

“Joint Prayer”

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As one of the unionistic practices of the Missouri Synod the 1953 Resolutions of the Wisconsin Synod list “Joint Prayer.” Contrary to former practice in the Synodical Conference and the Missouri Synod itself, a distinction is now being made between prayer fellowship and joint prayer, which has properly been called a distinction without a difference.

The Iowa Synod, particularly Dr. Reu has long contended that prayer fellowship or joint prayer has a broader base than Pulpit and altar fellowship, which until recent years was vigorously attacked by recognized spokesmen of the Missouri Synod. The Missouri Synod has changed its position and is now attacked by the Wisconsin and Norwegian Synods with the same arguments which the Missouri Synod formerly employed. It is now contended that under certain circumstances joint prayer is entirely proper even with those with whom pulpit and altar fellowship may not be practiced. Prayer fellowship, it is said, is wrong, while joint prayer is permissible. Just when it is prayer fellowship and when it is joint prayer is pretty much of a mystery and is largely left to the judgment of the individual. Joint prayer is represented as not being unionistic, while pulpit and altar fellowship with the heterodox is defined as unionistic.

In arriving at this conclusion certain definitions have been set up by the original advocates of joint prayer as distinguished from prayer fellowship. There is the arbitrary definition (Statement, p. 55) that “any two or more Christians may pray together to the Triune God in the name of Jesus Christ if the purpose for which they meet and pray is right according to the Word of God. This obviously includes meetings of groups called for the purpose of discussing doctrinal differences.” This, if it means anything, puts all the stress on the purpose and presupposes that Scriptural methods are of no importance, which smacks very much of the Jesuistic doctrine that the end justifies the means. It treats such a sacred thing as prayer as a trivial appendage, about which no one need bother if the purpose on the whole is right, If a gathering is, for instance, chiefly civic or patriotic in its nature and purpose, why get hot up about it if there is a little praying there? But prayer dare not be relegated to such an unimportant positions It is either a sacred thing or, if it be a promiscuous prayer, ungodly blasphemy, with which no true Christian can associate himself, Scripture speaks not only of the purpose but also very distinctly of the method. It tells us not only for what we should pray but also with whom we should pray. This can not be set aside by any arbitrary definitions about high and noble purpose after the manner of King Saul, who was told that “to obey is better than sacrifice and to hearken than the fat of rams.”

Dr. Reu aside from presenting joint prayer or prayer fellowship as being less far-reaching than pulpit and altar fellowship, advocated prayer particularly with those who subscribed to the Lutheran Confessions even in cases where full church fellowship was not yet in force, in other words, with those with whom there was agreement in fundamentals though not in non-fundamentals that is, in minor phases of Christian doctrine. That was to be expected of Dr. Reu in view of the Iowan position on Open Questions. So far as I know, the Missouri Synod does not officially take that position even today, nor do I know of any recognized Missouri spokesman who has publicly taken the stand that only disagreement in fundamentals is a bar to prayer fellowship. But in practice that consideration does seem to enter in. There seems to be little taste for joint prayers with Catholics, Congregationalists, and the like, but there seems to be little reluctance to pray with other Lutherans not in church fellowship. If I can pray with heterodox Lutherans, I can also pray with non-Lutherans. If it is permitted by Scripture in the one case, it is permitted in the other case also. The degree of error is not the determining factor.

Our charge is not based on that consideration but rather on the arbitrary distinction which is made between prayer fellowship and public joint prayer, a distinction which Scripture does not make. The only question involved in the decision whether we can pray publicly with others is the question whether they are persistent errorists. Public joint prayer always involves fellowship. That element is always involved except in such remote cases that it is almost impossible to conceive of them. Just saying that joint prayer is something

different from prayer fellowship or less unionistic than pulpit and altar fellowship does not make it so. Any plausible definition which tries to make it appear so can not set aside the teaching of Scripture.

In support of joint prayer the challenge is made: Point out a single Bible passages which forbids joint prayer with errorists. With equal propriety it might be said: Point to a single passage which specifically forbids pulpit and altar fellowship. It is not an argument which proves anything. It is not a question of so and so many isolated, disconnected pigeon-holes but one which rests on a Scriptural principle, without all the specific violations being enumerated. Unionism falls under the condemnation of such general statements as: "Avoid them," "withdraw," "come ye out from among them and be ye separate." Unionism is generally defined among us as consisting in joint religious worship and work with errorists. Is joint prayer that? It certainly is not avoiding but contacting others in a religious way.

Prayer is a religious act. It is an act of worship. When I pray with someone I am joined in worship with him. Joint worship with persistent errorists is religious unionism no matter what religious phase is involved. Prayer is worship if anything is. Joint prayer with persistent errorists, since it is an act of worship, is condemned by the general injunction to "avoid them," which applies to the entire field of religion.

It is persistent, habitual errorists who are to be avoided, not weak brethren. Every orthodox group has errors in its midst due to the weakness of the flesh. The Galatians had fallen into error under the spell of the Judaizers, yet Paul called them brethren. They were still open to conviction. They were willing to be corrected by the apostolic teaching when it was applied to them. But it is different with those who cause divisions and offences contrary to the Word, who make propaganda for their false teachings, who have demonstrated beyond the shadow of a doubt that, in spite of all instruction and admonition, they will not give up their errors but are determined to uphold them and spread them. Then the time has come to "avoid." Joint prayer by no stretch of the imagination can be called avoidance.

It is claimed that joint prayer is permissible if the elements of confession and offence are not involved, the implication of those who say that being that they are easily eliminated. When a man prays, everything that he stands for in a religious way is involved. He can not shed his confession, even portions of it, as he takes off his coat. It is an inseparable part of him. When the Mohammedan prays, he confesses his Mohammedanism. When the liberal prays, he expresses his liberalism though perhaps not in exact words. When the Synodical Conference Christian prays, he confesses his distinctive doctrines. It is the whole man that is praying, not an expurgated edition. If that is not the case, it is denial. And how the element of offence can be eliminated from public joint prayer almost defies the imagination. Why does joint prayer among the various Reformed denominations arouse no surprise? Because the differences are not considered vital, neither by the denominations themselves not by the ordinary onlooker. To give the impression that doctrinal differences are unimportant gives offence in the Scriptural sense. If we engage in joint prayer with heterodox Lutherans, the average person within or without our circles will conclude that there are no vital differences left, no matter how loudly we may protest that we did not want to give that impression. That is giving offence, for it will influence people to take portions of God's Word lightly.

The question of prayer fellowship is largely being reduced to mere casuistry, Every case is regarded as a case by itself with the presumption that it is all right unless someone demonstrates that it is wrong. The principle involved is shoved into the remote background, and the individual case is treated as the important thing. That under that conception the application of church discipline has practically gone out of the window is not surprising. There are too many loopholes through which the unionist can crawl and successfully evade church discipline. He can talk himself out of it. Though the relaxing of the former position on joint prayer was evidently not expected to have that result but was thought to have been sufficiently safeguarded, a veritable rash of joint prayers has broken out and is approaching epidemic proportions, not only at meetings for discussing doctrinal differences but on many other occasions: Seminars, editors' meetings, social welfare agencies, community affairs, and the like. We are constantly being confronted with reports of such instances of joint prayer both in the secular and in the church press. It has become a great offence.

The argument which seems to have carried the greatest weight within the ranks of the Missouri Synod is that the fathers, even Dr. Walther, had the same policy with respect to joint prayer which is being advocated today, as though that had been the standard procedure. Much is made of the fact that Dr. Walther and associates did not protest the opening with devotions of the Free Lutheran Conferences of 1856-1859. The implication is made that joint prayer with the heterodox was the consistent practice of the fathers. The fact is that they quickly abandoned joint prayers when it became clear that they were dealing with persistent errorists.

Those were the formative years when the lines had not yet been clearly drawn. When Dr. Walther and his associates participated in joint prayer with representatives of other Lutheran bodies, they still looked upon them as weak brethren. To say that Dr. Walther was an advocate of joint prayer with those whom he knew as persistent errorists is to slander and misrepresent him. There is even evidence of joint communion services in those formative years; it would be just as proper to conclude from that that we may join persistent errorists at the Lord's Table. It has also been the practice of some to identify praying with those with whom church fellowship has long been maintained, though nearing the breaking point because of errors that have arisen with praying with those in regard to whom there never were any fraternal relations, which are two different things. Dr. Graebner makes that mistake in his *Prayer Fellowship* (p. 19). Dr. Graebner is quoting Dr. Whither as advocating prayer fellowship among those who had never been in church fellowship, while Dr. Walther was speaking of how long this fellowship should be continued with those who have long been brethren. Dr. Walther can not be used to support the position on joint prayer which is being advocated now.

When the lines had once been clearly drawn, as after the predestination controversy, joint prayer was no longer practiced with those Lutherans because it had become plainly evident that they were not weak brethren but persistent errorists. The documentary evidence is unassailable.

Allgemeiner Synodalbericht of 1881, p. 31, Says: "We tell everyone who champions a different doctrine among us, although he alleges his adherence to the Confessions of the Lutheran Church, openly and honestly: We do not belong together, and hence we have come to the parting of the ways. —We can no longer pray together, for you would pray for our conversion and we for yours. But such joint prayer is an abomination before God." *Suedliche*, 1885, 97: "People who join in prayer must be of one mind, one faith, one hope, for joint prayer is an expression of common faith. For that reason Christians can not join in prayer with the heterodox." Prof. Aug. Graebner in Nebraska, 1903, 73f: "Prayer has everywhere and always among all nations been a part of divine worship. Prayer is a part of divine worship." Dr. Zorn in his "Questions on Christian Topics, p. 241, asks the question: "May an orthodox Christian in any case unite in prayer with such as are unorthodox?" His reply is: "By no means." By way of illustration he says: "Only a few years ago a series of doctrinal discussions were held by representatives of the Synodical Conference, which by the grace of God is an orthodox Church body, and representatives of Ohio and Iowa, which by their own fault are unorthodox Church bodies. The discussions were held for the purpose of establishing unity in faith and doctrine. The Ohioans and Iowans demanded that the sessions be opened with prayer. To this the representatives of the Synodical Conference refused to accede. Great fault was found with such refusal and the refusers were publicly reproached in various church papers." Farther on he states that such prayer "would have been the merest mockery."

Dr. Th. Graebner wrote in the *Homiletical Magazine*, Vol. 44, p 231f: "It is difficult to make members of the Reformed denominations understand our position on joint prayers. They, as a rule, lack a comprehension of certain basic factors that enter into the discussion. If we say: "Joint prayers presume Christian fellowship, they are nonplussed." In 1937 Dr. Arndt in an essay before the Oklahoma District, later published as monograph, said: "We must not overlook that rejection of the Triune God and of Christ and persistent adherence to false teaching or to a sinful life form a barrier against joint prayer." In 1905 *L. u. W.* 51,49 carried the statement: "That public, joint prayer is a sign and part of church fellowship and a) would create the false appearance as though all those assembled were agreed in mind and confession (faith), and b) as though doctrinal differences still remaining were no longer of any special importance."

Such documentary evidence in regard to the former stand on joint prayer culled from publications of the Missouri Synod in former years could be multiplied. It was *publica doctrina*, the generally accepted position and practice. Because of this position on joint prayer the Missouri Synod was much maligned as narrow-minded and intolerant by other Lutherans and by the general public but was willing to bear that stigma as an inevitable consequence of loyalty to God's Truth. It was a position which we held together in the Synodical Conference. Until recent years all the publications defended that position as Scriptural and warned against the more liberal policy of other Lutheran Church bodies in this matter. It was truly *publica doctrina*.

Since then there has been a gradual relaxing of this position. Dr. Geiseman at least was honest and frank enough to admit it when in the *American Lutheran*, Vol. 24, No. 8, p. 5, he wrote that prayer fellowship was a question "on which the understanding and viewpoint of a large number of our pastors has changed appreciably during recent years." This fact fills us with sadness. We still stand where the Missouri Synod formerly stood on the basis of Scripture in the matter of joint prayer or prayer fellowship. We plead with you to return to that position and again to stand shoulder to shoulder with us in the battle against religious unionism.