

The Responsibility of the Bearers of Truth

Avoiding the Errors of Unionism and Sectarianism

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Holy Scripture tells us that we are to only share in fellowship with those who share with us in the same orthodox confession of faith (Acts 4:32, 1 Cor. 1:10, 12:25, Phil. 2:2). In regards to heterodox Church bodies Scripture gives the command to those who are orthodox to “*come out of her*” (Isa. 52:11, 2 Cor. 6:17, Rev. 18:4).

Within Lutheranism, there is often the problem of people continuing to have fellowship with heterodox Church bodies and false teachers, despite their repeated refusal to repent.

This is not right. As bearers of the true teachings of Scripture we have a duty to rebuke false teaching, and to break fellowship with those who continue to teach falsely in unrepentance. In Matt. 18:15-17 we are told how to handle a Christian brother who continues in unrepentance sin, “*if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.*” And in Titus 3:9-11 Paul tells us to avoid false teachings, and as for the person who stirs up division through his false teaching “*after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him.*”

As the bearers of truth we have a responsibility not to be bound together with falsities (2 Cor. 6:14-16a). For, Scripture warns us not to listen to those who teach falsely (Deut. 13:1-3, Matt. 24:23-24, Acts 20:30-31). Instead, we are to mark and avoid those who create division through the promotion of 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), and we are not to associate with those who hold to a heterodox confession of faith (2 Thess. 3:14, Tit. 3:10, 2 John 1:10). We are even told not to eat with those in error but to purge them from our midst (1 Cor. 5:11-13).

This is a reference to Table (that is Altar) Fellowship. Those who 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). Those whom you commune with are those who you associate with, for Altar Fellowship is Church Fellowship (Acts 2:42, 1 Cor. 10:16-18, 11:18). We are not to 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 the Scriptures warn us not to partake in the sins of others (1 Tim. 5:22).

Therefore, we have a responsibility to flee from heterodox teachers and Church bodies and not to fall into the error of having fellowship with false teachings.

However, within Lutheranism there is also an equally serious error that we should avoid. Very often people are so eager to flee from false teachings that they break fellowship to hastily instead of trying to seek reconciliation. Scripture does teach us to break fellowship with those who continue in unrepentant error, but at the same time Scripture urges us to walk in humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing one another in love, being eager to maintain unity (Eph. 4:1-3). We are to be patient with our Christian brothers who have been caught in sin. We are to rebuke them and call them to repentance (1 Tim. 5:20), but we should also restore them through gentleness, bearing one another’s burdens (Gal. 6:1-2). We are to preach the true Word of God, but we are to reprove, rebuke and exhort with patience and careful instruction (2 Tim. 4:2). For, our opponents must be corrected with gentleness, so that God may grant them repentance, leading them to a knowledge of the truth, so that they may come to their senses and escape the snare of the devil (2 Tim. 2:25-26). We are to preach the truth in love, so that the body may grow and be built up in love (Eph. 4:15-16).

While it is always important to seek the true teachings of God’s Word, it is also important to seek unity among the Body of Christ.

Now I am not saying that we should just do away with all divisions and become one big “happy” church, for there must be divisions among us in order that those who are genuine among us may be recognised (1 Cor. 11:19). But, as the bearers of truth we do have a responsibility to restore our fallen

brothers through patience and gentleness, rather than just simply breaking fellowship with them straight away.

But once fellowship has been broken, this does not mean that we should sever all contact with those in error and never talk to them again. Yes Scripture does tell us to have nothing to do with them (2 Thess. 3:14, Tit. 3:10) and that we are not to greet them (2 John 1:10) or eat with them (1 Cor. 5:11). But this is in regards to Church fellowship and is referring to those who do not seek to change their wicked practices or doctrine. We are not to have Church Fellowship with those in error, but this does not mean that we cannot dialogue with them. We are to break fellowship with those in error, but we are not to regard them as enemies, but to warn them as brothers in Christ (2 Thess. 3:14-15).

If people are open to change and willing to engage in dialogue then we should be willing to dialogue with them. We are all sinners and we can err, but if we have erred then let those errors be shown to us using Scripture and plain reason. In dialogue we must be open to being proved wrong, if we have erred, but our main goal should always be to seek reconciliation, agreement and to bring our erring brother back to the truth.

Many Lutherans these days are too quick to cease dialogue, for the fear of 'endless debate'. Many will argue that they have debated this topic in the past and both sides have continued to come to a disagreement. But this does not mean that we should completely cease all dialogue with that Church body. As the bearers of truth we have the responsibility to take the truth to those in error, with the hope of bringing them to the truth. We may fail, time and time again to bring them to the truth, but as long as they are willing to dialogue with us, then we should continue to dialogue with them. I call this the *1st Corinthians 7 Principle*. In 1 Corinthians 7:12-15 Paul says that if a Christian is married to non-Christian spouse, and the non-Christian spouse consents to staying married, then the two of them should remain married. In doing so, there is the hope that the non-Christian spouse may be won over to the faith by their Christian spouse (1 Pet. 3:1). However, if the non-Christian spouse separates, then there is really nothing that can be done (for a non-Christian will not listen to the Law of God regarding marriage), and therefore the Christian spouse is free to remarry.

In the same way, those who are the bearers of truth have the responsibility to continue in dialogue with those in error, as long as those in error are willing to continue the dialogue. For, as the bearer of truth, you are obligated to speak this truth to those in error, and as long as they consent to listen to you, you have a responsibility to dialogue with them. In doing so, there is the hope that you may bring them to a fuller knowledge of the truth and free them from their error (1 Tim. 2:4, 2 Tim. 2:25). But, if they are not willing to dialogue with you, then there is really nothing that you can do, and so you are freed from your responsibility.

In Ezekiel 3:17-21 and Ezekiel 33:7-9, Scripture says that we are to warn those who are in error. We are told that if we do not warn them and they die in their sin, then their blood is on our hands. But, if we do warn them and yet they remain unrepentant, they will die in their sins but their blood is on their own hands. Again, if a righteous person (a brother in Christ) falls into sin and you fail to rebuke him, he will die in his sin and his blood is on your hands. But if you warn him and he repents, then you have saved your brother (Matt. 18:15, James 5:20).

Therefore, if those in error are willing to listen to you and you do not attempt to dialogue with them and warn them of their wicked ways and false teachings, then their blood is on your hands. You have the responsibility to preach the truth to them and you have been given the opportunity to do so. If you do not use that opportunity, then it is your fault if they continue in their heterodox teachings. But if you two engage in dialogue and they refuse to repent of their wicked ways and false teachings, then their blood is on their own hands. For, you have fulfilled your responsibility to preach, and yet they have refused to repent of their error.

But if you are open to dialogue and they are not, then let them be. In the book of Ezekiel, the prophet is given the command to preach the Word of the LORD to the people, whether they listen or whether they refuse to listen (Ezek. 2:5,7, 3:11); demonstrating our responsibility to preach the truth regardless of our audience. As for those who listened, let them hear, and those who refused to listen, let them refuse (Ezek. 3:27).

If those churches in error are willing to listen to us, then we should engage with them in dialogue. Whether they repent or not, whether we can come to an agreement or not, we should continue to use this chance to preach the truth, as long as this opportunity presents itself. But if those in error refuse to have any dialogue with us, then we should have nothing to do with them. For if they will not listen, then treat them as an unbeliever (Matt. 18:17) and have nothing to do with them (2 Thess. 3:14, Tit. 3:10, 2 John 1:10). If they will not listen to you, then shake the dust from your feet and have nothing more to do with them (Matt. 10:14, Mark 6:11, Luke 9:5, 10:10-11).

We should not fall into the error of Unionism and continue in fellowship with those who unrepentantly promote false teachings, nor should we establish fellowship based upon a false agreement in doctrine. But we also should not fall into the error of Sectarianism, with its endless divisions, which fails to seek reconciliation and is too quick to separate.

We should rebuke error, but do it in love and gentleness. We should divide from error but do so patiently. We should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry (James 1:19). We are to love one another as Christ first loved us (John 13:34, 15:17, Eph. 5:2, 1 John 4:19), and this means that we should be like God, slow to anger and abounding in love (Exod. 34:6, Num. 14:18, Neh. 9:17, Psalm 86:5,15, 103:8, 145:8, Joel 2:13).