

The Doctrine of Confessional Fellowship (Of Joint Worship and Church Work)

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By Professor emeritus Carl Lawrenz

We are gathered here to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the Lutheran Confessional Church. You have asked me to present a lecture on the doctrine of confessional fellowship. “Confessional” is an integral part of the very name of the LBK whose anniversary we are observing with joyful thanksgiving to our gracious God. With the Lord’s gracious help, it is determined to remain confessional. This is indicated also by placing three doctrinal essays on today’s anniversary agenda. Two of these essays deal specifically with the doctrines against which a false ecumenism undermining Biblical confessionalism of our day is directing its double attack. They are the doctrines of the authority of the Holy Scripture and the doctrine of confessional fellowship.

If a church body wishes to remain confessional it must uphold Holy Scripture as the divinely inspired and inerrant Word of God in everything that it clearly asserts. On the other hand, such a church needs to be intent upon practicing confessional fellowship only with church bodies, congregations and individuals with whom it is in full agreement in Scriptural doctrine and practice. These are interlocking positions. A weakening in either position invariably leads to a weakening in the other likewise. If a church body is willing to join in worship and church work with those who espouse or condone false doctrine and practice, it will find it impossible to keep these errors out of its own midst or purge them out when they assert themselves. Pluralism practiced and permitted gradually dulls confessional sensitivity. What is finally at stake is the blessed Gospel message of God’s saving grace in Christ Jesus for us sinners. Clarity concerning the Scriptural doctrine of confessional fellowship is important.

1. A Scriptural Definition of Confessional Fellowship

Speaking of St. Matthew’s and the other ten congregations of the LBK we can say that these congregations and their individual members are in confessional fellowship. Then we are using the term confessional fellowship to designate a *status* in which these congregations and their members recognize each other as Christian brethren and now consider it God-pleasing to express their common faith in joint worship and church work. Referring to tomorrow’s service, in which the members of the LBK congregation and guests from sister church bodies will be participating, we can also say: All these people will be practicing confessional fellowship in a joyful anniversary service. Then we are using the term confessional fellowship to designate an activity.

Confessional fellowship defined as activity includes every joint expression of the common faith in which Christians on the basis of their confession find themselves to be united. This can pertain to individuals, congregations or church bodies. Mutual recognition of one another as brethren is itself such an activity. Thus, a Scriptural definition of confessional fellowship as an activity is most serviceable. In the course of this essay the various points of the definition will be elucidated and the Scriptural basis for them will be offered.

Confessional fellowship needs to be distinguished from our spiritual fellowship in the invisible communion of saints. Confessional fellowship is meant to reflect that spiritual fellowship, but it cannot simply be identified with it. Ananias and Sapphira quite properly enjoyed confessional fellowship with the apostolic church until they were exposed as hypocrites, though a spiritual fellowship was no longer existing. God may know us to be united in the spiritual fellowship of the invisible church with members of heterodox churches with whom we cannot practice confessional fellowship.

Nevertheless, any treatment of confessional fellowship ought to begin with a discussion of our spiritual fellowship in the invisible church. When we practice confessional fellowship we are always to assume that the spiritual fellowship is there. Not to assume that we are jointly expressing a common faith that is in our hearts, and not intending to do that, would externalize the whole concept of confessional fellowship.

2. The Spiritual Fellowship We Assume in Confessional Fellowship

Through the message of Christ's finished redemption the Holy Spirit has brought us to the faith that all our sins are blotted out, that God is our Father (Gal 3:27). Through such faith constantly nourished and sustained by the Holy Spirit by the means of grace we stay united with our God and Savior. With the Apostle John we are thrilled by this unmerited fellowship with God and exclaim: "How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God" (1 Jn 3:1).

By this Spirit-wrought faith in Christ we are at the same time united in an intimate bond with all other believers. All believers the world over regardless of race, nationality, age, sex and station in life, together with those who have already departed out of this life in faith, constitute one spiritual family with Christ as the head. St. Paul says (Eph 4:4-8): "There is one body and one spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all." This glorious reality of the unity of all believers is emphasized by many striking metaphors of Holy Writ. Christ's believers are called the temple of God, a commonwealth, a family, a royal priesthood, branches of the one vine, one fold.

3. Confessional Fellowship as the Joint Expression of a Common Faith

The faith that unites Christians with their God and Savior and with each other is spiritual life. Spiritual life, like all life, expresses itself in activity. It is the Holy Spirit who leads us to express in activity the faith which he has awakened in our hearts and which he constantly nourishes and sustains through the Gospel. It is the Holy Spirit likewise who leads Christians jointly to express in activity the common spiritual life with which he has united them and which he sustains in them through the means of grace. These joint expressions of faith are our particular interest in this lecture. As joint expressions of *faith* they are spiritual in nature and cannot be seen. As such they are a part of the spiritual fellowship of the communion of saints.

As *expressions* of faith, made jointly by specific people (individuals, groups, congregations, church bodies), they are outwardly discernible. These joint expressions of faith cover a great variety of activities.

Let us discuss just a few examples at the hand of Scripture. Believers long for the indispensable food of the word of God for the constant nourishment of their spiritual life. When Christians, therefore, gather to hear God's word, this is a joint expression of faith, confessional fellowship. In entrusting his Gospel to his church, the Lord has given it to us also in the special form of holy baptism and the Lord's Supper. When Christians jointly carry out the Lord's commission to make disciples through baptism as a washing of regeneration, this is a joint expression of faith. In Holy Communion we receive the very body and blood with which our Savior won forgiveness of sin for all to strengthen us in the assurance of faith that we enjoy God's favor. But when Christians jointly commune, it is at the same time a joint expression of faith. Christ intended it to be that.

When Christians jointly carry out Christ's commission to preach the good news to all creation (Mk 16:15), when they are jointly engaged in mission work, in Christian education, these are joint expressions of faith, a practice of confessional fellowship.

As the victorious and exalted Savior, the Lord gives gifts to his church for the public ministration of the means of grace (Eph 4:11-14). When Christians make appreciative use of these gifts of the Lord, jointly train them for the ministry; when congregations and church bodies call them into service; when these public servants of the Word minister to believers, and they on their part in faith receive their ministrations, these are all joint expressions of faith, confessional fellowship.

Jesus himself taught us to pray, not "my Father," but "our Father in heaven" (Mt 6:9). In our prayers he wants us to keep in mind that we stand before him not merely as individual believers but as believers who are intimately joined together with all other believers in God's family. It is a comforting article of our Scripture-based faith that we know that all the children of God, though individually known to God alone, are constantly praying with and for us in supplication and thanksgiving. Yet in this sense every other expression of faith on the part of a Christian is at the same time an activity that he does together with all other Christians, also with every child of God whom the Lord is preserving for himself in heterodox churches. This is clearly taught in Ephesians 4:1-16 and in the twelfth chapter both of Romans and 1 Corinthians.

But this is not the activity of faith that we have in mind when we speak of confessional fellowship. That pertains to joint expressions of faith that we consciously and outwardly make with other Christians. Thus also the invisible joint prayer of which we have spoken needs to be distinguished from the joint prayer of which Jesus speaks when he says: “If two of you on earth shall agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven” (Mt 18:19). It is such joint prayer that is confessional fellowship.

In our WELS “Essay on Church Fellowship” we say: “We can classify these joint expressions of faith in various ways according to the particular realm of activity in which they occur, e.g., pulpit fellowship, altar fellowship, prayer fellowship, fellowship in worship, fellowship in church work, in missions, in Christian charity. Yet *insofar as* they are *joint* expressions of faith they are all essentially one and the same thing, and are all properly covered by a common designation, namely, church fellowship. Church fellowship should therefore be treated as a unit concept, covering every joint expression, manifestation and demonstration of a common faith.” Where the essay in the last two sentences uses “church fellowship” I prefer to use confessional fellowship” as I have throughout this presentation. I am avoiding the term church fellowship because for many, especially in Europe, “church fellowship” like *Kirchengemeinschaft* is thought of as a restricted term covering only fellowship between churches. In our synod the two terms have been used interchangeably. Neither “church fellowship” nor “confessional fellowship” are Biblical terms.

Our interest as we use either term is the Scriptural truth that every joint expression of a common faith is *essentially* the same. Scripture can give the general admonition “keep away from them” when confessional fellowship is to cease (Ro 16:17). It does so without specifying any particular form of confessional fellowship that is no longer to be practiced. Scripture sees an expression of church fellowship also in giving the right hand of fellowship (Gal 4:9), and in greeting one another with a fraternal kiss (Ro 16:16). It shows us that withholding of confessional fellowship may be indicated by refusing a fraternal welcome to errorists.

For anything to be a *joint* expression of faith presupposes that those involved are really expressing their faith together. This distinguishes a joint expression of faith from individual expressions of faith, which happen to be made at the same time and at the same place. In silent prayer many individuals are expressing their faith at the same time, but intentionally are not doing it jointly.

Certain things, like the Lord’s Supper, the proclamation of the Gospel, prayer, are by their very nature expressions of faith. When they are not intended to be that, they are an abomination in God’s sight. When done together, jointly, they are therefore invariably joint expressions of faith.

Giving a greeting, a kiss, a handshake, extending hospitality or physical help to others are not in themselves expressions of faith. Doing these things together with other does not necessarily make them joint expressions of Christian faith. For his own person, of course, a Christian endeavors to express his faith in everything that he does (1 Co 10:31). Done together with others, these things become joint expressions of faith only when those involved intend them to be that, understand them in this way, and want others to understand them in this way. That was the case with the apostolic collection for the poor Christians at Jerusalem, and with the fraternal kiss of the apostolic church. That is the case with our handshake at confirmation and ordination.

Only *insofar as* the various joint activities are *joint expressions of faith* do they lie on the same plane. *Only* in their common function as joint expressions of faith do the joint use of the means of grace and such activities as joint prayer and joint Christian charity lie on the same plane. In other functions, the means of grace and their use are indeed unique.

Joint proclamation of the Gospel is an expression of fellowship *not because the Gospel is a means of grace*, but because when I proclaim the Gospel I am expressing my faith and when I proclaim it with others I am expressing my faith jointly with them. Likewise, joint celebration of the Lord’s Supper is an expression of confessional fellowship *not because the Gospel is a means of grace*, but because in partaking of the Lord’s Supper I am at the same time expressing my faith, and by partaking of the Lord’s Supper with others I am expressing my faith together with others.

That in proclaiming the Gospel with others and by celebrating the Lord’s Supper together they and I are at the same time being edified by the means of grace is more important and vital than that in doing so we are

jointly expressing our faith. What God in his grace does for me and others through the means of grace is always more vital than our joint responses of faith.

Yet when we are defining what confessional fellowship is *in essence*, it is imperative that we simply define it as a joint expression of faith. To bring in the factor that in some instances we are jointly using a means of grace is introducing an irrelevant factor. This factor has nothing to do with the essence of an expression of confessional fellowship.

When expressions of confessional fellowship are classified as primary if they involve the joint use of the means of grace and others as secondary if they do not involve the joint use of the means of grace, this likewise leads to unclarity. Again, an irrelevant factor is injected to make certain joint actions more of an expression of confessional fellowship than others.

We find no warrant in Scripture for the idea that altar fellowship, pulpit fellowship, prayer fellowship, joint Christian education, joint mission work, joint Christian charity, all require different measures of Christian unity, so that one or several of these joint expressions of faith might on the basis of their essence already be possible while others might not yet be permissible.

We realize, of course, that other factors may come into consideration in commending the one joint expression of faith and ruling out others. We pray with our little children, but we do not commune with them. We do this not because we are not sufficiently united in faith to celebrate communion with little children, but because they have not yet been instructed sufficiently to examine themselves and to discern Christ's body and blood in receiving the sacrament.

We do not practice pulpit fellowship with every Christian with whom we do carry out joint mission work, simply because not every Christian meets all the requirements that the Lord in his word sets forth for those who teach and preach publicly. The vital matter of not giving offense may also be an added factor that might keep us from certain public demonstrations of a common faith when a private expression of confessional fellowship may be possible.

4. With Whom We Are to Practice Confessional Fellowship

It would be presumptuous on our part to try to recognize Christians on the basis of the personal faith in their hearts. Only the Lord can do that (2 Ti 2:19; 1 Sa 16:7). God would have us deal with people on the basis of their confession of faith. A Christian will confess his faith. St. John says (1 Jn 4:1): "Test the spirits to see whether they are from God." We are told to look at their confession. From their confession we will be able to recognize the many false prophets in the world. Jesus says (Mt 12:37): "By your words you will be acquitted and by your words you will be condemned." Scripture, of course, tells us that there will be hypocrites, that people's hearts will not always correspond with the confession they make. But hypocrites are not our responsibility until God in his time exposes them.

What kind of a confession does the Lord want us to look for in order to acknowledge one as a Christian through a joint expression of faith, through an exercise of church fellowship? Jesus says (Jn 8:31): "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples." In his great commission (Mt 28:19,20) Jesus asks us, in making disciples of all nations, to teach them to obey *everything* that he has commanded. St. Peter (1 Pe 4:11) urges: "If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God."

In principle a Christian's confession of faith is always a confession to the entire word of God. The denial, adulteration, suppression of any part of God's word does not come from faith. The Lord would have us acknowledge those as Christian brethren in an exercise of confessional fellowship who profess faith in Christ and with this profession embrace and accept his entire word. With such Christians we are encouraged to join in worship and church work. This accounts for the term "*confessional* fellowship." It also gives a Scriptural basis for the final clause of the definition: *Confessional fellowship is every joint expression of the common faith in which Christians on the basis of their confession find themselves to be united with one another.*

5. The Debt of Love We Pay to the Weak in Confessional Fellowship

Actually, the faith of Christians is marked by many imperfections, either in the grasp and understanding of Scriptural truths, or in the matter of turning these truths to full account in our lives. We are all weak in one

way or another. Weakness is implied by the prayers of Paul that his Christian readers may grow in Christian wisdom and understanding and become more fully rooted and grounded in love. Spiritual weakness is implied by his admonition (1 Th 5:14): “We urge you, *brothers*, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone.”

Weakness of faith is in itself not a reason for terminating confessional fellowship, but an inducement for practicing it vigorously in whatever form is suitable for helping one another in overcoming our individual weaknesses. That is why Scripture abounds in precepts and examples which exhort us to pay our full debt of love toward the weak, to carry each other’s burdens (Gal 6:1). In Matthew 18:17 the Savior shows us how far we shall want to go in our efforts of love to win a Christian brother or sister who has become ensnared in sin or error.

In the Gospels we frequently hear Jesus warning, rebuking, chiding his disciples for being “of little faith.” In principle they did not deny God’s fatherly care. Their weakness consisted in this that they were not yet quite able to live up to these truths. Jesus rebuked them sharply, blamed them for having a Gentile mind. But he also instructed them in all patience and tenderness. He granted them new manifestations of his grace and power. Like Jesus, we are not to break the bruised reed or quench the smoking flax, but lovingly to make every effort to restore them to healthy vigor. Weak brethren of every kind distinguish themselves from scoffers, unbelievers and persistent errorists in their willingness to receive spiritual help and instruction.

Romans 14 and 1 Corinthians 8 and 9 tell us of the weakness that affected the apostolic churches in the use of adiaphora, things neither commanded nor forbidden in God’s Word. Also here, as in all points of Christian life, doctrine was involved, but not in the sense that the weak brother did not know or understand the pertinent truths. The conscience of the weak brother had not yet risen to the level of his understanding. St. Paul met the need with patient and sympathetic instruction, unfolding the glorious liberty wherewith Christ has made us free. He approached the problems of the weak as though they were his own, fighting their battles in his own heart.

Paul’s apostolic testimony determined which was the weak and which the strong position. This was important. In any confessional church body the full debt of love can be paid to the weak, also when the weakness is doctrinal, only if it is clear who is weak and who is holding the strong position. The public confession of the congregation or church body must do this. To do it properly the public confession must be firmly based on the prophetic and apostolic word, Holy Scripture. Pluralism endured for any length of time blurs the distinction between the strong and the weak position. If no discipline is exercised, the official confessional position finally becomes meaningless.

The weakness which fraternal love will seek to overcome in fellow Christians also includes weakness in understanding God’s truth and involvement in error. Paul’s letters to the Galatians, Colossians and Corinthians teaches this very lucidly. In all these cases Paul patiently built up the weak faith of these Christians with the Gospel to throw off very serious errors in which they had become involved. In Galatia, for example, the Judaizers had spread the error that to enjoy the salvation won by Christ believers still had to be circumcised and observe all the Mosaic festivals. This struck at the very heart of the Gospel. Many of the Galatian Christians were misled and confused. Paul did not immediately sever fraternal relations. He indeed used very strong language against the seducers (Ga 1:8,9). The Galatians he still treated as brothers, as weak brothers to be sure, but as brothers nevertheless. He grounded them anew in the gospel of salvation by grace alone.

6. What Calls for Termination of Confessional Fellowship

In our efforts at winning the erring, it may become evident that we are no longer dealing with a weak Christian. We cannot continue to recognize and treat anyone as a Christian who, in spite of proper Christian admonition, impenitently clings to a sin (Mt 18:15-17). Manifest impenitence calls for excommunication. No further expression of confessional fellowship is possible. The sinner must be told that with his impenitence he has placed himself outside of Christ’s church. In excommunication we pass judgment concerning the impenitent sinner’s faith. This judgment, spoken out of love, is meant to shock the sinner into a realization of what his impenitence involves. Paul’s epistles to the Corinthians give us an illustration of such a desired effect. A

previously excommunicated impenitent sinner (1 Co 5:1-6) repented, and Paul could now urge the Corinthians to receive him anew as their brother (2 Co 2:5-11).

We can also no longer acknowledge and treat as Christian brothers those who in spite of patient admonition *persistently* adhere to an error in Scriptural doctrine or practice. Persistent errorists show themselves to be such by demanding recognition for their error and the right to make propaganda for it (Gal 1:8,9; 5:9; Mt 7:15-19; 16:6; 1 Ti 2:17-19; 2 Jn 9-11; Ro 16:17). This calls for a cessation of every joint expression of faith.

In a very comprehensive way Jesus urges: "Watch out for false prophets" (Mt 7:15). False prophets are those who in their teaching or practice deviate from God's word, demand recognition for their errors, seek to spread them and win adherents for them. Often enough they are themselves deceived by their own sheep's clothing. Yet they are in reality "ferocious wolves." They are that whether they are conscious of their false teaching or not. They threaten Christ's flock with harm and destruction. Jesus would have us know that it is not a light thing to deviate from his word. False doctrine undermines, breaks down, and destroys spiritual life. "A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough" (Gal 5:9). False doctrine will spread like gangrene" (2 Ti 2:19) That the Lord in his grace often prevents it from becoming fatal, even in the false prophets themselves, is quite beside the point. In his Savior's love the Lord is seeking to preserve his, precious word for us and others. By it alone faith is created, nourished, and preserved to eternal life. Corrupt the word by omitting something, changing something, adding something, or compromising any part of it and faith is endangered. That is why the Savior tells us to watch out for false prophets and to practice no fellowship with them. Whether their erroneous message is original with them, or whether they are peddling someone else's error, makes very little difference as long as they hold to it, demand recognition for it, and persist in spreading it.

Just as emphatically, the Apostle Paul tells us: "I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teachings you have learned" (Ro 16:17). In this very epistle Paul had given them a clear summary of Christian doctrine. Thus they were able to keep a watchful eye on anyone who departed from the doctrine which they had learned. Paul is not thinking of anyone who might casually make an erroneous statement. He has such in mind as cling to their error and with it create divisions. He uses a present participle to bring out the fact that it is something that those against whom he is warning practice habitually.

Concerning such errorists he says: "Keep away from them" (Ro 16:17). We are to cease all confessional fellowship with them. That the apostle does not mean social or any other ordinary contacts of life should be evident from what he told the Corinthians when they misunderstood his exhortation that they should have no company with sexually immoral people. They thought that he meant *all* contact with them. But Paul explained: "In that case you would have to leave this world" (1 Co 5:10).

When we are saying that Romans 16:17 tells us to withhold confessional fellowship from all persistent errorists, we are not slighting verse 18: "For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people." Some still maintain that this verse describes the only kind of persistent errorist from whom we are to withhold confessional fellowship. But verse 18 does not serve the purpose of telling us for whom we are to watch out and whom we are to avoid. Verse 17 has done that. Verse 18 cannot do that because it speaks of motives and attitudes that only God who discerns hearts can establish in an absolute way about anyone. That is why we must recognize verse 18 as God's appraisal of those whom we are to avoid according to verse 17, namely, all persistent errorists. God would have us know that insofar as they are clinging to error and disseminating it, they are taking orders from their own desires and appetites, not from the Lord Christ, whether they themselves are fully conscious of this or not. Error being what it is, people can be captivated to accept it only by artfully adapted illusory argumentation. We cannot fellowship with them as though ours and theirs were a common cause.

When many Lutherans persistently reject that the Holy Scripture is inerrant in everything that it clearly asserts, when they deny that all the details of the creation account are factual, when they teach that the Biblically recorded statements of Jesus concerning historical and scientific matters are not necessarily factual,

this is not merely weakness. They want recognition for these positions in the Lutheran church and strive to induce others to share them. We cannot practice fellowship with such errorists. By doing so we would share responsibility for their error.

St. John writes (2 Jn 11:12): “Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God; whoever continues in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take him into your house or welcome him. Anyone who welcomes him shares in his wicked work.” The errorists who called forth St. John’s exhortation were followers of Cerinthus. He taught that Jesus was the natural son of Joseph and Mary, that the Christ *eon* had descended on Jesus at his baptism but left him before his great passion. Such a denial of Christ’s deity and incarnation involved also the denial of the gracious purpose and the glorious outcome of Christ’s entrance into human flesh (1 Jn 4:1-3). Such teaching overthrew the foundation of Christian faith, made Christian faith impossible. That is why John says of the kind of errorist of whom he is speaking that he “does not have God.” John’s judgment is tantamount to the judgment of excommunication.

The withholding of fellowship to which St. John exhorts is, however, not restricted to the type of errorist of whom John had special occasion to speak. For the reason that John adduces for withholding confessional fellowship is not the faith-destroying nature of the particular error under discussion. The reason adduced by John is that “anyone who welcomes him [an errorist] shares in his wicked deed.” John, of course, means the kind of welcome and hospitality that would be understood as an acknowledgment of him as a confessional Christian brother. By joint expressions of faith with any persistent errorist we share responsibility for his error, whatever the error may be.

If the error to which a persistent errorist clings does not of itself overthrow the foundation of Christian faith, making Christian faith impossible, terminating or withholding confessional fellowship does not pass judgment on someone’s Christianity. That judgment is left to the Lord. Judgment is, however, passed on an individual’s or a church body’s doctrine. By withholding confessional fellowship we refuse to *share* responsibility for the error or unscriptural practice to which an individual or a church body clings.

“In more than one way will he who fellowships with an adherent of false doctrine be sharing in his evil deeds. He sins against the Lord, being indifferent to his Word. He sins against the church, for he gives offense to its members by leading them to believe that one doctrine is as good as another, thus making them indifferent. He sins against the false teachers by strengthening them in their convictions that they possess the truth, instead of helping them by testifying against their error in all meekness. He sins against his soul, because he exposes himself to the corrupting influence of error, which is never static but spreads” (*Christian Fellowship*, C. A. Hardt, *Concordia Theological Monthly*, Vol. XVI, p. 520).

Summary

“From all this we see that in the matter of the outward expression of Christian fellowship, the exercise of confessional fellowship, particularly two Christian principles need to direct us, the great debt of love which the Lord would have us pay to the weak brother, and his clear injunction (also flowing out of love) to avoid those who adhere to false doctrine and practice and all who make themselves partakers of their evil deeds. Conscientious recognition of both principles will lead to an evangelical practice also in facing many difficult situations that confront us, situations which properly lie in the field of casuistry.” (Adapted from the WELS *Essay on Church Fellowship*, using the term “confessional fellowship” instead of “church fellowship” in line 2.)