

***The doctrine of Church Fellowship - presuppositions and consequences –
by pastor cand.theol. Magnus N. Sørensen, July 17, Joint Conference of The
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This will not be a logical presentation of the doctrine of church fellowship proceeding from the doctrines of the invisible church, the visible church and the command to leave false teachers. I presuppose some knowledge of the doctrine of church fellowship as it is confessed by most churches who think themselves confessional Lutherans. What I am trying in this paper is taking up some of the problems with the doctrine of church fellowship among Lutherans who claim to be confessional today.

Doctrinal presuppositions for the doctrine of Church Fellowship

I. God has revealed his heavenly doctrine clearly in his word, the Holy Scriptures, so that we are able and commanded to draw clear doctrines from this word and reject all false doctrines together with the teachers of false doctrine. Therefore it is also possible to pass final judgments on doctrine and to demand confessional subscription to this final judgment.

Antithesis: Those must be rejected, who believe, that Holy Scripture is not clear and sufficient and that we are therefore not bound to confess all the doctrines in there and to reject all teachings that are not in accordance with the revealed doctrine in Scripture.

Oftentimes, the problem with the doctrine of church fellowship is more a problem with the doctrine of scripture than a problem with the doctrine of the church as such.

My experience is that most people are able to see that church fellowship is in fact an expression of unity. And that is their problem with our refusal to practice church fellowship with those who believe differently. It is therefore oftentimes not an issue about the doctrine of church fellowship isolated from every other doctrine, but rather a problem with the doctrine of scripture. Unionism is very often really an expression of the denial of the clarity of Scripture.

In Denmark there are a lot of conservative Lutheran pietists in the state church and outside the state church. Those in the state church will commune with liberal godless bishops in the state church. Some have left the state church but will still practice fellowship with their pietist brethren in the state church. Those who stay in the state church argue that their communion with false teachers is not really an expression of fellowship. But when I as a confessional Lutheran refuse to commune these same people this is suddenly seen as a denial of Christian fellowship. The bottom line is that they know that communion is a sign of fellowship. If they believed that communion fellowship was not a sign of church fellowship, it wouldn't matter to them that I refuse to commune them. But they do see this as an expression of condemnation.

And their problem is that their postmodern doctrine of Scripture has made it impossible for them to make final judgment on any doctrine. So while they adhere to conservative Christian opinions, these are only opinions to them. They are not clearly revealed doctrines. They are therefore left with the judgment of the personal faith of others.

It is not that they don't think that our practice of church fellowship is an expression of unity. Their problem is that our rejection of this expression of unity means something to them and to us.

Their problem is, that they do understand, what this means, at least partly, since they sometimes overreact and see it as a condemnation of everyone with whom we are not in fellowship.

Most discussions of the doctrine of church fellowship today end up in a discussion of the clarity of Scripture and the certainty of doctrine. The doctrine of the clarity and authority of Scripture can be directly applied to the question of what we need to agree on, which I will discuss in a later thesis.

In our postmodern age it seems impossible for anyone to speak about certainty of doctrine. Everything depends on interpretations. This was not the case in Lutheran orthodoxy before the enlightenment.

The roots of postmodernism in modernism and the epistemology of Immanuel Kant, who might have been inspired by both Descartes, David Hume and the subjectivity of pietists and later Lutheran orthodoxy. Kant's dualism or dichotomy between subject and object is described by Byrne, James M. "Religion and the Enlightenment"¹: "*Kant thus constructed a dualism between the subject and the object on the basis of a pessimistic epistemological phenomenalism: we know only the phenomena, and what things are 'in themselves' is not within the scope of our knowledge*".

Applied to theology this means: *But his dualism...split the world and human knowing in two to such an extent that what 'knowledge' of the divine we have,*

¹Byrne, James M. "Religion and the Enlightenment" p. 210

whether it be through faith or the moral law, can only be a pale reflection of the more secure knowledge of the phenomena available to the senses.”²

This epistemology was in conflict with the pre-Kantian Lutheran orthodox hermeneutics that saw understanding and faith as created by the external word and not the other way around.³

The German idealists, who influenced parts of the German confessional movement in the 19th century started with this dichotomy of Kant between the thing in itself and our perception of it.

Thoughts from Hegel, Schleiermacher influenced the new Lutherans of the 19th century, who tried to solve the dichotomy of Immanuel Kant while trying to return to the Lutheran confessions. To these new Lutherans, among those Wilhelm Löhe, the external word was not the main agent in interpretation. For the human subject and the object, that is Scripture, to meet, you needed the experience of the individual or -for most of them- the experience of the church. The false theory of open questions which Walther opposed came from this kind of thinking.

In other words, Lutheranism was influenced by this kind of thinking long before postmodernism and the extreme ecumenical theology we see today. But the roots of this mess we find in epistemology and the doctrine of Scripture, which has been undermined by centuries of false philosophy and theology.

²Ibid p. 214

³See Hägglund, Bengt, Kolb, Robert. Pre-Kantian hermeneutics in Lutheran Orthodoxy 2006 in Lutheran Quarterly 20 3, 318-336

We need to keep on returning to a pre-Kantian orthodox Lutheran epistemology, hermeneutic and doctrine of Scripture, where Holy Scripture is both the only source and norm of doctrine, because Holy Scripture is able to enlighten us and create understanding of the divine truths through careful study.

This orthodox pre-Kantian doctrine of Scripture is the presupposition of our unconditional subscription to the confessions. We can only subscribe to the confessions, because we have already been able to check whether they are in accordance with Scripture. We don't need to keep the door open and express uncertainty about that. Our unconditional subscription to the confessions is really our unconditional subscription to the clarity and sufficiency of Scripture, because by this subscription we confess, that we are able to draw doctrines from Scripture with certainty and to reject false doctrines with the same certainty.

This pre-Kantian Lutheran orthodox doctrine of Scripture also makes it possible for us to decide where the limits of church fellowship are. The limit is the doctrine revealed in Holy Scripture and nothing else. We cannot make another standard than the doctrines contained in Holy Scripture. The church is obliged to all the doctrines of Scripture to the end of the world (Matt 28:20) and cannot make another standard.

II. The doctrine of the means of grace teaches us that the true church of believers is gathered throughout the world through the preaching of the pure doctrine of Scripture and the right administration of the sacraments even when it seems that those who mix the word of God with error gather more people than the true visible church.

Antithesis: Those must be rejected, who believe that the true church is not gathered by the Holy Ghost through the pure means of grace, and who therefore think that compromises against the word of God are allowed in order to win more souls.

Another threat against the true doctrine and practice of church fellowship in my opinion is a false doctrine of the efficacy of the pure means of grace. Jesus promises in Matthew 28:19-20 to gather disciples through baptism and teaching of all that he has commanded. But sometimes it seems that those who make compromises gather more disciples than those who keep on teaching everything Jesus has taught.

But we are not to make people into our disciples. Therefore we cannot judge on the basis of what we see. False teachers might gather more people around them, who become disciples of the false teachers. But we are to make people into disciples of Jesus, who hear and learn what Jesus says. If we accept false doctrine in our church or our sister churches in order to gather more people, we are making people into our disciples and not Jesus disciples.

We are thereby showing that we do not believe in the pure means of grace as the means by which the church is gathered.

Unionism is really oftentimes a subtle kind of church-growthism, when churches fail to trust the pure means of grace and therefore the pure doctrine as the only means by which we are assured that Jesus gathers disciples at a certain place (see Mat 28:19-2).

I think parents in small churches like ours especially know this temptation. We would like our kids to stay in faith. And sometimes we might believe more in group pressure and friends to do this work than in the pure means of grace. If we are willing to make compromises and have church fellowship with those who believe differently in order for our children to have more friends of the same age in their church, it really shows that we do not trust the word of God to do the job for us.

In reality, I believe, more young people leave churches because of churches and their parents` lack of trust in the means of grace than because of lack of orthodox friends. When churches or parents don't really believe that the means of grace and the doctrine of Scripture is able to preserve our kids in the faith, this contempt will eventually show up in their practice. And the first ones to notice inconsistencies and hypocrisy are the children, I believe. Jesus says about the little ones: *"But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were drowned in the depth of the sea. (Mat 18:6 NKJ)*

This false doctrine of the means of grace is connected to another doctrine:

III. The doctrine of the cross teaches us, that we should not expect nor desire a large and successful true visible church this side of heaven, but instead that we should expect few people to adhere to the true doctrine of Holy Scripture and a constant struggle to keep the true doctrine against false prophets and teachers who will attack the church of Christ until his return. The doctrine of the cross also comforts us with the hope of eternal

life and the promise that God will keep his church from the attacks of Satan.

Antithesis: Those theologians of glory must be rejected, who believe that some amount of unionism or doctrinal compromise is allowed in order to have a larger visible church.

This might often be seen not as a doctrinal issue but rather as a question about personal motives.

But our personal motives are founded on the doctrines, which we believe and trust with our hearts. When we are willing to make compromises against the word of God in order to gather large crowds or in order to feel that we are not alone in the world, we are really engaging in the false doctrine of glory, which will not accept that the cross is one of the marks of the true church.

We should not expect to be left alone by the devil and his demons at any time this side of the return of Christ. We should instead expect attacks from the devil, false teachers, our own flesh and the world. And the primary attack on us by the devil is our doctrine. Jesus didn't promise true prophets after the time of the apostles, but he sure did warn his church against false prophets and teachers throughout history (Matt 7:13-23). Therefore we must expect to struggle against false doctrine until Christ returns. And we must expect to be only a little flock who adhere to the true doctrine (Luk 18:8).

And we should also expect our own flesh to be bored by the true doctrine and wanting to find something more interesting.

If we expect to see a large true visible church, we will be disappointed and tempted to form unions where there is not full doctrinal agreement or to keep church fellowship where doctrinal unity has already ceased. We must trust that even when it seems that no one will adhere to the true doctrine, God rules the world and gathers his church. We must believe the doctrines revealed in Scripture even when no-one else does, and we must confess them boldly, even when everyone leaves us.

I think that this is where many of us, who have struggled for a long time are tempted the most. When we have left more than one church or been in doctrinal disputes too many times, we are tempted to give up our doctrine of church fellowship in order to keep our relationships intact or in order to find at least a few more with whom we can be in church. Or maybe in order to keep the next generation in our churches.

But we need to keep the doctrine of the cross especially as it pertains to false doctrine. Jesus has promised that his church will not be left alone by the false teachers. And there might not be many who still keep his word, when he returns. We should not look for the visible glory of the church, but keep our eyes on the pure marks of the church as the only trustworthy sign of the presence of Christ.

We should also seek the strength to bear the cross in the promises of God about perseverance and his working through the means of grace. When we experience false teaching our own flesh that wants to make compromises against the word of God, this is God's way of showing us, that we cannot keep the faith by our own strength. Therefore we should seek consolation and assurance in his heavenly word. Here we

will find the strength to bear the cross, also the crosses of being small churches, having to work part- or full time besides being pastors, being kicked out of churches, when we will not give up one dot of God`s word and so on. We should bear these crosses gladly, even though they are heavy burdens.

IV. The doctrine of church and ministry teach us, that the visible churches with whom church fellowship is either denied or recognized are the gatherings around word and sacrament, administered by the publicly called teachers and preachers, and that the doctrine which is to be judged is the public doctrine taught and practiced by the church and neither the subjective faith nor the occasional errors of church members, as long as persistent errors are not tolerated by the church.

Antithesis: Those must be rejected who do not distinguish in any way between the public doctrine of the church and its teachers and the subjective faith or private opinions of the hearers and those who believe that church fellowship is declared to individuals and not to congregations and pastors.

Jesus commanded his apostles and their successors in the preaching office to make disciples by baptizing and teaching all things he commanded (Matt 28:19-20). This cannot happen all at once. Therefore the church cannot be recognized by the occasional appearance of the marks of the church in a place. The pure marks of the church is that the word is continually preached and taught and the sacraments continually administered in a given place. When we declare fellowship, we declare fellowship on the basis of the preaching, teaching and administration of the sacraments in a given congregation. In The

Augsburg Confession we confess: *And to the true unity of the Church it is enough to agree concerning the doctrine of the Gospel and [3\]](#) the administration of the Sacraments.*⁴

We also declare fellowship with that congregation and not with an organization of congregations.

In the Overseas Statement it is stated this way: *3. Where the means of grace are in operation, there the church is to be found - whole, local and tangible. The assembly regularly gathered about the pure teaching and the right administration of the sacraments is called by God Himself the church at that place, irrespective of the hypocrites who may be attached outwardly to such assembly. This is no mere organizational form or association of individuals, but the one church that will remain forever (Una Sancta perpetuo mansura) in the exercise of its God-given, spiritual functions (office of the keys). This church is only one. Though locally apprehended, it must not be thought of as isolated, intermittent, or individual with reference to persons, time, or place.*⁵

The basis of church fellowship is the pure marks of the church, the means of grace. While agreement in the pure marks of the church can be stated in confessions and doctrinal discussions, they can only be found in the actual congregation of saints. The church doesn't not exist on paper. It exists, where the actual word is preached.

Neither should we look to the faith of individuals to ascertain our fellowship. There are hypocrites in the Christian congregation. There might even be parish members who haven't understood what the

⁴ AC VII 2 <http://bookofconcord.org/augsburgconfession.php#article7>

⁵ Fellowship in Its Necessary Context of the Doctrine of the Church (Statement of the Overseas Committee) <http://www.angelfire.com/ny4/djw/lutherantheology.overseasfellowship.html>

preacher teaches and therefore hold to a different doctrine. At times there might be discussions about doctrine in a local church, where the pastor has to teach his congregation and show patience to his flock, while not showing acceptance of false teaching. The fellowship is not based on the confession of every individual of a congregation.

Church fellowship is based on the public doctrine and preaching of a church through its rightly called pastors. This does not mean, that congregational members can confess a false doctrine without it having any consequences. If a congregational member publicly confesses a false doctrine, it must be ascertained what the ministry and the congregation teaches and that the false doctrine is dealt with according to Scripture.

If pastors in a given congregation tolerate open errors and attacks on the true doctrine, they themselves are becoming false teachers and should be dealt with accordingly.

V. Our doctrines of the means of grace and church and ministry furthermore teach us, that church fellowship is expressed through fellowship in the means of grace and our response to the means of grace in the worship of the gatherings around word and sacrament, but also that every member of these gatherings and especially the public servants of the word are representatives of their church even outside the worship service.

Antithesis: Those must be rejected who see every gathering of Christians as being on the same level as the official gatherings of the church.

Furthermore those are rejected who deny that the doctrine of church fellowship is to be applied also outside the public worship of the church.

The Statement of the Overseas Committee expresses the same thing: *12. The fellowship created by Word and sacraments shows itself fundamentally in pulpit and altar fellowship. It can show itself in many other ways, some of which, like prayer and worship and love of the brethren, the church cannot do without; others of which, like the holy kiss or the handshake or the reception into one's house, vary from place to place and from time to time. In whatever way the fellowship created by Word and sacraments shows itself, all visible manifestations of fellowship must be truthful and in accordance with the supreme demands of the marks of the church. The "sacred things" (sacra) are the means of grace, and only by way of them is anything else a "sacred thing" (sacrum).⁶*

While church fellowship is fundamentally fellowship in the marks of the church in the local congregation, we should not use this as an excuse to practice Christian fellowship with whomever we want outside the regular Sunday-worship of the local congregation. We should not see every gathering of Christians as being on the same level, but neither should we see that we practice a kind of congregationalism, where every activity outside the public worship is seen as indifferent to church fellowship.

When a person communes at an altar, that person is confessing the faith of this altar. It does matter what that person does outside the church assembly. While not being official representatives of the church, they are representing their church as members of the church.

Therefore it does matter, how they act outside the church. Depending on the situation, public acts by church members may be public acts of their church. They bear the name of their church.

⁶ See above

More so with pastors, who are the divinely appointed representatives of the church. Wherever they are, the visible church is present through this office. Pastors therefore should especially guard against giving the impression of fellowship, when there is no basis for this.

We are commanded to reject false teachers (Rom 16:17). Therefore, fellowship between teachers of different confessions is a special problem.

I will speak a bit about the practical application of this later in the paper.

Application of the principles - the doctrine of church fellowship strictly speaking

VI. Because we are bound to the whole word of God and commanded to reject all false teachers, we must demand complete doctrinal unity with other churches, before we can recognize church fellowship with them. The doctrine of church fellowship itself is one of those doctrines on which we must agree, wherefore church fellowship is to be denied to those, who are still in church fellowships with heterodox churches.

Antithesis: Those must be rejected who believe that minor doctrinal errors are to be tolerated in the teaching of a church or in the fellowship of churches and that fellowship is to be recognized when there are only small doctrinal differences.

This application is a consequence of thesis I regard Holy Scripture.

The basis of church fellowship is complete doctrinal unity. This is not the condition for membership in the Una Sancta. There might be true

believers among heterodox churches, who even believe in false doctrine with their hearts, but do not draw the full consequences of the errors.

There are doctrines which, when the full consequences are drawn, will lead to damnation, but when this is not drawn, will not lead to damnation. If not, we would not be able to distinguish between heterodox Christian churches and pagan religions.

There must be made a distinction between false doctrines that lead to damnation and false doctrines that do not necessarily lead to damnation, but still can lead to damnation, especially if held against the conscience. So while every false doctrine can lead to damnation, not every false doctrine must lead to damnation. The orthodox theologians distinguished this way between fundamental and non-fundamental doctrines. I think this is a useful distinction, especially when dealing with pastoral theology and how to prioritize how much time I spend different doctrinal points in my teaching of my congregation. While this distinction is not formally a part of our confessions, we must all admit, that the catechisms aren't just an arbitrary collection of doctrinal points. No, they present the fundamental doctrines that every Christian should know in order to be saved. Luther couldn't just have chosen the doctrines of the Antichrist, Election, Angels as his chief parts in the catechism. So clearly we must distinguish between the importance of doctrines for the salvation of men.

But our church fellowship is not based on this distinction. Ultimately, every false doctrine can lead to damnation. I am terribly afraid of

snakes. In Denmark, we have one poisonous snake. Normally adults don't die from being bitten by it, but a few have actually died from it, because of a weak heart or other circumstances. The possibility of dying from the bite of a cobra, an Australian tiger-snake or an American rattle-snake is much bigger. But since all of them can be deadly, I shouldn't make it possible to be bitten by any of them, especially as I hate snakes as much as Indiana Jones did.

The same applies to doctrines. While some false doctrines are more dangerous than others, all false doctrines are potentially dangerous.

But even more important is, that Jesus has commanded his apostles to teach the gentiles all that he has commanded in Matt 28:19-20. He hasn't commanded them to teach the gentiles most of what he has taught them, but all of it. He hasn't commanded them to teach the gentiles the most important things he has commanded. False doctrine is simply not allowed in the church. So while I might in my personal conversations with another person recognize that they are weak brethren who due to a weak understanding adhere to a false non-fundamental doctrine, this is not the basis of church fellowship. While I am dealing with persons and not necessarily with churches in my private affairs, I am dealing with churches and public doctrine in matters of church fellowship. Therefore, the distinctions between doctrines don't matter here. Well, of course they matter in the sense that the closer we are to each other doctrinally, the more reason there is to strive for the settling of the rest.

In a paper named Fundamental and Non-fundamental Doctrines — and Church Fellowship P.E. Kretzmann writes quoting Hoenecke: *"It is with*

*regard to the difference between fundamental and non-fundamental doctrines in their relation to church affiliation that we must be on our guard, lest confusion arise. The Scripture itself, as we shall presently see, makes a distinction between the condition of membership in the Holy Christian Church and that in visible or corporate bodies. Membership in the Una sancta is one thing, and the Lord of the Church fixes His own minimum in the matter of requirements for being accepted into this body. But fellowship in a visible church organization of the orthodox type demanded by the Word of God is fixed by the same infallible rule of faith and life, namely the Word of God. And this Word draws the boundaries closer with regard to church fellowship, since it demands a full acceptance of "all things whatsoever [He has] commanded [us]." Hoenecke rightly says: "No person has the liberty to say: This article is written in the Bible, and yet I do not believe it; for thereby he would overthrow the authority of the Scriptures, and hence the organic foundation It cannot be left free to anyone whether he will believe and confess a certain doctrine which is clearly revealed in the Holy Scriptures." (Ev.-Luth. Dogmatik, I, 452, 454)."*⁷

CLC confess the same thing in their Concerning Church Fellowship, A Statement of Principle: § 14 *We also believe, teach, and confess that all aberrations from Holy Scripture are condemned. For what is false may not be mixed with truth. In Jeremiah 23:28 the Lord speaks to the preachers: " . . he that hath my word, let him speak my word faithfully. What is the chaff to the wheat? saith the LORD." The Church is commissioned to speak only God's Word in its purity, "teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you." Paul admonishes Timothy to "Hold fast the form of sound words, which thou hast heard of me" (2 Tim. 1:13). In his First Epistle to Timothy Paul obligates him to "charge some that they teach no other doctrine" (1 Tim. 1:3). Of*

⁷ Fundamental and Non-fundamental Doctrines — and Church Fellowship By Paul E. Kretzmann, Ph.D., D.D., Ed.D. <http://confessionallutherans.org/papers/funddocs.htm>

those who mix the truth with error, Paul tells the Galatians in the first chapter of that letter: “If any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed” (Gal. 1:9). Jeremiah threatens all such with God’s wrath: “Behold, I am against the prophets, saith the LORD, that use their tongues, and say, He saith. Behold, I am against them that prophesy false dreams, saith the LORD, and do tell them, and cause my people to err by their lies, and by their lightness; yet I sent them not, nor commanded them: therefore they shall not profit this people at all, saith the LORD” (Jer. 23:31-32). For any person to change any teaching of the Holy, Holy, Holy God is a most grave offense against the majesty of God. When we see men dare to tamper with the Divine Record, not trembling at His Word, we can only shudder at what must inevitably be the consequence. We remember God’s wrath at the changing of His worship perpetrated by Aaron at Mt. Sinai, and say with the Psalmist: “Horror hath taken hold upon me because of the wicked that forsake thy law” (119:53).⁸

I believe the CLC is right here. There can be no compromise in the church, when it comes to God’s word.

It has been mentioned to me, that some have interpreted the statement on *levia errata* in the Apology as pertaining to doctrine: [111](#) *Christ to be excluded as Propitiator. Therefore he speaks not of personal perfection, but of the integrity common to the Church [concerning the unity of the Church, and the word which they interpret as perfection means nothing else than to be not rent]. For on this account he says that love is a bond or connection, to signify that he speaks of the binding and joining together with each other, of the many members of the Church. For just as in all families and in all states concord*

⁸ Concerning Church Fellowship A Statement of Principle Revised Edition
<http://clclutheran.org/library/ccf.html#index>

*should be nourished by mutual offices, and tranquility cannot be retained unless men overlook and forgive certain mistakes among themselves; so Paul commands that there should be love in the Church in order that it may preserve concord, bear with the harsher manners of brethren as there is need, overlook certain less serious mistakes, lest the Church fly apart into various schisms, and enmities and factions and heresies arise from the schisms.*⁹

If this was understood as pertaining to doctrine, it would mean that the Apology accepts minor errors in doctrine. But doctrine isn't mentioned there at all. The same Latin word *Errata* is used in the paragraph with regard to the family and the state and in regard to the church, we must assume that they are talking about the same kind of mistakes, that is mistakes in life.

Referring to 1 Pet 4:8, Melanchthon writes in pr. 121: *Peter, therefore, does not mean that love merits in God's sight the remission of sins, that it is a propitiation to the exclusion of Christ as Mediator, that it regenerates and justifies, but that it is not morose, harsh, intractable towards men, that it overlooks some mistakes of its friends, that it takes in good part even the harsher manners of others, just as the well-known maxim enjoins: Know, but do not hate, the manners of a friend*¹⁰.

Even if the mistakes could be interpreted as doctrinal mistakes, we ought to interpret such an unclear statement in the confessions in light of the clear statements. And according to CA VII, unity in doctrine and the administration is enough, which implies that it is also necessary.

9 Ap III 111 http://bookofconcord.org/defense_5_love.php#para111

10 Ap III 121 http://bookofconcord.org/defense_5_love.php#para121

VII. This doctrinal unity must be found in the public confession of the churches and in their teaching, preaching and practice, and also in what is tolerated in the churches. We do not need to question every member of the churches, whether they fully comprehend and confess the whole truth, when the church and its ministers confess the truth and do not tolerate error or attacks on the true doctrine.

Antithesis: Those must be rejected who believe that only the official doctrinal position of a church needs to be correct and not the actual teaching, preaching and practice. Also those must be rejected who believe that a church can be seen as orthodox when it teaches and preaches correctly but nevertheless tolerates, that its members openly attack the true doctrine. On the other hand, we must also reject the opinion, that we must ascertain adherence to the true doctrine by every individual member of another congregation.

I base this thesis on the foregoing theses, especially thesis IV and V, but now I deal with the practice following from the doctrine of church fellowship.

The public confession of a church is to be trusted as the public teaching of that church unless evidence is against it. This follows from the 8th commandment, which we should also honor in the doctrine of church fellowship. When the preachers of a church declare, what they preach, we are to trust this, unless we see evidence to the contrary.

Since our unity is based on the doctrine taught in the pulpits and practiced in the churches, our church fellowship is first and foremost based on the public doctrine of the servants of the word, to which the

sheep of the congregations are listening. We declare church fellowship with churches and not with individuals. And we should also apply the eighth commandment here. Whatever misunderstandings laypeople might have, we should see their gathering around the true doctrine as a confession of their willingness to hear the true doctrine and be corrected, unless we see evidence to the contrary.

But the sheep are required to judge doctrine. And their confession is also a confession of the church, they belong to. So when they publicly attack the doctrine of their own church, this issue must be dealt with, before fellowship can be declared with that church. When laypeople attack the doctrine of their teachers, they do become teachers themselves - either emergency teachers or false prophets, depending on who is right. This matter cannot be unsettled. Also when a congregational member has publicly attacked the true doctrine by word or deed, this issue should be dealt with, before church fellowship can be declared with that church. Church fellowship should not be recognized with a church, in which there is a controversy not yet settled.

Also, when the public doctrine of a church is changed, because the teachers are convinced that a change must be made in their doctrine and practice in order to be faithful to the Scriptures and the confessions, the sheep must be given the opportunity to judge this matter. Public doctrine must be public - also in the local church. If for example a pastor, who used to be a receptionist, is convinced that the Lord's body and blood is present, when the Lord has blessed the elements with his word and that the Lord's command to eat and drink

apply to all the consecrated elements, this pastor needs to teach his congregation and give them the opportunity to judge his doctrine. He cannot just change his doctrine in his external relation to other churches, but not to his sheep.

So while the public confession of the teachers of a church should be accepted as an expression of what they teach and preach, evidence to the contrary should be examined, before church fellowship is to be recognized.

VIII. Church fellowship is to be broken as soon as it has been established, that doctrinal unity no longer exists, since it is not based on the subjective faith or repentance of individuals or churches, but on the objective unity in doctrine.

Antithesis: Those must be rejected who believe that once doctrinal disunity has been recognized, church fellowship can still be upheld on the basis of the hope that the false teachers will repent. Those must be rejected, who break fellowship, when it has not yet been established, that there isn't doctrinal unity.

In Rom 16:17 we are commanded to mark and avoid those who teach differently. We are not commanded to wait a bit and see if they eventually change their mind. The breaking of church fellowship is not to be postponed on the basis of subjective judgments of other churches.

We are not dealing with persons, when we deal with other churches. We are dealing with churches and especially their teachers. We cannot look into the hearts of church bodies and we shouldn't try.

It is a false understanding of a state of confession, when it is assumed, that church fellowship can be upheld, when it has been clarified that there is not doctrinal unity anymore. The Danish free- church, which I left seven years ago had this practice of declaring a state of confession or protest fellowship. The CLC accused the WELS of the same thing, though I am not sure whether it was a misunderstanding. The Evangelical-Lutheran Free-church in Denmark had already been in protest-fellowship with the German SELK for around 10 years in 2002, when I joined it - and they still are. They have admonished the LCMS regarding its fellowship with LWF-churches, and it keeps on admonishing them, as far as I know. But when the breaking of fellowship is made dependent on the hope of repentance, it can always be postponed.

On the other hand we should also guard against a separatist spirit, where church fellowship is broken as soon as someone says something wrong. It must be clear that there is a doctrinal difference. It is very serious to break fellowship and we must also respect the 8th commandment here, so that we don't judge too quickly. We must also give others time to study, even though we are not to give them time to repent, when they have studied and still confess error.

Our breaking of fellowship must be dependent on the objective standard of doctrinal unity, not more than that and not less than that. We must reject false doctrine, when it appears and we must reject false teachers, when it has been clarified, that they adhere to false doctrine even after having been confronted with the true doctrine of scripture.

IX. A principal distinction must be made, not between prayer fellowship and pulpit- and altar fellowship, but between public expressions of fellowship with another church and its representatives on the one side and fellowship between individuals in the privacy of a home or family on the other side.

Antithesis: Those must be rejected, who believe that public joint prayer can be practiced with representatives of heterodoxy. Those must also be rejected who believe that every expression of Christian fellowship in private must adhere to the same rules as the public fellowship of the church.

Prayer of course is not a means of grace and not a mark of the church the same way the means of grace are. On the other hand, Luther does number it among the marks of the church in his "On the council and the churches". Luther seems to be talking about the public prayer and worship of the church there. In Acts 2:11 prayer is seen as an expression of the fellowship of the church.

The Overseas Statement states regarding prayer: *13. Prayer is not one of the marks of the church and should not be coordinated with Word and sacraments, as though it were essentially of the same nature as them. As a response to the divine Word, it is an expression of faith and a fruit of faith, and when spoken before others, a profession of faith. As a profession of faith it must be spoken in harmony with and under control of the marks of the church.* I agree that prayer is not on the same level as the means of grace. On the other hand, I also agree that it is a profession of faith. The Overseas statement also correctly states: *12. The fellowship created by Word and sacraments shows itself fundamentally in pulpit and altar fellowship. It can show itself in many other ways, some of which, like prayer and worship and love of the*

brethren, the church cannot do without; others of which, like the holy kiss or the handshake or the reception into one's house, vary from place to place and from time to time. In whatever way the fellowship created by Word and sacraments shows itself, all visible manifestations of fellowship must be truthful and in accordance with the supreme demands of the marks of the church. The "sacred things" (sacra) are the means of grace, and only by way of them is anything else a "sacred thing" (sacrum).

The public worship of the church, including prayer, is a public response to the word as prayer is always a response to the word. When we pray together, we are confessing a brotherly fellowship.

When we pray or worship publicly, we are acting as public representatives of our churches. We are not just confessing that we see the Individuals with whom we are praying, as Christians. We are worshipping as representatives of our churches with representatives of other churches. We are practicing fellowship with churches.

So while every joint prayer is an expression of brotherly fellowship, not every joint prayer is an expression of church fellowship. The distinction should not be made between prayer and the means of grace, but between public and official acts where we are dealing with churches, and private acts on the other side, where we are dealing with individuals. In a family devotion, the housefather is really preaching to and teaching his family and in this way he is administering the means of grace as fathers have been commanded to do from the beginning even before the institution of the public ministry of the word. He isn't just praying with them, but also teaching them.

In the mutual consolation of brethren, when the word of God is used, there is also a private administration of the word.

So there are both public acts and private acts that are using the means of grace or responding to the means of grace. The distinction we need to make in the doctrine of church fellowship is a distinction between the public and the private acts.

At the same time, we should recognize, that private brotherly fellowship is still a confession of brotherly fellowship, while not necessarily being a confession of church fellowship.

X. This doesn't mean that we can pray in private with everyone, who confess that they are Christians. We can only worship in private with those, whom we recognize as Christians, which means that we cannot pray in private with obstinate and persistent errorists, but we can pray with those whom we recognize as weak brethren, as long as this does not involve acceptance of error or can be seen as acceptance of error.

Antithesis: Those must be rejected who believe that we can never pray in private with members of a heterodox church body. Those are to be rejected who believe that we can always pray in private with members of a heterodox but Christian church body.

Praying together is an expression of Christian fellowship. There is no way around this. Praying cannot be considered a civil act. It is by

definition a sacred act, and when we join together in prayer, we are expressing that we pray together to the same God.

We are not, however, necessarily expressing fellowship with the church of someone else, when we pray together in private. While there can be no levels of fellowship in the public expressions of fellowship, we cannot judge private situations by the exact same standard as public worship.

We are not necessarily dealing with members of heterodox churches as representatives of error. We might be, depending on the situation. Some private situations might have an official flavor, and in some situations, it might be seen as an acceptance of the errors of their church, if we pray with people. So there are private situations, where we are dealing with people as representatives of their churches.

But even when we do not, we cannot always pray with anyone else.

We are expressing Christian fellowship by praying together, and we cannot lead other people to believe that they are Christians, if the evidence shows us something else. While we should not excommunicate in private, we should preach the law also by our deeds. If someone shows the signs of being in contempt of the word of God, we cannot express Christian fellowship with them. If we are convinced that these people will not listen to the word of God and therefore are not true Christians, we cannot pray with them just to keep family peace. Also, if they deny fundamental articles of the faith, necessary for salvation, we cannot recognize them as Christians even in private, I believe. If they deny the Holy Trinity or believe in

justification by works, we should not consider them Christians in private

But, on the other hand, when we recognize others as weak brethren, who don't understand everything, but who want to listen to the word of God, we should not treat them as false believers in private, just because we have to treat their church as false.

We must remember, what we confess in the preface of the Book of Concord: *Thus, as it is in no way our design and purpose to condemn those men who err from a certain simplicity of mind, but are not blasphemers against the truth of the heavenly doctrine, much less, indeed, entire churches, which are either under the Roman Empire of the German nation or elsewhere; nay, rather has it been our intention and disposition in this manner openly to censure and condemn only the fanatical opinions and their obstinate and blasphemous teachers, (which, we judge, should in no way be tolerated in our dominions, churches, and schools,) because these errors conflict with the express Word of God, and that, too, in such a way that they cannot be reconciled with it. We have undertaken this also for this reason, viz., that all godly persons might be warned diligently to avoid them. For we have no doubt whatever that even in those churches which have hitherto not agreed with us in all things many godly and by no means wicked men are found who follow their own simplicity, and do not understand aright the matter itself, but in no way approve the blasphemies which are cast forth against the Holy Supper as it is administered in our churches, according to Christ's institution, and, with the unanimous approval of all good men, is taught in accordance with the words of the testament itself. We are also in great hope that, if they would be taught aright concerning all these things, the*

*Spirit of the Lord aiding them, they would agree with us, and with our churches and schools, to the infallible truth of God's Word.*¹¹

We declare fellowship with churches, and we refuse to declare fellowship with churches. When we are dealing with individuals as individuals, we should judge them as individuals. If we were to judge individuals solely on account of the doctrine they confess through their church fellowship, we would have to excommunicate every member of our own churches, who have misunderstood the true doctrine.

We have to make a judgment about the situation and the persons we are about to express Christian fellowship with.

I believe the practice here described is the same as the one expressed in the presentation from the ELS and the WELS on the topic of private prayer fellowship. Erling Teigen writes in his conclusion in a paper on prayer fellowship: *On one occasion, we may exercise our fellowship with the ingenuous Christian and on another not exercise it with a disingenuous theologian. But there is no prayer which is NOT fellowship. If we are truly ecclesial, then we will understand that all prayer is confessional and expressive of fellowship. When I pray "Abba Father," just between me and my Lord, that is expressive of my fellowship with him, and even so, I know that I am not alone, but with my fellow believers. And where my prayer is with my fellow believers, the prayer expresses the koinonia fellowship we have with each other by virtue of our fellowship with him. Prayer IS fellowship. No prayer is merely private, or apart from fellowship.*¹²

11 BoC Preface 20 <http://bookofconcord.org/boc-intro.php#para20>

12 Prayer—Is it a Means of Grace? (The Biblical and Confessional Prohibition of Inter-Faith Prayer and Worship) Erling T. Teigen A Congress on the Lutheran Confessions – 2004 Indian Lakes Resort, Bloomingdale, Illinois April 16, 2004 http://hans.blc.edu/~eteigen/Theology_& Church_History_files/PrayerFellowship.htm

Armin Schuetze wrote in his Timely Topics on whether or not one could pray a table prayer with someone who was not WELS at the time when the WELS was breaking fellowship with the LCMS: *We see then that Scripture does not give an absolute yes or an absolute no as the answer to our question. And it does not set up a detailed set of rules that tells you exactly what you must do under every circumstance. But it does give the principles that are to guide you; it does say that you are to take note of the confession of those who come to you and want to be acknowledged as fellow Christians. If that confession shows them to be persistent errorists, you are to avoid joint expressions of faith with them. If that confession shows them to be brethren, in some cases still weak brethren (and in private relations a personal confession may reveal him to be that in spite of doubtful church connections), you may engage in joint expressions of faith for your mutual encouragement.*¹³

Conclusion

I have tried to present both the doctrinal presuppositions for the true doctrine of fellowship and some of the applications of this doctrine. When we see different applications, we need to ask, whether these differences are based on different judgments of the situation or whether they are in reality differences in doctrine or the doctrinal presuppositions of the doctrine of church fellowship. In my opinion, many issues come down to the presuppositions regarding the doctrine of Scripture, the means of grace and the cross.

¹³ Timely Topics: Relating to the Termination of Fellowship with the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod p. 7
[http://www.wlssays.net/files/Timely%20Topics.ASchuetze%20\(1\).pdf](http://www.wlssays.net/files/Timely%20Topics.ASchuetze%20(1).pdf)