

AC 7 and Church Fellowship

Jake Zabel BTh, AdDipThMin

2019

Scripture warns us not to listen to those who teach falsely (Deut. 13:1-3, Matt. 24:23-24, Acts 20:30-31), but instead to mark and avoid those who confess false teachings (Matt. 7:15, Rom. 16:17-18, Gal. 1:8-9, 1 Tim. 6:20, 2 Tim. 3:1-5, Tit. 3:10-11). We are told to have nothing to do with them, not to associate with them (2 Thess. 3:14, 2 John 1:10).

We are not even to eat with false teachers (1 Cor. 5:11-13). This is a reference to Table Fellowship, meaning Altar Fellowship. In general those whom you eat with, declares to the world who you associate with (Matt. 9:10-11, Mark 2:16, Luke 5:29-30, Gal. 2:12-13). This principle applies not only to the meal table but also to the Lord's Table (1 Cor. 10:21). But Table Fellowship at the Lord's Table is not merely human fellowship, like other kinds of table fellowship, rather Altar Fellowship is Church Fellowship (Acts 2:42, 1 Cor. 10:16-18, 11:18). Those whom you commune with are those whom you associate with and the Scriptures tell us not to welcome or associate with those who hold to a heterodox confession of faith. For, those who associate with false teachers partake in their sin (2 John 1:10-11) and we are not to partake in the sins of others (1 Tim. 5:22).

Scripture warns those of an orthodox confession of faith to come out of the heterodox church bodies (Isa. 52:11, 2 Cor. 6:17, Rev. 18:4), for we are not to be yoked together with those who hold to a different confession of faith (2 Cor. 6:14-16a). Instead, we are to share in fellowship only with those of the same confession of faith (Acts 4:32, 1 Cor. 1:10, 12:25, Phil. 2:2).

It is self-evident from Scripture that we, as those who hold to the orthodox confession of faith, are not to have fellowship with heterodox teachers or church bodies. As for those who hold to an orthodox confession of faith but are still a part of a heterodox church body, they are to come out of that body and to flee from its false teachers.

But at the same time we are not to be schismatic sectarians and fall into endless splits. Scripture urges us to bear with one another in love, gentleness and patience (Gal. 6:1-2 Eph. 4:1-2, 15-16, 2 Tim. 2:25-26, 4:2) and to be eager to maintain unity within the Church (Eph. 4:3).

Scripture teaches us to avoid that which is falsely called "knowledge" (1 Tim. 6:20) and to avoid those who create division by teaching contrary to the truth (Rom. 16:17). Instead, we are to set our minds on the truth (Phil. 4:8), we are to worship God in truth (John 4:23), to be led by the truth (Psalm 25:5, John 14:6), and to come to the full knowledge of truth (1 Tim. 2:4, 2 Tim. 2:25).

We are to be sanctified by the truth, which is the Word of God (John 17:17). God's Word is the truth, and we are to hold firmly to the Word of God (Deut. 27:26, Josh. 1:8, Jer. 11:3, Gal. 3:10, Phil. 2:16), and to obey what is written therein (Deut. 29:9, Josh. 23:6, 2 Thess. 3:14).

And, how much of the Bible is true? How much of it are we to obey and hold firm to? All of it. For all of Scripture is the Word of God (2 Tim. 3:16) and cursed be any man who adds to it or removes from it (Rev. 22:18-19), for Heaven and Earth will pass away, but the Word of the LORD shall stand forever, not a single iota or tittle will be removed (Isa. 40:8, Matt. 5:18, 24:35, Luke 16:17, 21:33).

But the question still remains if we are to be of one confession (Acts 4:32, 1 Cor. 1:10, 12:25, Phil. 2:2), and are to hold to all the Word of God, does that mean that we must agree on every single point regarding Scripture in order to have fellowship? For there are a number of disputed theological issues which cannot be definitively proven by the Word of God, such as Creationism of the soul vs. Traducianism of the soul, what the Nephilim are, etc.

So then the question is raised, where do we draw the line over which doctrines to split over and which ones not to split over? Scripture tells us to avoid foolish controversies regarding genealogies, and quarrels about the law (Tit. 3:9). We are told not to quarrel over terminology (2 Tim. 2:14), and not be contentious about church customs (1 Cor. 11:16).

So then, where is the line drawn?

Article 7 of the *Augsburg Confession* says, “*The Church is the assembly of saints in which the Gospel is taught purely and the Sacraments are administered rightly. It is enough for the true unity of the Church to agree concerning the teaching of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments. It is not necessary that human traditions, rites, or ceremonies institution by human beings be alike everywhere. As Paul says (Eph. 3:5-6): ‘One faith, one Baptism, one God and Father of all.’*”¹

From this we can learn that manmade traditions, human terminology and human opinion (theologoumena) are not to be alike everywhere, and are henceforth not church divisive. However, the true Church is the assembly of saints gather around the pure teaching of the Gospel and the right administration of the Sacraments, here the German text says “*administered in conformity with the divine Word.*”²

For the true unity of the Church it is enough that the Gospel is preached according to a pure understanding and the Sacraments are administered in accordance with the Word of God³. For, there is one Body, one Spirit, one Lord, one faith, one Baptism (Eph. 4:4-5), there is one Bread and one Body (1 Cor. 10:17), there is one Gospel (Gal. 3:7), and we are all united by one confession (Acts 4:32, 1 Cor. 1:10, 12:25, Phil. 2:2).

Therefore, the Lutheran “rule-of-thumb” for Church fellowship is the pure teaching of the Gospel and the right administration of the Sacraments, in accordance with the Word of God.

This is evident from the Scriptures. In Galatians 1:6-9, St. Paul teaches us that there is only one true teaching of the Gospel, and that anyone and everyone who preaches contrary to the true Gospel is accursed. The Greek word here is *anathema*, which basically means ‘condemned to Hell’. In fact, in 1 Timothy 1:20 St. Paul refers to two false teachers who rejected the pure Gospel and were thus handed over to Satan so that they may learn not to blaspheme. In other words they were excommunicated in order that they may see the error of their ways and be brought to repentance.

Regarding the right administration of the Sacraments, we are to perform the Sacraments in accordance with the Words and command of Christ.

On the night when Christ was betrayed He commanded us to “*do this.*” (Luke 22:19, 1 Cor. 11:24-25) Thus, we are commanded to do as Christ did, we are to celebrate our Supper in accordance with the way that Christ celebrated the Last Supper.

As Luther said, “*Christ’s order and institution are clear: ‘This do in remembrance of Me.’ What should we do? And what is meant by ‘this’? Nothing else than what He indicated by action and word when He took the bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to His disciples, saying: Take, eat; this is My body, which is given for you. This do in remembrance of Me. After the same manner also He took the cup, gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying: Drink ye all of it; this is the cup of the new testament in My blood. This do ye, as oft as ye drink it, in remembrance of Me. If then Christ’s institution is to be observed (as He Himself says: ‘This do’), we [pastors] must not only take the bread and wine with the words of Christ but also give and impart it to others.*”⁴

As Chemnitz said, “*For what He Himself did in the Supper, that He commanded the apostles to do thereafter... Now Paul is the most reliable interpreter that the pronoun “this” in the command of Christ: “Do this,” is to be referred to the whole preceding action: “This (namely, what was done at the first Supper) you are to do hereafter.” Therefore the command of Christ: “Do this,” means nothing other than that the ministers of the church in the administration of the Lord’s Supper ought to do that of which it is established and certain that Christ did at the institution of the Supper.*”⁵

As Gerhard said, “*Since at the Institution of the Holy Supper, Christ explicitly commands that we do what He did when we administer it, it follows that the ministers of the church, when they want to*

¹ Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, Augsburg Confession*, Article 7, Latin text, page 43.

² Ibid. German text, page 42.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Martin Luther, *On the Private Mass and Holy Orders*, quoted in C.F.W. Walther, *Church and Ministry*, page 260.

⁵ Martin Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent*, volume 2, page 465. Quoted in John Stephenson, *The Lord’s Supper*, page 84.

celebrate the Holy Supper, must repeat the Words of Institution, consecrate the bread and wine in this way, and distribute them to the communicants. So when the minister repeats the Lord's Words of Institution, consecrates the bread and wine with them, and distributes them to the communicants, that is not merely a historic repetition of what Christ did, as when those words are customarily repeated to the people in sermons to be presented to them."⁶

We are to celebrate the Lord's Supper in the same way that Christ celebrated the Last Supper, to do otherwise would be to go against the command of Christ, and would not be a right administration of the Sacrament. As Luther said, "*The more closely our celebration of the Mass [Holy Communion] matches the first Mass of Christ, that is without doubt better, and the more divergent it is, the more dangerous our approach.*"⁷

Pastors are the Stewards of the Mysteries of God (1 Cor. 4:1) and are responsible for the administration of the Lord's Supper. If they do not "*do this*" as Christ commanded them to, then this is a wrongful administration of the Sacrament. If we were to eat and drink from that altar then we would be united to that altar (1 Cor. 10:18) and would become partakers in this wrongful administration of the Sacrament (2 John 1:11). We would be eating and drinking the Supper in an unworthy manner and would eat and drink judgment upon ourselves (1 Cor. 11:27-29).

Therefore, instead of partaking of this Table of Demons (1 Cor. 10:21), we should not eat and drink the Lord's Supper with those in error (1 Cor. 5:11). We should only eat and drink with those who administer the Sacraments in accordance with the Word of God. As Luther once said, "*thank God, in our churches we can show a Christian the true Christian Mass according to the order and institution of Christ as well as according to the right and true intention of Christ and the church.*"⁸

In the same way that Holy Communion is to be done in accordance with the command of Christ to "*do this*", Holy Baptism is to be done in accordance with the command of Christ to "*go forth and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.*" (Matt. 28:19-20) Christ commanded us to baptize all nations, including adults and children (Acts 2:39), in the name of the Triune God. If Baptism is not done in accordance with God's Word and command then it is not a Christian Baptism (Acts 19:3-5). For when Christ's institution is not observed as He established it, there is no Sacrament.⁹

Thus the Scriptures teach us that we are not to have fellowship with those who do not preach the Gospel purely or administer the Sacraments rightly, for they eat and drink judgement on themselves (1 Cor. 11:29) and are to be anathema (Gal. 1:8-9).

When establishing Church fellowship we are not to have fellowship with those who teach false doctrines and who administer the Sacraments in a wrongful manner. Instead, we should seek out those true Churches who teach the truth of God's Word, who preach the Gospel purely and administer the Sacraments rightly in accordance with the commands of Christ. Those who are united in fellowship should be united by a single confession of faith, and as Christians our confession should be united by the Word of God.

⁶ Johann Gerhard quoted by C.F.W. Walther, *Pastoral Theology*, page 131.

⁷ Martin Luther quoted by Albrecht Peters, *Commentary of Luther's Catechisms: Baptism and Lord's Supper*, page 183.

⁸ Martin Luther, *On the Private Mass and Holy Orders*, quoted in C.F.W. Walther, page 279.

⁹ Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert, *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, Formula of Concord: Solid Declaration*, Article 7.85, page 608.

Appendix:

The following appendix is an excerpt from Hermann Sasse's Article VII of the Augsburg Confession in the Present Crisis of Lutheranism (1961), taken from We Confess the Church, pages 56-58:

So then the great article of the Augsburg Confession about the church is both a confession of firm faith in the indestructibility of the church and a call quickening our consciences to preserve the unity of the church and to restore it where it has been lost among us. The Apology calls the article of faith about the catholic church "very comforting and highly necessary" (Par. 9, German text; *Concordia Triglotta*, page 229). How often has it not appeared as if the church were done for? *Ne desperemus*, "that we may not despair" (Par. 9; Tappert, page 170), we are given the great and comforting article of faith in the actuality of God's church in the word.

It would be an utter contradiction of all that the Augsburg Confession says in confessing what God's Word says, if we would use all this as a resting ground for our complacency. The confessors of Augsburg did not rest content with the fact that, despite all that was wrong in the papacy, the church was still there. They were not content to confess the profound inner communion of all God's children which no one can destroy. They were active in doing what they could to preserve the unity of outward Christianity. They took up the emperor's words regarding the purpose of their coming together to deal with the questions of the faith at the Diet, "to live together in unity and in one fellowship and church, even as we are all enlisted under one Christ" (AC Introduction, 4; Tappert, page 25).

The question they then had to answer was wherein the true unity of the church consists. On the basis of God's Word they confessed that it is not to be found in unity of traditions or ceremonies but in the one Gospel and in the Sacraments instituted by our Lord. They declined the false view of the church's unity which sees this unity in what human beings have arranged or devised, such as a great constitution or a uniform liturgy.

Our church has never taught that in areas such as these there *have* to be differences. On the contrary, there have always been efforts to preserve unity also in these areas. The confessors raised no basic objection against Episcopal polity. They even acknowledged that the office of pope was acceptable, if only pope and bishops would honour the Gospel and not set themselves up as more than incumbents of the office of the Word and the Sacraments. There was no objection to adding to this divine office also the humanly devised office of oversight (*episkopē*) over pastors and congregations. What the confessors could not do was heed the pope and the bishops more than the Word of God.

The Augsburg Confession makes this final declaration:

St. Peter forbids the bishops to exercise lordship as if they had power to coerce the churches according to their will. It is not our intention to find ways of reducing the bishops' power, but we desire and pray that they may not coerce our consciences to sin. If they are unwilling to do this and ignore our petition, let them consider how they will answer for it in God's sight, inasmuch as by their obstinacy they offer occasion for division and schism, which they should in truth help to prevent (AC XXVIII, 76ff. Tappert, page 94).

Thus the Lutheran Reformation ended with the division of Christendom; the efforts to preserve unity ended in the separation of those on both sides who were "all enlisted under one Christ" and so wished to live "in one fellowship and church," as was confessed in the introduction of the Augsburg Confession.

Why was no outcome possible? We can answer this question only by referring to the deep mystery of world and church history that, in this sinful world, where lies are fathered on every hand, what is lie and what is truth cannot be known if there is no line between them. Therefore unity in the church is possible only with demarcation against heresy. Thus when our Lord prayed for the unity of all those who believe in Him, He also prayed: "Sanctify them in the truth; Thy Word is truth" (John 17:17). The apostle John was then a servant of the truth, and so a servant of the true unity of the church, when he drew the line against those who denied the Incarnation. This was also the case when the early church drew the line against Marcion and the Gnostics, Athanasius drew it against the Arians,

Augustine against Pelagius, and Luther against the pope, Zwingli, and the Anabaptists. So it has ever been with the church militant in this world. We cannot confess what is true without rejecting what contradicts it. Kierkegaard observed that truth's quotation marks are polemical.

And when here on earth the tragic case occurs, which happens again and again where the question of truth is earnestly engaged, that one confession of faith is set against another, conscience against conscience, then we must leave the decision to Him who in the Last Judgment will finally separate truth from error. We do not know God's judgments, and can and may not anticipate them. Also when we must speak the *damnamus* (we condemn) against a false teaching, God's forgiving grace may bring the erring sinner into the church triumphant, where there is no more untruth. On the other hand, this door will be shut to many a one who has done battle for the truth in perfect orthodoxy, but has forgotten that he too was a poor sinner who lives only by forgiving grace. Only in God's light, when we shall no longer "know in part" but "shall understand fully, even as" we "have been fully understood" (1 Cor. 13:12) – only then, and not before, will we in the full truth of God also fully understand the true unity of the church.