

Statement on Prayer-Fellowship

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In the following statements prayer-fellowship is used in a sense distinct from joint prayer. By prayer-fellowship is meant communion of hearts and minds which takes place when a number of people who have been called, enlightened and sanctified by the Holy Ghost engage in common prayer. It can exist only between those who in Scripture are called saints. It is a product of the Holy Ghost's calling, gathering, and enlightening the whole Christian Church on earth. Prayer-fellowship is something internal, a matter of the heart. Its presence can be discerned only by God, who knows the heart and what is in the heart, and who only "knoweth them that are His."

By joint prayer is meant the outward uniting in words of prayers spoken in unison or by a leader, the group following the words in their hearts.

Prayer-fellowship can exist only where the Spirit of Christ prevails. It depends on fellowship in and with Christ. It is consummated when two or more who are one in Christ engage in the same prayer and unite in the same thoughts.

People who are of different minds at the moment of prayer are not in prayer-fellowship. Their prayers may even be contradictory. Fellowship in prayer will not be attained by them even though they unite in the same words, for example, the Lord's Prayer.

Men may believe that prayer-fellowship exists in specific groups, but they cannot know who the individuals are between whom this prayer-fellowship obtains. Nevertheless the reality of prayer-fellowship may not be doubted. It is attested by the Scriptures in the passages which guarantee the efficacy of God's Word, (Is. 55 v1-11.) It is at once comforting and inspiring. It should bring us to our knees in humble gratitude for the mercy and adoration of His grace.

Prayer-fellowship does not exist between all members of the visible church or between all members of a Christian congregation, for, as the Scriptures teach, hypocrites are always mingled with the true believers. The hypocrites outwardly join in prayer and say Lord, Lord, though their hearts are far from God.

On the other hand, prayer-fellowship can exist between all members of the Holy Christian Church (the *una sancta*, the Church Invisible) even though they are separated by great distances, and do not know that they are praying together, for they are under all conditions members of Christ, in whom they are fitly joined together to form one temple.

Prayer-fellowship can exist between members of different confessions, Lutherans, Catholics, Presbyterians. Hence it self-evidently can exist between U.L.C. and Missouri and A.L.C. Lutherans, etc. The only conditions of prayer-fellowship are that they who pray be true believers and be not praying in contradiction to each other.

Prayer must be utterly sincere. Prayer should contain no element of cant or sham. It must express the innermost convictions. For "God desires truth in the inward parts (Ps. 51.6)". Diverse thoughts should therefore not be hidden under uniform words. Inward disunity should not be cloaked in outward uniformity. Where a truly common prayer is not offered, the outward motions of prayer should not be enacted.

The important thing about joint prayer is not that the group repeats identical words or together goes through the forms of worship, but that the joint prayer gives outward expression of

the inner prayer-fellowship which exists by virtue of the work of the Holy Ghost. Joint prayer should therefore express the conviction on the part of those who pray that they know of no specific reason for thinking that fellowship in Christ has been disturbed.

When confessing Christians refuse to fraternize in joint prayer, they may express nothing beyond the fact that they recognize the existence of certain specific factors which may disturb the unity of the Spirit. Such refusal does not express the conviction, and may not be held to express the conviction that the unity of the Spirit and the fellowship in Christ have been disrupted. To deny brotherhood in Christ where Christ is truly confessed, but where differences have arisen nevertheless, collides with Scripture.

2 Thess. 3:6 “Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly.”

2 Thess. 3:14 “And if any man obey not our word by this epistle, note that man, and have no company with him, that he may be ashamed. Yet count him not as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.”

Thus it is clear, the Thessalonians were commanded to consider as brothers also such confessors of Christ as were in error.

To attain clarity in the question as to when the Scriptures authorize a declaration of prayer-fellowship, it is necessary to exclude from consideration private prayer involving two Christians of different church bodies or a Christian family in whose midst is a guest from another church body from public prayer that includes people who are members of separate church bodies. The first is a question of casuistry and must be dealt with as such; the latter must rest upon permanent principles. It is axiomatic that principles cannot be constructed out of cases of casuistry.

Besides the devotional element, public-prayer has in it always the confessional element.

Only such as are known to be qualified to teach in the Church should be asked or permitted to lead an *ex corde* prayer in public. That is the traditional Lutheran position. And it is correct, for a Christian can prepare to submerge his thinking only when he has the assurance that sound words and sound doctrine can be expected to prevail. This follows self-evidently from the apostle's sound insistence on sound doctrine and words in 1 Tim. 10; 2 Tim. 1, 13; Tit, 1:9; 2, 1; 2, 8. The Lutheran position finds an analogy in the fact that in the Old Testament only the priests were permitted to pronounce the blessings.

*(When engaging in public prayer one does not listen as when one hears a sermon. In the latter instance one listens as did the Bereans to make sure that the preaching conforms to Scripture. In a prayer one listens to repeat unquestioningly what is heard.)

To be a qualified teacher in the Church means that a man is known to hold certain definite views. He has made specific confession; he has united with a confessional group. Thus he is a representative of certain definite views. And whenever a religious matter comes up in which he takes part, he cannot divest himself of his confessional character in whole or in part. Thus the leader invariably gives a confessional stamp to a public prayer.

Furthermore, in public prayer the content of the prayer is fixed by the leader. Irrespective of the words employed it is the thoughts of his heart that make up the content of the prayer. And prayer-fellowship will be attained when the others (assuming of course, that all are Christians).

so to say, merge their thoughts with the leader's thought so that one and the same petitions ascend to the throne of grace.

When the confessional standing of the leader is not shared by the group, the individuals cannot assume that identical thoughts will arise from all hearts, cannot assume that only sound words and doctrine will be uttered. Hence they may not assume that prayer-fellowship will be attained. If they will not assume it, they must not give expression to such assumption.

May a Christian pray in the following spirit: In view of the fact that other man whose learning and Christianity I dare not question differ from me in certain doctrines which we are about to discuss on the basis of Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions, I may be wrong in my belief and that in spite of the Bible passages on which I ground my faith in this matter; Hence I ask to be led in all truth?

Answer: No, a Christian may not pray that way. Such attitude contradicts the purpose for which God has instituted the Holy Ministry---"That henceforth we be no more children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine." Eph. 4:14; see also Heb. 13:9; 2 Tim 3:14.

A Christian may pray in general for enlightenment and to be led to recognize the truth without specifying in words or knowing in thought what particular truth he is praying to have revealed to him only when he does not know what the particular truth is. For example, when a convert begins to read for the first time the epistle to the Romans such a general prayer is in order. But when a mature Christian re-reads Romans, he prays to be established in the truth that he has learned from the previous reading and study to have corrected any errors into which he may have inadvertently fallen and to have revealed unto him additional truths as have hitherto escaped his knowledge.

May a Christian admit the possibility of being wrong in doctrine which he finds based on certain Scripture texts?

Answer: Yes, he may and must admit the possibility of being in error. This fact should drive him to examine and re-examine all that the Scripture has to say in the matter and all Scripture that is alleged against his view. Such examination must, however, be carried on not in a spirit of doubt as to the truth of what he has learned, but in a spirit of humility, which recognized his own weakness and the deceitfulness of his heart, as well as with an open mind and hearts ready and willing to "receive with meekness the engrafted word, which is able to save souls (James 1:21)."

But the actuality of being in error a Christian cannot and dare not admit until he has been convinced by clear and cogent words of Scripture. And until such a time, he cannot without denying his faith, and coming under the sentence, "Whatsoever is not of faith is sin (Rom.14: 23)", act upon the possibility of being in error.

When two distinct doctrines are represented, especially when they come under discussion, and we hold one doctrine because we are convinced that it is Scriptural, we must pray to be established in the truth, protected against all highmindedness, and that the truth may prevail. Self-evidently the prayers of opposing parties cannot be framed in identical thoughts and should therefore not be couched in uniform words.

*(When doctrines clash, to confess one necessarily involves rejecting the other; to hold that one is true necessarily means to hold that the other is false.)

***(When a group meets expressly for the purpose of discussing doctrinal differences, the thing in the foreground of attention is not unity of faith but the diversity of confession.)

Such prayer does not mean that we ask God to give us a good opportunity to do some proselytizing, but that we ask God to give us grace to present the truth of His Word. Neither does it mean that meetings where doctrinal differences are discussed in the Light of God's Word are futile. The Word of God has free course. It will serve to correct error wherever error exists. It will serve to modify such prayers as need modification. It will lead to the true prayer-fellowship which is apparent only to God and which only is important.

In public joint prayer we may assume that prayer-fellowship exists when unity of faith prevails between the leader and the group. This unity in faith must be understood to include all the revealed doctrines of Scripture concerning which a public statement has been made by the leader through personal statement or confessional association. When no contrary evidence is available—and it is not necessary to search earnestly and diligently for evidence of disunity—unity in the faith should be assumed to exist.

*(In determining the question of unity of faith it is irrelevant to distinguish between fundamental and non-fundamental doctrine of the Scriptures, for the Scriptures attach equal authority to all teachings and make receiving them equally obligatory. "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable etc 2 Tim 3:16". See also 1 Cor. 2:13. The Scriptures nowhere give warrant for believing differences in minor doctrines, i.e. doctrines the knowledge of which is necessary for salvation, do not disrupt the fellowship in the Spirit and the unity of faith. On this point bear all the passages which warn against error and command us to avoid error.)

Unity of Spirit and unity of faith normally produce unity of confession. The normal corollary to being likeminded is to be likeworded. 1 Cor. 1:10. "Now I beseech you brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and the same judgement."

Hence, we may assume that unity of faith and unity of Spirit exists where unity of confession is found.

Unity of confession exists until some member of the group declares that he believes a doctrine-fundamental or non-fundamental-which others of the same group hold to be in contradiction to any Scripture.

When unity of confession is disturbed the unity of faith and the unity of the Spirit may continue unbroken nevertheless. 2 Thess. 3:6: "Now we command you brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the tradition which he received of us." 2 Thess. 3:14,15: "And if any obey not our word by this epistle, note that man, and have no company with him, that he may be ashamed, Yet count him not as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother." Since the evidence of such unity of the Spirit is lacking we have no warrant to assume that unity in the Spirit exists. Hence we may not act upon such assumption.

Where we do not have grounds for assuming that unity of the Spirit has remained undisturbed, we have no grounds for assuming that prayer-fellowship can exist. And where we do not have grounds for assuming that prayer-fellowship can exist we are not free by outward joint prayer to express conviction that prayer-fellowship does exist.

To assume that prayer-fellowship will exist where doctrinal differences divide because one feels sure that certain doctrines are not church divisive is to make the error of the enthusiasts, who substitute personal feeling for God's revelation.

*(It is not correct to speak of doctrines which are not church divisive. Once error appears one can never tell how far its ramifications go. Error in minor doctrine, even in an adiaphoron may be the symptom of a fundamental error. For example, the error of the Baptists in insisting on

immersion is bound up with the much more serious error of denying that Baptism is a means of grace. Thus the former becomes church divisive.)

When the Scriptures speak of praying together they indicate invariably that the people are agreed.

Matt 18:19: "If two of you shall agree on earth as touching anything that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven."

Acts 1:14: "These all continued in one accord in prayer and supplication with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with the brethren."

When we read the roster of names given in verses 13 and 14 we see that they were also of one mind.

Acts 2:42: "And they continued steadfastly in the apostle's doctrine, and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and prayers."

Acts 12:5: "But prayer was made without ceasing of the church of God for him, Peter who was in prison." The church is the church at Jerusalem, whose unity is characterized in Acts 2:42.

Rome. 15:30: "Now I beseech you brethren, for the Lord Jesus Christ's sake, and for the love of the Spirit, that ye strive together with me in your prayers to God for me." Prior to that Paul prayed, "the God of patience and consolation grant you to be likeminded one toward another according to Christ Jesus" (i.e. according to the will of Christ, who prayed that all disciples might be one. John 17,11.) Later Paul admonished the same Romans to avoid these who cause divisions and offenses. Rom.16,17.

2 Cor. 1:11: "Ye also helping together by prayer for us." These same Corinthians had been rebuked for tolerating in their midst contentions, some of which involved fundamental doctrines. 1 Cor. 1:11-13. A perusal of chapters 1 and of 2 Corinthians reveals the fact that Paul was now entirely satisfied with the congregation at Corinth. See especially 2:9. The only inference is that contentions and divisions had been removed and that the Corinthians were now of one accord.

According to the Scriptures, the fact that a person is a brother in Christ does not carry with it the necessity of fraternizing him. He may be in error and yet be a brother. But if he is in error, we may not fraternize him.

2 Thess. 3:6: The Thessalonians are here commanded to withdraw from a brother who "walked disorderly and not after the tradition received from us." The injunction is repeated in 3:14, where the Thessalonians are commanded to note the brother who obeys not "our word by this epistle," to "have no company with him that he may be ashamed." The recognition of brotherhood should express itself in admonition: "but admonish him as a brother."

*(To fraternize a person means to accord him equal rights and privileges with the other members of the congregation so far as administration of the Word and Sacraments are concerned. It means other things being equal, to give him the right to preach, to teach, and to lead in prayer.)

Thus the salient factor in fraternizing is not the fact of Christian brotherhood, but holding the “tradition taught, whether by word or our epistle.” 2 Thess. 2:15.

The sweeping injunction of this passage covering our relationship with those who can properly be called brothers in Christ, but who unfortunately differ from us in some confessional point precludes any God-pleasing uniting in joint prayer. The commands “withdraw” “Have no company with” (2 Thess. 3:6,15) leave no room for praying with such on terms that accord them also the right to lead in prayer.

Fellowship existed between members of the church at Thessalonica and certain of the brothers in Christ. Yet the congregation was forbidden to give expression to their fellowship with those brethren who did not walk after the tradition received from the Apostle.

Even if fellowship exists between all the members of the group here assembled—I hope and pray that it does exist; I cannot know because I do not have revelations as had St. Paul—still the prohibition is clear; we may not express that fellowship outwardly. That means we cannot have joint prayer. (This was a conference of A.L.C. and Mo. Synod pastors.)

When we quote Romans 16:17 as Scriptural ground for not engaging in joint prayer, we cast no reflection upon the Christianity of those with whom we do not pray together in public. For verse 18 does not place them outside the pale of the *una sancta*. The verse says that they who create divisions and offenses serve not the Lord Jesus but their own belly (*koilia*). The word *koilia* is unfortunately translated. The passage does not mean that such people are given to pleasures of the palate or to gluttony, or that they teach their errors in the interest of job security or social standing.

With two exceptions—in one of these instances Paul qualifies *koilia* by *metros* Gal.1:15; in the other instance he connects it with food, 1 Cor. 6:13 - - Paul uses the term figuratively, to designate the innermost part of man, the thought-life of man, as the term is also used, and that in an astonishingly noble way in John 7:38: “He that believeth on Me, as the Scripture hath said, out of his belly (*koilia*) shall flow rivers of living water.”

*(I am indebted to Dr. Theo. Laetsch for his interpretation which for me makes sense out of an otherwise very difficult passage.)

To make the conclusion that since we may not offer joint prayer we may not pray individually is to argue mistakenly and to prove too much. If the inappropriateness of joint prayer makes impossible private prayer, then it makes impossible all prayer. The limitation of place and space means nothing to God. Hence, if we cannot pray individually in this room, we cannot pray individually in the whole world, for God is equally present everywhere, equally as much in this room, as in all the rest of the world.

Furthermore, if individual prayers are offered, no confession is compromised and sincerity remains unclouded.

Conclusion

As God alone knows when a joint prayer is expressive of prayer-fellowship He will also recognize and take delight in such prayer-fellowship as exists in the group here assembled when we pray individually. And though I cannot identify it, my prayer is that God will find our prayer-fellowship one hundred per cent complete.

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