

The Doctrine of Church Fellowship in the Lutheran Confessions

by Curtis A. Peterson

Preliminary comment: It is this observer's belief that there are ultimately but two understandings of church fellowship among Christians, at least among Protestants: one that assumes that a common faith (experience?) in Christ and a common fellowship in the body of Christ is sufficient for outward fellowship. This view predominates in both ecumenical and "Evangelical-Fundamentalistic" circles. This is a reductionistic or fundamentalists view of fellowship.

The second is the view expounded by the Lutheran Confessions on the basis of Scripture that outward fellowship can only be practiced where agreement has been reached in doctrine and all of its articles.

The real issue, therefore, in all church fellowship discussions is, what is necessary before we may practice church fellowship?

It is my hope also that this presentation will explain why I have insisted that adoption of a common fellowship practice [is necessary], specifically at the altar in a common position on close communion (see my resolution of February), if we are to continue to work and worship in fellowship and oneness.

I. The Doctrine of Fellowship in the Confessions

A. The Preface to the Book of Concord (Tappert page numbers)

p. 3-4: Desire for unity, which Satan disrupted

p. 6: The "formula for concord"

p. 11: Distinction between persistent errorists and "those who err ingenuously."
False teachings can't coexist with truth

p. 12: That no other doctrine be taught

B. The Augsburg Confession: VII & VIII

Understood in light of Ap VII:31

[cf.] also AC XXVIII 21-28; p. 84-85

C. The Treatise 41-42 – Use of Mt 7:15 & 2 Co 6:14ff in a fellowship context

D. Small Catechism, First Petition 346:5

Large Catechism 426:47-48

E. Formula of Concord, Epitome, X, 2, 7 (pp. 492-93) – On agreement in doctrine

Solid Declaration, Intro: 502-503:8-10 – Fellowship implications of asserting in strongest terms that those opinions condemned herein "cannot be tolerated in the church of God, much less be excused or defended."

How could fellowship be practiced with such, then?

Formula of Concord, "Rule and Norm," 503:1 What is necessary for concord (fellowship)?

Commonly confessed doctrine

506:14 – Antithesis needed, so that not only is the truth stated, but also to accuse the adversaries who teach otherwise. Note the scriptural proofs in this section.

This whole section has very important fellowship implications, as, for the sake of the gospel, the truth is set forth so that it “may be distinguished from all error.” (507:16)

See also 507:19, where every form of ambiguity is rejected and avoided

FC, SD, VII:33 (p. 575), where Luther’s fellowship principles are cited

FC X is, along with the Preface to the Book of Concord, and the Formula of Concord, the richest mine in the Confessions for principles of church fellowship

611:2 – “When enemies of the holy gospel have not come to an agreement with us in doctrine...”

612:10-13 – Not “yielding to the adversaries even in matters of indifference” would certainly make any activity of church fellowship impossible and out of the question

Why? 613:16 states the reasons very strongly. Makes the “Brief Statement” (28-29) seem mild in comparison)

616:31 – A clear statement on the basis of fellowship in the Lutheran Church

632:94-96 is the conclusion not only to FC XI, but of the whole *Book of Concord*, and shows their deep longing for true harmony and fellowship, but which cannot be purchased at the cost of “anything” of the “eternal and unchangeable truth of God,” nor could they “give place to the smallest error” for the sake of the gospel.

Such positions are continued in 633:8b & 9. Can anyone seriously doubt that those who hold such views persistently could be refused fellowship at any level unless they turned from them?

636:39-40 conclusion – “Avoid these as dearly as they love their soul’s welfare and eternal salvation.”

II. Implications of Such a Confessional Position.

- A. Although the confessors loved the unity of the faith, they could not accept doctrinal error, for it made such unity impossible, for it tolerated the cause of the disunity in the church.
- B. Christian unity is doctrinal unity as well as unity in love (life). Indeed, just as sin attacks the unity of the church on the level of life, so false doctrine attacks the unity of the church at the level of doctrine, by which the church is created, nourished and preserved by the Holy Spirit.
- C. No distinctions can be made in the matter of fellowship, either by Scripture or the Confessions in terms of certain kinds of fellowship being acceptable with one degree of unity, while other kinds (altar and pulpit) for another level of unity. Fellowship in Christian love and life is of one piece. We dare not permit fellowship with persistent errorists “when the enemies of the gospel have not come to an agreement with us in doctrine” either in the practice of church fellowship in:
 1. joint worship;
 2. evangelism joint mission planning or cooperation in missions (comity, etc.) and evangelistic endeavors;
 3. stewardship;
 4. Christian education, including joint day schools;
 5. weddings;

6. prayer fellowship (I find it ironic that we have, by and large, as a synod conceded this issue, and yet are upset about a prayer amendment to the Constitution on the grounds that prayer always has a doctrinal content and is a form of joint worship!);
- D. The only scriptural or confessional distinction is between [the] persistent errorist, where Romans 16:17-18 should be applied, and the weak in faith (example: Acts 18:26, or Romans 14 and 15).
- E. In the light of these matters, I do not hesitate to lay this confessional doctrine of church fellowship on your consciences on the basis of your ordination and installation vows, your signature to the constitution, and the confessional article of your church constitution. This is not a political issue or a matter of adiaphoron, but a matter of confession (in the sense of FC X) and doctrine.
- F. As Luther, Walther, Pieper (both in his *Dogmatics*, III, 425-27 and in his masterful and powerful Southern District essay, “The Difference Between Orthodox and Heterodox Churches”) state, whenever a church body teaches contrary to God’s Word and the gospel, it is teaching pagan doctrines, and stands, to that extent, under the judgment that they are “enemies of the gospel.”
- G. In order to maintain and preserve and, if necessary, restore a unity among us, I therefore, assuming that my exposition of the confessional doctrine is correct, must insist that we adopt the practice on communion fellowship which I submitted in February as our common practice.

It is my prayer that this review of our confessional and scriptural doctrine will cause us all to review our fellowship practices in the light of God’s Word, and our confessional position.