

The Relationship between the Justification of the Sinner before God

And the Practice of Church Fellowship

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Church fellowship is not a topic of Christian doctrine in and of itself. It is rather a way of describing the Church. We confess, "I believe in the holy Christian Church, the Communion of saints." The Church is the communion or fellowship of saints. Whenever we speak of the Church as having fellowship, establishing fellowship, declaring fellowship, or expressing fellowship we are simply talking about what makes the Church the Church. The Church is a fellowship of holy people. What makes them holy is what brings them into fellowship with each other. Therefore, what makes sinners into saints is what establishes fellowship between them. The justification of the sinner before God brings the sinner into fellowship with God and into fellowship with all other sinners who have been justified.

What breaks the bond between man and God is what breaks the bond between man and man. Until our fellowship with God is restored, we can enjoy no spiritual fellowship with one another. Here we see where the Christian faith parts company with all other religions. There is no brotherhood of man. There are warring factions of men held together by common interests and mutual fears. There is no true brotherly unity. Sentiment must yield to reality and when the desires of one man transgress the desires of another there must be a basis for resolving the conflict. It may involve the imposition of a superior will as with a government of some kind. It may require a little bit of give and take. It may be that the one simply subordinate his will to the other. Whatever the method of resolution might be, it is never more than temporary. The desire of the one and the desire of the other have not been brought into harmony. The fellowship they enjoy is forced.

Only the Holy Spirit can bring about true fellowship. He does so by bringing to us the forgiveness of sins and eliciting faith within us so that we may receive the forgiveness he brings. The conflict between sinners cannot be resolved until the sin that has caused it is removed. The forgiveness of sins is the presupposition of Christian fellowship. Christian fellowship is church fellowship. Any ecclesiology that is not grounded in the doctrine of justification by faith alone is

necessarily false. There can be no Holy Christian Church and she can enjoy no fellowship with God unless God forgives her all her sin.

The church receives and she gives. She gives what she has first received. Jesus has given the forgiveness of sins to his church. He has also given to her the authority to forgive. We do not seek out forgiveness from the State. God has not given to the State the authority to forgive. We do not look for forgiveness from non-Christian religious groups. The Mosque has no forgiveness to give. The Lodge has no forgiveness to give. The Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons have no forgiveness to give. The Jews have no forgiveness to give. Only the Holy Christian Church has forgiveness to give because Jesus gave forgiveness and the authority to forgive to the Church and only to the Church.

We may speak of another kind of fellowship than that which the church enjoys. A certain kind of sharing can exist among fishermen, recovering drug addicts, libertarians, bird watchers, socialists, and Green Bay Packers fans. Since this is so, it is also true that those who regard themselves as the church but do not have the forgiveness of sins may nevertheless enjoy a certain kind of fellowship with one another. But it is not church fellowship. It is something else. Church fellowship is not possible without the forgiveness of sins and church fellowship is guaranteed with the forgiveness of sins.

When we speak of church fellowship we are talking about what the New Testament calls *koinwnia*, which is translated into English as fellowship or communion. *Koinwnia* is a noun. The verb is *koinwnew*. The verb is usually translated into English as to share or to participate. In English usage, the term communion is often reserved to refer to the Lord's Supper, while the term fellowship is defined much more broadly, frequently more in quasi-religious social terms than in a strict theological sense. To have communion usually means to go to the Lord's Supper to eat and to drink the body and the blood of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins. To have fellowship usually means to eat food together after a church service. Never mind the fact that the two words are English translations of the same Greek word and there doesn't seem to be any particular reason why one or the other of the English words is used in translation. It's rather confusing.

It gets even more confusing when people use the nouns as if they were verbs. This is so commonplace in English these days that we could easily tolerate such abuses to our native language. And I would advocate tolerance if there were good reason for it, but changing the meaning of words often accompanies changing the meaning of the ideas the words are designed to express. Besides, murderers of the English language rarely show much respect for ideas anyway. The latest display of butchery in what passes for theological discourse among us is the expression "fellowshipping principles." Now I would argue that you cannot

turn a noun into a participle by adding the letters i-n-g to it. You can do that with a verb, but you cannot do that with a noun. You could rightly talk about principles of sharing or principles of participating, because to share and to participate are verbs. But fellowship is not a verb. It is a noun. There is no such thing as fellowshipping principles.

One does not fellowship. One may express fellowship, declare fellowship, or practice fellowship. But one does not do it. It is what it is and it is not a verb. It is a noun. One has it. One enjoys it. One is established in it. One declares it and recognizes it. One doesn't do it. That is to say, it is not an activity. It is a noun. However, it is a noun with a necessary verbal concomitant. It is like love. You are in love. You love. The love you practice comes from the love you have. Then the one deepens the other and so the verb and the noun reinforce each other.

The fellowship that is practiced among Christians is deepened as we return to its source in the forgiveness of sins. St. Paul identifies the fellowship of Christ's body and blood with the sacramental elements as the basis for the fellowship of the saints who eat and drink Christ's body and blood together. He writes:

The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? For we, though many, are one bread and one body; for we all partake of that one bread. 1 Corinthians 10:16-17

The body and the blood are given and shed for the forgiveness of sins. The body and the blood were once offered up to the penal justice of God to propitiate his wrath and to secure eternal salvation for us all. By the giving up to God of his body and blood the Lord Jesus won forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation for us and he gives us these treasures in the Supper that we call Holy Communion. The unity of Christ's natural body with the elements and the unity of the individual Christians with one another may not be dissociated from what Christ's body and blood secure for those Christians. We are justified by Christ's blood. The Lord's Supper justifies us. So it unites us. Nowhere is the unity of the church more vividly portrayed than at the Lord's Supper. The Christians are one body because they partake of that one body. But this is not just any body. This is the holy body of Jesus which, by bearing all our sin, has taken our sin away. In this way the sacrament of Christ's body and blood can grant to us forgiveness of sins and salvation.

The pastor speaks the blessing:

Our crucified and risen Lord Jesus Christ, who has now bestowed upon you His holy body and blood, whereby He has made full satisfaction for

all your sins, strengthen and preserve you in the true faith unto everlasting life.

The body and blood have made full satisfaction for sins. The body and blood are bestowed upon us. Therefore, the forgiveness of sins is also given. All who receive it are thereby joined together as one body. There is neither sect nor schism among them. They are perfectly joined together in one mind and in one judgment. They are the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church. This is no dream, no mere theological construction or pious opinion. This is the clear and abiding sense of the plain biblical text inspired by the Holy Spirit for us to believe and take to heart: "For we, though many, are one bread and one body; for we all partake of that one bread." (1 Corinthians 1:17)

We do not "do" the Lord's Supper. We administer it. We receive it. We share it. We participate in it. But it isn't done for the simple reason that it isn't a human activity to do. It is divine. God establishes the fellowship that we enjoy.

When God establishes fellowship we Christians live within what he has established. St. John writes:

This is the message which we have heard from Him and declare to you, that God is light and in Him is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin.

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us. (1 John 1:5-10)

We have fellowship with God. We walk in the light. If we claim to have fellowship with God and walk in the darkness we are lying. Fellowship has to do with one's walk. Faith has to do with works. But one's walk is not sinless in this world. Sin breaks fellowship. So we need the blood of Jesus to cleanse us from all sin. Walking in the light as God is in the light entails living under the shelter of the cross. It involves us in the daily dying to sin and rising to righteousness afforded us in Holy Baptism. It sends us to the Altar where we become one body by participating in the one body by which full satisfaction for all our sins was once and finally made. If we refuse to acknowledge our sins, confess them to God, and receive absolution from him we break fellowship with God and with one another. The practice of church fellowship – of Christian fellowship – is a practice born of absolution. That is, it comes from being justified by God.

To declare fellowship is to say something about the forgiveness of sins. To break fellowship is to say something about the forgiveness of sins. To practice fellowship is to say something about the forgiveness of sins. But what is it we are saying about the forgiveness of sins when we declare or withhold the hand of Christian fellowship? Do we mean to suggest that those with whom we will not express Christian fellowship are not in fellowship with us? But if they are not in fellowship with us they do not have the forgiveness of sins. If they had the forgiveness of sins they would surely be in fellowship with everyone else who had the forgiveness of sins. If forgiveness of sins doesn't bring about Christian fellowship, what does? To speak of possessing the forgiveness of sins through faith while not having fellowship with the God who has forgiven us our sins is to speak nonsense and offensive nonsense at that! God does not forgive and withhold fellowship at the same time. And if we are in fellowship with God we must also be in fellowship with everyone else who is in fellowship with God.

Here is where we confessional Lutherans are confronted with a problem. We confess that God establishes fellowship with us by forgiving us our sins and taking away what separated us from him. We must also confess that we are one with everyone who is justified by faith. Indeed, we define the church as those who are justified by God through faith alone in the gospel. Listen to the familiar words from the Augsburg Confession in which we describe the faith by which we are justified by God.

Our churches also teach 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 on account of Christ, who by his death made satisfaction for our sins. This faith God imputes for righteousness in his sight (Rom. 3-4). AC IV

The faith that God imputes for righteousness in his sight, that is, the faith by which sinners are justified by God, is the faith that believes that we are received into God's favor and that our sins are forgiven on account of Christ, who by his death has made satisfaction for our sins. We may not deny that a person possessing such a faith is received into favor with God. We can hardly argue that having been received into favor with God one is nevertheless out of fellowship with God. And if one person is in fellowship with God and another person is also in fellowship with God these persons are thereby in fellowship with one another.

So then, why may we not express a fellowship that clearly exists? Talk to a Christian from a conservative Reformed background and confession and he will tell you that you are wrong to refuse to express such a fellowship. But we refuse. We grant that everyone who is justified by faith alone is in fellowship with

everyone else who is justified by faith alone and yet we deliberately withhold the hand of Christian fellowship from people who confess justification by faith alone. They confess the Holy Trinity, are baptized in his name by Christ's command, and lay claim to no righteousness by which they are justified but the obedience-wrought righteousness of Christ alone. We know that they confess this gospel of justification. Nevertheless, we refuse to express Christian fellowship with them. For our refusal to do so we are frequently accused of denying that such Christians are Christians. It is not simply bigotry against confessional Lutheranism that leads people to accuse us of presuming that we are the only Christians around. It may be no more than an apparently logical deduction on their part. Surely, if we regarded others than ourselves as Christians we would express Christian fellowship with them.

This apparent disconnect between our doctrine of justification and our practice of church fellowship has caused a great deal of consternation within the synods and congregations of the former Synodical Conference. On this issue many if not most of the laity are either confused or simply out of sympathy with our historic practice. It's almost as if the pastors constitute a special *cognoscenti* that understands why we refuse to acknowledge fellow Christians as fellow Christians while the laity go along (more or less) to what they don't entirely understand.

There are reasons why our friends in the LCMS have had a particularly difficult time with this issue in recent years. Permit me a brief recap of events in the Missouri Synod pertinent to this issue. I'll begin in 1969. The grass roots of the LCMS had become angry with the theology taught at the St. Louis seminary, specifically on the matter of the inerrancy of the Bible. Most of the faculty defended the use of the historical critical method of interpreting the Holy Scriptures. This method assumed that the Bible erred, that the theology of the Old Testament evolved, that the historical accounts recorded in the Bible included embellishments of events in contradiction to actual history, and so forth. The tolerance of these and related errors had been going on for some time and had only gotten worse. Synodical president Oliver Harms was beloved and respected throughout the Missouri Synod and was regarded as personally conservative. Still, it was the consensus among conservatives that he was either unable or unwilling to deal with the growing liberalism at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis. He was voted out. J. A. O. Preus was voted in.

The same convention that rejected Oliver Harms in favor of Jack Preus voted to declare fellowship with the American Lutheran Church. While Jack Preus had spoken out against such a declaration, he said at the convention after his election that he could live with it. And so he did. One little irony of history is that the twelve year tenure of J. A. O. Preus as president of the LCMS was the precise period of time during which the Missouri Synod and the ALC were in altar and pulpit fellowship with one another. I would submit to you that that twelve

year relationship did more to undermine the historic position of the LCMS on church fellowship than anything else. While the Missouri Synod took a strong turn to the right after the election of Jack Preus, reaffirming biblical inerrancy, opposing women's ordination, and attempting to return to her theological roots in other areas, it has been the matter of church fellowship that has bedeviled Missouri during the past generation. She is more divided over this issue than any other.

Ralph Bohlmann, upon his ascent to the presidency of Concordia Seminary in St. Louis in 1975, described himself as a progressive conservative. (Isn't that a political party in Canada?) Bohlmann later served as president of the Missouri Synod from 1981 to 1992, beginning his service in that office at the same time that the LCMS suspended fellowship with the ALC. Twelve years of altar and pulpit fellowship with the ALC did much to change Missouri's views on the subject. First of all, the triangular relationship between Missouri and the ALC on the one hand and between the ALC and the LCA on the other hand meant that, for all practical purposes, the Missouri Synod was in fellowship with the LCA. It made no sense not to be if it made sense to be in fellowship with the ALC.

When the Missouri Synod broke fellowship with the ALC in the summer of 1981 I was the pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church, a Missouri Synod congregation in Clear Lake, Minnesota. I had been there for two years. We were the only Lutheran congregation in a town that had many visitors, especially in the summer time. We had many former ALC and LCA members who hadn't been catechized in Lutheran doctrine. In fact, the chairman of the board of elders had transferred to our congregation from an ALC congregation and had earlier transferred to that ALC congregation from a Swedish Covenant congregation. He had never learned Luther's Small Catechism and was the chairman of the board of elders.

When the Missouri Synod broke fellowship with the ALC at the 1981 convention I did the only reasonable thing I could do. I preached a thirty-five minute sermon on why it was right for us to break fellowship with the ALC and then I promptly left town for a three week vacation.

During the next few years the Bohlmann administration became about as obtuse in recognizing the loss of a synodical consensus against unionism as the Harms administration was in recognizing that that St. Louis seminary faculty had gone liberal. It was as if Bohlmann was seeking out a consensus within Missouri that didn't exist. The synod had taken a stand on an inerrant Bible, but couldn't quite find her voice on what that inerrant Bible said about church fellowship. One side insisted that complete agreement on the teaching of God's word was necessary before we could express church fellowship. The other side adopted the view that we could express fellowship with all Christians, even if they belonged to

churches that taught various kinds of false teachings. It would appear that the two sides were mutually exclusive.

And then came the levels of fellowship synthesis. Bohlmann proposed that while complete doctrinal agreement was necessary for the sharing of the Lord's Supper, there were other levels of fellowship that required a less thorough agreement. Thanks to the response of such confessional stalwarts as Prof. Kurt Marquart, Bohlmann's "levels of fellowship" trial balloon went over like lead. However, it wasn't too long before it reappeared under the new designation "levels of relationships." Missouri is to this day muddling through the confusion spawned by Bohlmann as he attempted to synthesize what couldn't be synthesized.

But before we stand in judgment of Bohlmann and others who have tried to accommodate concerns that the traditional position of the Synodical Conference on fellowship has raised, we need to confront these concerns head on. How can we respond to sincere Christian inquiries that suggest we are dividing ourselves from the vast majority of Christendom by our refusal to express church fellowship with those who confess with us that a sinner is justified by grace alone, through faith alone, solely for the sake of the vicarious obedience of Jesus?

There is a right way and a wrong way to respond. One wrong way to respond is to argue beyond the gospel itself to further requirements. To argue that justifying faith is an insufficient basis for declaring and expressing fellowship is a false argument. It is not insufficient. It is wholly sufficient. As St. John clearly says: "And this is the victory that has overcome the world – our faith." (1 John 5:4b) The issue is not the sufficiency of faith, as if we must supplement what is lacking in it by providing a list of scriptural principles that must be obeyed. This is a replacement of the gospel with the law, but it is the gospel by which we are ushered into fellowship with God and with one another. The law works wrath. There can be no requirement for fellowship beyond the necessity of faith to receive the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation that we share with one another.

Another wrong way to respond is to concede that we enjoy an invisible unity of faith with all Christians but that this is something very different from the external fellowship that exists at the altar. Is that so? There is no faith but the faith that God elicits by the means of grace. These means of grace are clearly recognizable. They are not hidden down in the heart. They are right out in the open for all the world to see. The gospel is proclaimed. It is spoken in words that have meaning. The washing of water in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit is performed publicly with the whole world watching. The Lord's Supper is not hidden from sight. We see, we hear, we touch, we taste, and the grace of God by which we are joined in fellowship with God and

one another is concretely identifiable. We may not drive a wedge between the invisible unity of faith on the one hand and the visibly manifested communion in the holy things of God. The holy things are for the holy people. Since the holy things make sinners holy the holy people cannot be found apart from the holy things. There is nothing wrong with speaking of the church as invisible and since faith is visible only to God and since it is by faith alone that we are justified and incorporated into the body of Christ it is good that we continue to speak of the invisible church. But there is no invisible church – there is no faith – apart from the clearly visible, that is identifiable, means of grace that are located in specific pulpits, fonts, and altars. We may not in such a facile fashion dismiss the implications of denying fellowship to those with whom we are in fellowship by an appeal to a false dichotomy between the unity of the invisible church and the fellowship of visible churches.

We must confront the fact that we do indeed deny the hand of fellowship to those with whom we are in fellowship. We do so for good reason. There is something higher and holier and greater even than the fellowship that we enjoy with our fellow Christians. And that is the truth by which that fellowship is established by God. Truth trumps fellowship seven days a week and three times on Sundays (when you have a three point parish).

This is what we need to convey to our people. Truth trumps fellowship. All fellowship considerations must always be subordinated to truth considerations. Since the divine truth establishes the fellowship we seek out fellowship by seeking out divine truth. When God speaks things happen. His word is almighty and creative. The doctrine of the means of grace rests both on the power of God's word as coming from the almighty God and on the power of Christ's redemption, that is, on the efficacy of the blood of Jesus to wash away sin. God says "let there be" and there is. Christ is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Therefore, the gospel word concerning the justification of the sinner for Christ's sake is a word that establishes both faith and the fellowship of faith. So we confess:

But the Church is not only the fellowship of outward objects and rites, as other governments, but it is originally a fellowship of faith and of the Holy Ghost in hearts. [The Christian Church consists not alone in fellowship of outward signs, but it consists especially in inward communion of eternal blessings in the heart, as of the Holy Ghost, of faith, of the fear and love of God]; which fellowship nevertheless has outward marks so that it can be recognized, namely, the pure doctrine of the Gospel, and the administration of the Sacraments in accordance with the Gospel of Christ. [Namely, where God's Word is pure, and the Sacraments are administered in conformity with the same, there certainly is the Church,

and there are Christians.] (Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Articles VII & VIII, paragraph 5)

Note that the outward marks of the church, marks that show that true faith and the Holy Spirit are present, are the pure doctrine of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments in accordance with the gospel.

While it is perfectly true that there are Christians in churches where false and soul destroying doctrine is taught it is also true that the false and soul destroying doctrine did not make them into Christians. The Holy Spirit is incapable of error or deceit or falsehood of any kind. It is blasphemous, not to say absurd, to suggest that the Holy Spirit might engender faith by means of false doctrine. False doctrine has its source in the father of lies. It can engender only unbelief. To attempt a synthesis between truth and error is to attempt the impossible. They do not mix. The Apostle writes, "For what fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness?" (2 Corinthians 6:14) There is none. It is given to all Christians to beware of false teaching and to have no fellowship with purveyors of it.

Why not? Jesus tells us why not. He says the false prophets are wolves. What do wolves do? They kill the sheep and eat them. So then why should we avoid false teaching and have no fellowship with false teachers? It is for our own protection.

God establishes fellowship by means of speaking the truth. This is why we avoid expressing fellowship with anything that negates that truth. God saves us by baptizing us. God saves us by preaching the gospel to us. God saves us by giving us Christ's body and blood to eat and to drink. God saves us by the absolution spoken by his minister. These are the means of grace and these are what must be kept pure for they justify us and bring us into fellowship with God and with one another.

The law does not establish fellowship because it doesn't justify. It does the very opposite. It condemns. The preaching of the gospel is impossible without the preaching of the law for without a context there is no discernable meaning of any kind of assertion and the context for the gospel is always a sinner who needs to be justified by Christ's blood. Since by the law is the knowledge of sin we may not neglect or discard the law, nor may we tolerate its denial. But the law must serve the gospel not only in the justification of the sinner but also in the establishment of true Christian fellowship.

But that has not always happened among us. Instead, a subtle shift has occurred which has changed how we view church fellowship. The Scriptures and the Confessions speak of fellowship as being established by the Holy Spirit as he

brings to us the forgiveness of sins that brings us into fellowship with God and one another. Fellowship is not something that we do. God establishes it through the means of grace. The means of grace save. They create fellowship. This is why we may not to any degree adulterate, truncate, or set aside these means of salvation as we search for true Christian fellowship. Fellowship is always fellowship in the holy mysteries by which we are justified.

But this isn't how matters have been expressed in our circles during the past couple of generations. As the Missouri Synod and the Wisconsin Synod were arguing with each other over such things as prayer fellowship and the distinction between joint prayer and prayer fellowship neither side in the debate grounded fellowship in the means of grace. Consider this comment from a 1948 article published in the Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly. After describing fellowship as a "visible, practical exercise," the author went on to say:

We must have fellowship with our brothers in Christ. But in order to establish grounds for having such fellowship with a given person, it is simply not feasible to consider his personal relation to God, because we cannot read the heart. Personal faith cannot be the basis of Christian fellowship. Instead, Christian fellowship can be based only on profession of faith, by word and deed, which is something else again.[\[1\]](#)

Yes indeed, that is something else again, and it is no longer the pure preaching of the gospel and the right administration of the sacraments to which the Augsburg Confession points as the only basis of church fellowship. Notice how the means of grace – God coming to us with salvation to give – have been replaced by our profession of faith by both word and deed.

The Missouri Synod approached the issue in a similar fashion. In a contribution to The Abiding Word published to celebrate the centennial of the Missouri Synod in 1947, we read the following about church fellowship.

This inward, invisible fellowship should manifest itself according to God's will in outward, visible fellowship of believers in the local congregation and beyond the local congregation. We recognize fellow believers by their confession of a faith based on God's Word and expressed in the Confessions of the Lutheran Church. This confession of faith constitutes the outward bond of fellowship.[\[2\]](#)

Note how we recognize fellow believers. It is not by what they receive. It is by what they confess. The means of grace by which faith is born are ignored. In matters of fellowship the attention is now drawn away from God speaking to us and has become focused instead on our confession.

Now it is perfectly true that the faith through which we are justified and saved is to be confessed before the whole world. Jesus himself said, "Whoever confesses me before men, him will I also confess before my Father who is in heaven." We are confessional Lutherans, after all, and we identify one another by our confession of the faith. But our confession is always bound to what we receive and believe. We believe, teach, and confess. The bond between preaching, teaching, and confessing cannot be broken. The Synodical Conference theologians were always careful to point out that our confession is determined by our church affiliation. There was never any doubt about that. But our connection to a specific church is more than membership in an organization which is committed to certain propositions. It is being made one body by the partaking of the one body and blood and thereby being justified and brought into perfect fellowship with one another. This happens individually because faith is personal and individual. But it happens within the body. It is corporate. It happens most specifically in the Divine Service and most intimately at the Altar where Christ's body and blood are received.

While the Missouri Synod and the Wisconsin Synod were refining their debate on fellowship during the middle of the twentieth century, the source of faith and thus the foundation for the fellowship of faith, namely, the pure gospel and rightly administered sacraments were rarely mentioned as sufficient grounds for true fellowship in the church. It is no wonder that men educated in those days learned to disconnect the unity of the church from the fellowship enjoyed in the church. Once fellowship is set free from its gospel moorings, it immediately becomes entrapped by legalism.

We do not agree with the pure doctrine in order to fulfill an obligation for membership in a particular church. We agree with the pure doctrine because it is the voice of our God who saves us and tells us that we live on every word he speaks to us. To divide the requirements for expressing church fellowship from the requirements for being a Christian is to distort the very essence of fellowship. Agreement with the pure doctrine is not primarily a matter of submission to God's law. It is a matter of faith. We receive. From what we receive we confess. What binds us together is what we receive. Confession cannot be understood apart from this. Consider how we Lutherans frequently incorporate creeds and confessions into the Divine Service as hymns. Within the Divine Service we have a wonderful mixture of preaching, teaching, confessing, and glorifying God. While we are careful to distinguish between the sacramental and the sacrificial elements of worship we cannot always put each element neatly into one or the other category as the giving of God and the response of the saints flow back and forth in a Spirit-filled and Spirit-driven expression of true fellowship with God and within the Communion of Saints.

Contrast this understanding of fellowship with the sterile “let’s make a deal and stick to it” understanding of fellowship that says if you want to participate in the activities of our religious club you had better learn to obey the rules. But the Christian fellowship we enjoy is not a matter of agreeing with one another. Who are we with whom to agree? It is a matter of receiving the same gifts from the same God and by means of the grace these gifts provide being united in the same faith by the same Spirit. This takes place in the Divine Service. This is why Christian fellowship can never be anything less than church fellowship. It is a matter of receiving the same gifts from God and confessing together the truth revealed in those gifts.

There is no other basis for declaring and recognizing church fellowship than the pure gospel and sacraments of Christ. This is what we confess. Our confession cannot be disjoined from the source of our faith. There is an organic connection between the means of grace and the fellowship expressed by the saints. When that connection is broken the faith stands alone. Christians are no longer bound together by their justification that takes place through the means of grace. They are bound together by mutual human agreement with whatever standards they set forth as required for fellowship. God is no longer in charge. The church is in charge. But not the church as church, that is, not the church as she receives or dispenses the holy mysteries by which sinners are made into the communion of saints, but the church as a legal entity that establishes governing procedures, conditions of membership, and statements of doctrine to which they are to be bound. Unleashed from the true spiritual power of the gospel, the church depends more and more on legal arrangements. With a tradition that rejects (in theory, anyway) all forms of clericalism and hierarchy, the authority upon which the church relies becomes the authority of the majority. The spirit of democracy replaces the Holy Spirit. But as history has shown us with numbing regularity, the spirit of democracy is in fact the spirit of tyranny as those most adept at manipulating the crowds assume the authority to govern on the people’s behalf.

Missouri accuses Wisconsin of legalism in her application of biblical principles of fellowship. Wisconsin accuses Missouri of abandoning their common history and heritage. In fact, both Wisconsin and Missouri have parted from their confessional roots. They have neglected what the Augsburg Confession teaches about church fellowship. We read in Article VII:

Our churches also teach that one holy church is to continue forever. The church is the assembly of saints in which the Gospel is taught purely and the sacraments are administered rightly. For the true unity of the church it is enough to agree concerning the teaching of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments. It is not necessary that human traditions or rites and ceremonies, instituted by men, should be alike

everywhere. It is as Paul says, "One faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all," etc. (Eph. 4:5, 6). AC VII

There is here no artificial bifurcation between the unity of the church and the fellowship of the churches. It's not as if the invisible church is united by the gospel while the various visible churches are united by manmade doctrinal statements produced by committees and adopted by majority votes at conventions. And there is no hint of a reduced gospel shed of its full doctrinal substance. No, the clear reading of this text is that the fellowship we enjoy with one another in Christ's church is the fellowship established by the pure gospel and rightly administered sacraments. This is what binds us together as one. Nothing we say as Christians, as churches, or as the Church may mitigate this in any way. Our doctrinal statements must always support the pure preaching that actually takes place among us. The Holy Spirit doesn't call, gather, enlighten, and sanctify his Church on earth by means of our agreements with one another to say this or that. The Holy Spirit does his work through the gospel and sacraments that are actually preached and administered in real churches attended by real sinners who are made into a Communion or fellowship of saints.

"We take our doctrine seriously." So said President John Moldstad, Jr. after the adoption by the 2005 ELS convention of "The Public Ministry of the Word," a document produced by a committee known as the Presidium's Committee on the Ministry, whence the initials PCM by which the document is popularly known. What did he mean when he said, "We take our doctrine seriously"? He meant that when the ELS adopts a doctrinal statement through the agreed upon synodical processes that doctrinal statement must be upheld by every member of the ELS. Those who cannot in conscience support it are conscience bound to leave the fellowship of the synod that adopted it. That's what it means to take doctrine seriously.

Having been raised in the LCMS and been a witness as well as a participant in the conservative/liberal struggles in that synod I would suggest that Moldstad's sentiments are shared by quite a few "conservatives" in that body as well. I recently visited with a retired Missouri Synod pastor who told me that while he agreed with my position on the ministry he thought that it was good that the ELS was willing to take a stand on doctrine. Take a stand! Any stand! Show how seriously you take your doctrine! It reminded me of Elizabeth Taylor's response to the question of why she didn't believe in marriage. She replied, "I do believe in marriage. Why do you think I've been married so many times?"

Congregations, associations of congregations, and synods must have the right to define what they believe, teach, and confess and to set as conditions of membership the requirement that one agree with their doctrine. No one but a callused liberal would deny that or have no sympathy for President Jack Preus'

exasperated exclamation during the heat of the battle for the Bible in the LCMS, "Somebody in this synod has to have the authority to say what we believe." I mention callused liberals because I distinctly remember that after he said that his comment was immediately pounced upon by the propaganda masters within the liberal establishment of Missouri who accused him of seeking the authority of a pope. They called him Pope Preus. That was supremely unfair.

Perhaps the criticism that some of us have leveled against the leadership of the ELS is just as unfair? Surely a synod has the right to define her doctrine! And doesn't she have the right to expect those who belong to abide by the agreed upon standards that are conditions of membership?

I would like to point out some crucial differences between the battle for the Bible in the Missouri Synod during the sixties and seventies and the debate about the ministry in the ELS in recent years. First of all, within Missouri those who left the synod had been attacking the historic teaching of the Missouri Synod on the inerrancy of the Bible. The synodical administration was supporting the doctrine held in Missouri from her very beginning. In contrast, within the ELS the administration was seeking to impose as a new test of orthodoxy a doctrinal statement that introduced novel notions unknown to the founders of the synod.

Secondly, no one was disciplined in the Missouri Synod because he disagreed with or refused to be bound by a synodically adopted doctrinal statement. While "A Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles" prepared by President Preus (with the help of Ralph Bohlmann) and sent out to the synod obtained overwhelming support and was later adopted by the synod as an official statement of the synod's doctrine, "A Statement" was never used as a standard for discipline during the entire controversy. Contrast this to what happened in the ELS. The PCM document was used as a means of discipline immediately upon its adoption.

There is a third difference that is by far the most significant. During the battle for the Bible in the Missouri Synod the synodical administration was in the right and the St. Louis seminary faculty majority was in the wrong. This is determined, not by synodical votes or human covenants to agree with one another, but by the word of God. During the debate about the ministry in the ELS the synodical administration was in the wrong and the traditionalists who refused to be bound by the PCM document were in the right. Again, this is determined by the word of God.

But I am missing the point, aren't I? I am supposed to understand that there is a principle involved here, namely, that a synod has the right to define her own doctrine and to establish fellowship based upon the standards she chooses to follow. That's the principle I am missing. Obviously, everyone will insist that his

doctrine is true. This isn't a matter of whose doctrine is actually true. This is a matter of the right of a group of Christians to determine for themselves what their doctrine is. Surely I am missing this fundamental point in my criticism of the ELS.

No, I am not missing this fundamental point. I am taking due note of it and rejecting it. The church is not a gathering of like minded people who have determined for themselves what their doctrine is. The church is the assembly of saints who are joined together by the Holy Spirit in the saving truth by which they are justified. The message of the cross identifies them. They confess nothing more nor less than what they have received to confess. The confession of faith that marks them as Christians is the clear "Amen" to the means of grace that made them Christians.

We have no right to confess anything at all unless we know without any doubt that this confession is the confession of God's truth. Our Lutheran fathers said that they would stand before the judgment seat of Christ with fearless hearts as they staked their salvation on the confession they made. Who would stake his salvation on the truth of the PCM document? The very idea is absurd. But when the doctrinal basis for determining with whom we will express church fellowship is no longer the gospel by which we are justified and saved, that doctrinal basis will move around to wherever the church-political winds may lead her. Torn loose from the activity of the Holy Spirit in regenerating and justifying sinners, the doctrine becomes more and more academic, impenetrable, and irrelevant.

If we are to say that we can have no fellowship with a preacher we must be willing to say that God himself forbids that preacher to preach. If we deny the exercise of fellowship with a man whom we acknowledge as sent by God we thereby deny our fellowship with God himself. The imposition of doctrinal standards on the church's ministers is essential. And it is essential that the standard be unambiguously divine. We acknowledge and confess the divine authority of our Lutheran Confessions because we know that they agree with the written word of God.

God deals with us in nature and through government by means of his law. This governance over us is imperfect, not due to God's imperfection because God is perfect, but due to the imperfection of all human authority and the weakness of the law itself due to our fallen sinful nature. But the governance of God over us by means of the gospel is the authority he has given to his church. This authority he exercises by justifying us and bringing us into perfect fellowship with him. The justification is perfect for there is nothing lacking in Christ's holy obedience and vicarious suffering. The fellowship is perfect, for it is the fellowship achieved solely by the pure gospel in which there is nothing false.

What happens when we develop a practice of church fellowship based on agreeing to agree with one another? The gospel is replaced by the law. What is holy and pure becomes captive to sin. It is no longer the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. It is burdensome rules to tolerate for the sake of getting along with others. The church is abandoned in favor of a religious social club.

Once you begin to conceive of agreement in doctrine apart from the actual reception of the forgiveness of sins from the purely preached gospel and the rightly administered sacraments you redefine doctrine and the fellowship that is grounded upon it. Our doctrine is God's. But God does not deal with his church except through Christ. Severing the normative doctrine of the church from the actual preaching of Christ crucified for sinners is to pervert the gospel itself. It is to disconnect the doctrine from God and make it our own.

We can tolerate much in the area of pious theological opinion, even when we disagree with it. Whether or not Mary was assumed bodily into heaven is not a matter of doctrine. When the pope's church decided that it was dogma it did not thereby become divine doctrine. It remained pious opinion elevated to a level to which it cannot be entitled since all divine doctrine must be drawn solely from God's word. Likewise, the various opinions, theories, and notions floating around among us Lutherans concerning such things as divine calls for schoolteachers and synod presidents, a limited use of the keys, and so forth may be tolerated in the church even when we disagree. But when such matters are elevated to the level of divine doctrine, we must resist and refuse to be bound by them.

Pious or even not so pious opinions that are not imposed as doctrine can be tolerated and they should be. We cannot legalistically ride herd on one another, forbidding anything but a parroting of correct doctrinal formulations. But once these opinions become doctrinal imposition upon which the expression of church fellowship depends, we must resist them and oppose them and refuse to be bound by them. The fact that this distinction between tolerance of varying opinions and intolerance of imposing them as divine doctrine cannot be seen by so many is proof that the practice of church fellowship is understood as agreeing to agree with one another rather than saying "Amen" to the gospel.

Is our doctrine God's? Does it save? It is the means by which the Holy Spirit justifies us through faith by granting to us the righteousness that avails before God? Once doctrine becomes the plaything of theologians who want to synthesize what cannot be synthesized it is no longer the evangelical power in our lives that brings us together as one. It is rather a legal obligation to fulfill. But then we are no longer acting as church.

It has been said that God's truth is simple and that false doctrine is complicated. How true. The doctrine of fellowship is really quite simple. In explaining the practice of closed Communion, Justin Martyr (A. D. 114-165) wrote:

And this food is called among us the Eucharist, of which no one is allowed to partake but the man who believes that the things which we teach are true, and who has been washed with the washing that is for the remission of sins, and unto regeneration, and who is so living as Christ has enjoined.^[3]

That's not so very complicated, is it? Notice how Justin Martyr explains things much like the Augsburg Confession does. His practice of fellowship is ours. Those who commune at the altars over which we preside and at which we ourselves commune are washed in Holy Baptism, born again and forgiven of all their sins. They are not denying the faith by living openly godless lives. They agree that the things which we teach are true. Everything beyond this is mere commentary.

We may not compromise the truth that we believe, teach, and confess by joining together with purveyors of false doctrine in joint efforts to promote the gospel. Joint services with ministers of sects that deny baptismal regeneration, the real presence, the authority of the Holy Scriptures, or even the central article of the Christian religion constitute a denial of the truth regardless of whatever sentimental justifications are provided. There is no gospel but the pure gospel by which we were regenerated and brought into fellowship with God and his communion of saints. The scandal of visible division throughout Christendom cannot vitiate the true fellowship that exists in the saving truth. So we stay with it. We do not deny the right hand of Christian fellowship to anyone simply because he disagrees with us. It is only when he disagrees with God and what God has given us to teach that we must refuse to acknowledge fellowship with him. Our fellowship is with the Holy Trinity. It is in the forgiveness of sins. It is the gift of the Holy Spirit. The justification of the sinner before God is not only the necessary basis for the expression of church fellowship. It is of its very essence. We are the communion of saints. So God tells us. So we confess.

[1] "Concerning Christian Brotherhood and Christian Fellowship" by E. Schaller, published in Essays on Church Fellowship, Curtis Jahn, Editor, NPH, Milwaukee, 1996, page 160.

[2] "Church Fellowship" by Arnold H. Grumm, The Abiding Word, Volume Two, Theodore Laetsch, Editor, CPH, St. Louis, 1947, page 521.

[3] From The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Volume I, page 185.

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