we define the church as she receives, we are confessing that the church is holy. She is the communion of saints. She is justified. She is united in love without sect or schism. There are no unbelievers in the church because faith alone justifies and the church is holy with the imputed

righteousness of Jesus. "I believe in the Holy Christian Church, the communion of saints." To confess this is to confess that these saints who are joined together into one communion or fellowship are joined together by God who has forgiven them all of their sins. We should think of the church as she receives because it is only as she receives that she can rightly be called church. As we confess in AC VIII, "The Church properly is the congregation of saints and true believers."

Holy Mother Church: the Church as She Gives

We should also think of the church as she gives. If she did not give, nobody could receive. God is the One who gives, but He does not give except through the church. Cyprian was right when he said, "He can no longer have God for his Father, who has not the Church for his mother." The church that is born from above by God's promise gives birth to children here below by means of the same promise. This makes her the mother of all Christians as it is written, "but the Jerusalem above is free, which is the mother of us all." (Galatians 4:26) In Luther's Large Catechism we confess that the Holy Spirit

. . . has a peculiar congregation in the world, which is the mother that begets and bears every Christian through the Word of God, which He reveals and preaches, [and through which] He illumines and enkindles hearts, that they understand, accept it, cling to it, and persevere in it. (Large Catechism, Creed, par 40-42)

It is to the church and to the church alone that God has entrusted the true gospel and sacraments. Therefore, the church is our mother.

In Article VII of the Augsburg Confession the church is described both as she receives and as she gives.

Also they teach that one holy Church is to continue forever. The Church is the congregation of saints, in which the Gospel is rightly taught and the Sacraments are rightly administered.

"The Church is the congregation of saints" is the church as she receives. "In which the Gospel is rightly taught and the Sacraments are rightly administered" is the church as she gives. The individual members of the church are holy as they are justified through the faith that receives the treasures God gives through the church. The church as mother is holy on account of the treasures she has. They are holy treasures. They are the holy things for the holy people. The people are not made holy by any other means than by the holy things entrusted by God to Holy Mother Church.

“Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth.” (John 17:17) So Jesus prayed to His Father. The truth by which the Father sanctifies us is entrusted to Holy Mother Church. The very heart of this truth is the teaching that “men cannot be justified before God by their own strength, merits, or works, but are freely justified for Christ’s sake, through faith, when they believe that they are received into favor, and that their sins are forgiven for Christ’s sake, who, by His death, has made satisfaction for our sins.” (AC IV) Since Rome anathematizes this doctrine, she is not Holy Mother Church. She can hardly be the “pillar and ground of the truth” (1 Timothy 3:15) when she condemns the truth by which we are brought into fellowship with God.

Neither Confusing nor Dividing the Pure Gospel

We must not divide the substance. Since God is indivisible, so also is His truth. The demons have their doctrines (1 Timothy 4:1). God has His doctrine. In the New Testament, the pure doctrine is always stated in the singular. God justifies us, reconciles us to Himself, establishes fellowship with us, delivers us from the power of the devil, rescues us from death, and takes us to heaven by means of speaking His truth to us.

The truth by which God establishes fellowship with us is specifically the gospel truth. Our communion with God and with the church is a spiritual one and the law can only stir up spiritual antipathy. It cannot engender spiritual unity. However, the gospel itself cannot be proclaimed without the law. There is no forgiveness of sins except for sinners. So while it is vital that we always distinguish between the law and the gospel, it is just as vital that we refuse to separate the gospel from the law. We can talk about the gospel in the narrow sense, but we cannot actually articulate it without touching on every other article of Christian doctrine in the process. When talking of Christ we are talking of the Holy Trinity. When talking of sin we are talking of the fall and the innocence of God’s original creation from which we fell. When talking of redemption we are talking about regeneration, justification, resurrection, and the life of the world to come. When we talk about the church, whether as mother or as bride, we are always talking about the pure marks of the church, that is, the pure means of grace by which we are born again and by which the fellowship or unity of the church is recognized. Fine distinctions between fundamental, non-fundamental, primary, and secondary articles of doctrine can easily pave the road out of confessional Lutheranism into a Reformed fundamentalism or a gospel reductionism that, while loudly and eloquently extolling the “gospel,” never succeeds in putting into plain words what the gospel is.

We may not separate a gospel in the narrow sense from its place in, with, and under the whole counsel of God. Jesus says, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God." (Matthew 4:4) Every attempt to base the fellowship of Christ's church on anything less than the entire body of Christian doctrine will result in reducing the gospel to cliches and slogans without any meaning beyond that which is projected upon them by the spirit of the day. We cannot divide God's word apart from God's word any more than we can divide the Father from the Son or the Son from the Holy Spirit. There is one faith, not a hierarchy of teachings ranging from primary fundamental down to secondary non-fundamental with learned theologians patiently explaining the difference. Have you ever tried to explain why a particular topic of God's revealed truth has little if anything to do with our justification but we must nevertheless insist that we agree concerning it because a certain doctrine of church fellowship requires it? If so, didn't you feel just a little bit sectarian? Listen! If it doesn't have to do with the justification of sinners it doesn't have to do with church fellowship. The fellowship of the Holy Christian Church is not achieved by the mutual submission to correct doctrinal formulations. It was achieved by Jesus' submission to the demands of divine justice by obeying the law in our stead and by suffering divine retribution against all sinners. It was by means of that meek and holy and perfect submission to His Father's will that all sins separating us from God and dividing us from one another were forgiven. The fellowship of the church is fellowship in this forgiveness. This is why it is fellowship in the pure gospel and sacraments of Christ that bring this forgiveness to us.

Confessional Fellowship

We don't establish church fellowship. God does. When we know by our agreement on the doctrine and all its articles that we are in fellowship we are bound publicly to recognize, acknowledge, declare, confess, and celebrate that fellowship. Our agreement is agreement in what God and God alone has established without any help from us. If we think that fellowship is created by our declarations, we are replacing the Spirit with the flesh, the gospel with the law, and we are creating for ourselves sectarian prisons to keep us in and others out.

Fellowship is communion. It is sharing. It is participation in the same things. God gives us eternal life as He gives us the treasures that bestow this life upon us. Fellowship in the pure gospel and sacraments of Jesus is fellowship in the forgiveness of sins, deliverance from death and all evil, eternal salvation, and the glories of heaven.

We insist on full doctrinal agreement before we can faithfully acknowledge that church fellowship exists because the doctrine is God's. God tells the truth. False teaching contrary to God's word will divide and scatter the flock. To tolerate false teaching is to despise the Shepherd whose voice calls the sheep into pasture. It is to despise the sheep who are helpless without their Shepherd. It is to despise the church and her fellowship, because the church is created and united by means of the pure gospel, and not by means of false teaching.

It is in this context that we must consider our confessional subscription. When we subscribe to the Lutheran Confessions we are first and foremost confessing the pure gospel by which sinners are justified and saved. We are saying that the Lutheran Confessions agree with the Bible and obtain their normative authority from the Bible. For this reason we are promising to regulate our doctrine according to the standard set forth in the Confessions and to settle all religious controversies according to that standard.

Sola Scriptura: The Scriptures as the only Norm and Source

The Lutheran Confessions agree with the Bible. The Bible is the "only rule and norm according to which all doctrines and teachers alike must be appraised and judged." Why? It is the only rule and norm of doctrine because it is the "pure and clear fountain of Israel." The reason the Bible is the only norm of doctrine is because the Bible is the only source of doctrine. The Lutheran Confessions do not present as doctrine anything that is not clearly taught in the text of the Holy Scriptures. The so called sola Scriptura principle is the foundation for the normative authority of the Lutheran Confessions precisely because the Lutheran Confessions are nothing more nor less than true expositions of the Word of God.

In opposing the anti-creedal caricature of sola Scriptura popular in American Protestantism that twists this Reformation principle into a "what the Bible means to me" Biblicism we must not lurch over onto the other side of the bridge. An organization of Missouri Synod pastors that calls itself the Society of St. Polycarp states in its rule, "We reject all methods of interpretation that seek to understand the meaning of Scripture apart from the guidance of the Church, through which God gave us the Scriptures." When one asks how it is that the "Church" guides us, we are told that ancient church tradition that is not explicitly refuted by the Bible is a source of doctrine for the church. According to members of this society, the confessional assertion that the Bible is the only norm of the church's doctrine does not mean that the Bible is the only source of the church's doctrine. They are wrong. When the Formula of Concord asserts that the Bible is the only

norm of doctrine, this is precisely because the Bible is the only source of doctrine. It is God's word. This makes it both source and norm.

The Bible cannot be the sole norm of doctrine if it contains errors or if it is unclear. We cannot understand confessional subscription and its relationship to church fellowship unless we affirm both the inerrancy and the perspicuity of the Bible. There is no real confessional subscription where the inerrancy of the Bible is denied. A norm that derives its authority from a norm that is subject to error is also subject to error and no norm at all. To suggest that the Bible could err or contradict itself is to teach that the Bible is not God's word. If it is not God's word it cannot be the norm or standard for what God teaches us.

There is no real confessional subscription where the perspicuity and therefore sufficiency of the biblical text is denied. It may seem to be a needed corrective to the spirit of individualistic subjectivism to say that we may not interpret the Bible except by the guiding of the Church. We all need guidance, after all. But confessional Lutherans do not bind themselves to any guide that has not already been judged to be faithful. It is the Scriptures alone, not the "Church," that judges. When I was ordained, I subscribed to the catholic creeds of the church, as "faithful testimonies to the truth of the Holy Scriptures." We judge the fathers in the light of the Scriptures. We don't judge the Scriptures in the light of the fathers. We do not require of our ministers that they subscribe to the fathers as guides from which to understand the meaning of the Bible. We require our ministers to subscribe to the creeds and the confessions because these writings obtain their authority from the plain sense of the biblical text.

The doctrine of justification is at stake here. Luther discovered the pure gospel by which he was justified by reading the biblical text. For Luther, there could be no dichotomy between trusting Scripture alone and trusting in the merits of Jesus, for he found Christ and His righteousness in the pages of the Bible. Did Luther embrace the pure gospel of justification because he bowed before the authority of the naked Scriptures over against the authority of tradition? Or did he bow before the authority of the Scriptures because he found therein the righteousness that availed before God? Luther never separated the two because Jesus and Jesus' words are inseparable.

Confessional Subscription and Church Fellowship

The Bible is God's word. It serves as that norm for doctrine by which all other norms are normed. The Lutheran Confessions agree with the Bible and because of that agreement they serve as the norm for the doctrine and practice of the church. The original subscribers to the Lutheran Confessions bound themselves

and all others who would later subscribe to an unconditional subscription. There is no other kind of subscription. An unconditional confessional subscription obligates all subscribers to use the Confessions to settle doctrinal disputes. We read in the Preface to the Book of Concord:

In conclusion, we repeat once again that we are not minded to manufacture anything new by this work of agreement or to depart in any way at all, either in content or in formulation, from the divine truth that our pious forebears and we have acknowledged and confessed in the past, for our agreement is based on the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures and is comprehended in the three Creeds as well as in the Augsburg Confession, submitted in the year 1530 to Emperor Charles V, of kindest memory, in the Apology that followed it, and in the Smalcald Articles and the Large and Small Catechism of that highly enlightened man, Dr. Luther. On the contrary, we are minded by the grace of the Holy Spirit to abide and remain unanimously in this confession of faith and to regulate all religious controversies and their explanations according to it. (Preface to the Book of Concord, Tappert Edition, page 14)

These men were minded to “regulate all religious controversies and their explanations” according to the Lutheran Confessions precisely because the doctrinal content of the Confessions is encompassed within “the rightly taught Gospel” and the “rightly administered Sacraments” of AC VII. This is why we in our day may, with evangelical confidence, regulate our doctrine according to the standard set forth in the Confessions and settle all religious controversies according to that standard. This is why we may bind all of our pastors to this same standard in their ordination vows. This is why we may require the same of all our congregations. The Lutheran Confessions teach what God teaches. God’s doctrine is the basis for church fellowship.

Measuring Boards of the Synodical Conference

The confessional Lutheran synods of the former Synodical Conference all hold to an unconditional confessional subscription. Yet, they no longer enjoy confessional fellowship. How can this be? If the Lutheran Confessions were actually applied as originally intended to regulate and to settle religious controversies would not the Missouri Synod, the Wisconsin Synod, and the Evangelical Lutheran Synod still enjoy church fellowship? Unfortunately, it seems that the norm that is normed has become the norm that doesn’t really

norm anything at all, except perhaps the rubrics of an ordination or the written constitution of a congregation.

While formally insisting on an unconditional confessional subscription, the synods of the Synodical Conference relied in fact upon the authority of an ever-changing synodical tradition. The solemn promise of our Lutheran forebears that we not “depart in any way at all, either in content or in formulation” from the confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church was given to safeguard the written standard from being compromised by a living tradition. Unfortunately, synodical tradition trumps confessional teaching seven days a week and twice on Sundays.

There are a number of reasons this happens. Laziness is one. It is easier to parrot a teacher than it is to learn what the teacher learned by doing what the teacher did to learn it. Parroting teachers isn’t all wrong, but when you parrot a teacher who parroted another teacher who parroted another teacher you tend to move away from where the original teacher stood. Confessional Lutherans become confessional Lutherans by their own personal experience with the Lutheran Confessions. It is not possible to subscribe unconditionally to the Lutheran Confessions unless one has actually studied them, examined them, and learned from reading them that they are indeed what they claim to be: the divine truth.

What has happened in the past 150 years can be illustrated by a basic principle of carpentry. Let’s say you need to cut a number of boards to the same length and you use a board to do the measuring. You’d be advised to keep on using the same board. You may think that it doesn’t matter which board is the original board since each subsequent board is the same length as the original board. Well, not exactly. Close, but not exactly. So what happens is that cutting twenty or thirty boards while constantly changing your measuring board will leave you at the end of the procedure with boards significantly longer or shorter than the original board. It’s pure laziness. That’s all it is. You should have kept track of the original board.

This problem is compounded by the myth of the orthodox synod. Don’t get me wrong. I’m all for orthodox synods. I believe that I belong to the one of the most orthodox synods around. But there is a problem with orthodox synods. Orthodox synods invariably make the synod itself to be the norm of doctrine. Let me explain how this works. First, pretend that you belong to an orthodox synod. Now, your synod is orthodox because of what it teaches, right? Otherwise, it wouldn’t be an orthodox synod, but it is an orthodox synod, therefore its teaching is orthodox and since its teaching is orthodox it serves as the standard for what is orthodox. When you read the Bible and the Confessions the orthodox synod to which you belong will guide you into a correct understanding of what they

teach. In practice, the normative authority of both the Bible and the Confessions are superseded by the doctrine of the orthodox synod. Confessional loyalty is subordinated to synodical loyalty. The truth is subordinated to the church instead of the other way around.

Confessional Lutherans don't do this deliberately and it doesn't happen overnight. But it happens. When it does, we who call ourselves confessional Lutherans need to remember that we find and identify the true church by finding and identifying the pure marks of the church. We don't find the pure marks by finding the true church. The true church is hidden under the pure marks and can be found nowhere else. When the synod becomes the norm of doctrine, confessional Lutherans cannot safely be tolerated, except in theory. Confessional Lutheran observations are not very welcome when they reveal that the latest synodical measuring board was poorly cut. I have heard pastors argue – in service to synodical measuring boards used in Missouri, Wisconsin, and ELS – that the real presence means that the body of Christ is present only for that flickering moment when the bread touches the tongue; that the discipline, evaluation, and grading of schoolchildren is the ministry of the gospel; that baptism is not necessary for salvation; and I could go on. Boards have been poorly cut in all of the synods that once comprised the Synodical Conference. One would think that orthodox synods would appreciate confessional Lutheran correction. But their corporate ego is a fragile thing that, when threatened, threatens.

Both the Missouri Synod and the Wisconsin Synod embraced the orthodox synod myth until the breakup of the Synodical Conference. Since then, the Wisconsin Synod has faithfully adhered to her latest measuring board, while the Missouri Synod got into a big fight during which all of the boards were broken. The confessional contingent in Missouri consists of those digging through the rubble in search of the original confessional measuring board.

In an attempt to make sense of where Missouri and Wisconsin stand in relationship to each other, let me give my own rather rude and simplistic explanation of how they view church fellowship and from there proceed to offer suggestions for the future.

Missouri's Doctrine of Influence

The Missouri Synod doesn't have a doctrine of fellowship. It has a doctrine of influence. We declare fellowship with you so that you will listen kindly to us when we tell you that you really ought to leave the Lutheran World Federation and, while you are at it, perhaps consider subscribing unconditionally to the Lutheran

Confessions. It's somewhat like a young woman who wants to make a man her husband and reasons that the way to do this is to go to bed with him. She forgets that nobody buys the cow when he can get the milk for free. The doctrine of influence does not work. In July of 2001 the Missouri Synod, by a ninety-percent majority vote, declared fellowship with the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Latvia, a church body that belongs to the Lutheran World Federation. A week earlier an article appeared in the Baltic Times in which ELCL Archbishop Janis Vanags was quoted as saying:

There is tension between the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod and the Lutheran World Federation, but we should not play games according to their rules. We establish our own rules and develop friendly relations with all churches.

The doctrine of influence replaced the doctrine of fellowship when the official position of the synod replaced the public doctrine of the synod as the basis for declaring fellowship. The public doctrine is the teaching that is taught in real pulpits and classrooms throughout the church body. The official position is the teaching that is determined by a majority vote at synodical conventions.

This doctrine of influence goes way back to the 1930's when the Missouri Synod and the old ALC and were poised to declare fellowship with one another without confessional agreement. You see it again in 1969 when the Missouri Synod declared fellowship with the new ALC without confessional agreement. The damage done to the Missouri Synod doctrine of church fellowship by that twelve-year relationship is incalculable. Missouri has not recovered. One wonders if she ever will.

Wisconsin's Wauwatosa Myth

The Wisconsin Synod's position on fellowship is very simple and easy to understand. If you are in church fellowship with us you are orthodox. If you are not you are not. That's simple. While positing the theoretical possibility that one could be orthodox while belonging to a heterodox church body, this remains always theoretical. Also somewhat theoretical is the unconditional confessional subscription. In fact, the norm for doctrine in the Wisconsin Synod is the Wisconsin Synod. It is, after all, an orthodox synod.

The Wisconsin Synod suffers from the Wauwatosa myth. This myth is grounded in a deep respect for sola Scriptura, but it neglects the role the Lutheran Confessions must serve for confessional Lutherans. The Wauwatosa Gospel says that you must determine your doctrine on the basis of the Scriptures alone without having Luther or the Lutheran Confessions whispering in your ear. Only

after completing the exegetical task with perfect exegetical neutrality does one then consult the Confessions to see if he got it right. It doesn't work. It is true that we must base our doctrine on the Bible alone, but we never go to the Bible all alone. We go to the Bible with the prejudices, misconceptions, and false paradigms that we have imbibed from the religious climate in which we live. We project all sorts of foolish notions onto the biblical text without even knowing it. This is one reason why the church demands that we subscribe to the Lutheran Confessions. They have been tested and found to be faithful, whereas our own bright ideas may not stand the test of thorough long-term theological scrutiny. The Lutheran Confessions help us to read the Holy Scriptures correctly. After all, they are scriptural. Having been persuaded that the Lutheran Confessions are in complete doctrinal agreement with the Scriptures, the confessional Lutheran may be confident to permit the Lutheran Confessions to guide him in his study of God's Word. Of what value are they to us if we do not depend on them for guidance as we study God's word?

In response to those of us who have been appealing to the normative authority of the Lutheran Confessions in the ongoing debate about the ministry, Prof. Thomas Nass writes:

This debate about forms of ministry is a debate that developed after the writing of the Lutheran Confessions. It was not something that the writers of the Confessions intended to address. It is always problematic, after doctrinal controversy has raged on a topic, to expect documents written before the controversy to settle the issue. Certainly documents from previous generations need to be studied, and their light needs to be shed on current issues. But often people on both sides of a later controversy will claim that the previous documents support their view. This is exactly what is happening in regard to the Lutheran Confessions and the question of ministerial forms.

But the Lutheran Confessions do address the issues we are debating! This has become crystal clear in the debate on the ministry in the ELS during the past few years. What is the point in subscribing to writings by which we will regulate all religious controversies if we may not appeal to those writings as normative when religious controversies arise? The Lutheran Confessions do not change. Who can deny that the teaching of the Wisconsin Synod and the teaching of the Missouri Synod on the office of the ministry have undergone change over the years? So then, what will serve as norm for us? Ever-changing synodical traditions or the confessional writings that we require our pastors and our congregations to subscribe unconditionally?

The simple fact of the matter is that while claiming to reject the “father’s theology” of the Missourians, the Wisconsin Synod has adopted a “father’s theology” of her own. The Wisconsin Synod does indeed hold to an unconditional confessional subscription, but too often that original measuring board is left on the ground somewhere while a more recently cut board takes its place. This is a dangerous practice that militates against genuine confessional subscription and leads to sectarianism.

Family Matters in the ELS

The ELS is a family. The original family was a tiny remnant of the old Norwegian Synod that refused to merge into oblivion in 1917. Following the wise counsel of Francis Pieper, these Norwegians did not join Missouri, but instead formed their own synod in fellowship with Missouri and Wisconsin. Since breaking fellowship with Missouri nearly fifty years ago, the ELS has always welcomed confessional Missourians who wanted to join the family precisely because they were confessional Missourians. While enjoying fellowship with the Wisconsin Synod, the ELS has not usually applied the measuring boards cut in the Wisconsin Synod as the norm for doctrine in the ELS. Recent attempts to do just that with respect to the doctrine of the ministry were unsuccessful. The division caused by those attempts can be mended only as we in the ELS resolve to use the Lutheran Confessions to regulate religious controversy among us.

Confessional Lutheran Fellowship Today

When the fellowship between Missouri and Wisconsin was broken over forty years ago, each was judging the other by means of their respective synodical measuring boards. Since then, when considering the topics of the church, her ministry, and her fellowship, each synod defines its position in reaction against the other synod. Wisconsin defines church, ministry, and fellowship in more general terms while Missouri defines them in more specific terms. Missouri criticizes Wisconsin for failing to see the specific divine institution of the local congregation, the pastoral office, and how church fellowship is always essentially altar and pulpit fellowship. Wisconsin criticizes Missouri for failing to acknowledge the presence of the church, her ministry, and her fellowship outside the parameters of the local congregation.

Missouri is right. The Augsburg Confession does not identify the church as the assembly of saints among whom the gospel is purely preached *or* the sacraments are rightly administered. We confess that the church is the assembly of saints where the gospel is purely preached *and* the sacraments are

rightly administered. We should define the church, her ministry, and her fellowship according to the whole, for that is how our Lord has instituted His church and ministry, and this is what we share. Holy Mother Church possesses all of the treasures of salvation and we must not think of her as having anything less than the full gospel and sacrament ministry of reconciliation. It is inadequate theologically to speak, for example, of a schoolteacher as holding essentially the same office as the pastor, albeit a more limited form of it. This is saying that the essence of what belongs to Holy Mother Church does not include the sacraments. This formless conception of church and ministry reduces the concretely instituted preaching, baptizing, absolving, and administering of the Lord's Supper into abstract and interchangeable means of grace. God did not institute abstract means of grace. He gave us preaching, baptism, absolution, and the Lord's Supper. These belong together. They identify Holy Mother Church, define and form her ministry, and together are the basis for church fellowship. This is the plain teaching of the Augsburg Confession.

Wisconsin is right. The children of Holy Mother Church do not cease to be her children when they are not at home. The communion of saints remains a holy communion even when the saints are physically scattered. The church's fellowship is a fellowship of every individual Christian. Furthermore, the church as Mother has nothing that is not by divine right the possession of every individual member of the church. This means that when Christians worship God they always do so as members of the church and the church is always defined by the pure marks. The sophisticated distinction between joint prayer and prayer fellowship by which Missouri justified her unionistic intentions in the 1930s has borne the fruit of Yankee Stadium in the 21st century. It's okay to pray! Yes, it most certainly is! But it does matter where, when, and with whom. The offense of Yankee Stadium is not just that the Rev. David Benke was president of the Atlantic District of the Missouri Synod or that he was the Pastor of St. Peter's Lutheran Church in Brooklyn, New York. It was that he participated in an activity by which he, a Christian, denied the truth into which he was baptized. No Christian has the right to do this. The Wisconsin Synod and the ELS understand this. A significant portion of Missouri apparently does not.

Neither confusing nor dividing the marks of the church. The marks are confused when they are all rendered into a general activity of "sharing the gospel" as if the pastoral office and the local congregation are superfluous. The marks are divided when an entirely different standard obtains at the altar and the pulpit than what applies to every individual Christian whatever his vocation in life, as if the church ceases to exist whenever the pastor is absent. We must learn to confess the church, her ministry, and fellowship as an undivided and indivisible whole. We must learn also to confess that every individual Christian by God's grace possesses all the treasures Christ gives to Holy Mother Church and he

confesses day by day the very same gospel that the pastor preaches in the pulpit on Sunday morning.

If we wish to discover that orthodox Lutheran heritage of confessional fellowship in our day we are going to have to learn to subordinate synodical loyalty to the normative authority of the Lutheran Confessions. Synods change. The truth doesn't change. Our confirmation vows and our ordination vows are more important than any official statement of any synod that cannot be binding on our conscience because we never subscribed to it.

Confessional Lutherans in the Missouri Synod must mark and avoid persistent and openly unrepentant unionists and syncretists and other errorists who belong to the Missouri Synod. The Missouri Synod claims that all Missouri Synod congregations and pastors are by virtue of their synodical membership in fellowship with all other Missouri Synod congregations and pastors.

Confessional Lutherans in the Missouri Synod should challenge this, by publicly breaking fellowship with David Benke and Gerald Kieschnick unless and until they publicly repent of their syncretism. Confessional Missourians should also declare themselves to be out of fellowship with all congregations in the Missouri Synod whose altars welcome those who regularly commune at heterodox altars. Confessional Lutherans may not address the issue of confessional Lutheran fellowship by assigning the responsibility of church discipline to synodical officials who cannot or will not act. The official confession of a synod to which one formally belongs cannot replace the personal responsibility of every confessional Lutheran congregation, pastor, and individual to confess the pure truth of the gospel of Christ and to avoid every expression of fellowship with false teaching. Empowering synods and their representatives to make our confession for us is to deny our own confession. Submitting to any synodical authority above the authority of the Lutheran Confessions is to submit to sectarianism. There is no authority higher than the truth.

If the theological leadership from among the confessional Lutherans in the Missouri Synod and their counterparts in the Wisconsin Synod and the ELS were to set aside synodical loyalties in a higher pursuit of genuine confessional Lutheran consensus, I believe that God would richly bless their efforts. If confessional Lutherans can come together to confront the issues that divide them on the basis of the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions without regard to their respective synodical measuring boards, how can good not come from such efforts? Entrenched synodical bureaucracies, timid yet powerful synodical functionaries, and chauvinistic synodical loyalties will stand in the way. The spirit of confessionalism will prevail because it is stronger. It is expressed nowhere so powerfully than in the words which conclude the Formula of Concord and bind all confessional Lutherans of all ages:

Since now, in the sight of God and of all Christendom, we wish to testify to those now living and those who shall come after us that this declaration herewith presented concerning all the controverted articles aforementioned and explained, and no other, is our faith, doctrine, and confession, in which we are also willing, by God's grace, to appear with intrepid hearts before the judgment-seat of Jesus Christ, and give an account of it; and that we will neither privately nor publicly speak or write anything contrary to it, but, by the help of God's grace, intend to abide thereby: therefore, after mature deliberation, we have, in God's fear and with the invocation of His name, attached our signatures with our own hands.

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