

Confessional Fellowship and Church Fellowship Distinguendum est!

Since both the two-word English phrases in our caption are of ecclesiastical rather than Biblical origin, - although when rightly understood they may be aptly used in the discussion of Biblical doctrine and practice, - a misunderstanding of the proper distinction between them would not constitute doctrinal error, though it might well lead to unionistic or schismatic practice.

We shall first briefly refer to a unionistic practice which might result from a confusion of these two terms, though it is not likely that readers of this periodical would be tempted to confuse them in this way. By a false identification of confessional fellowship with church fellowship an unwary Lutheran might assume the right to practice church fellowship with all who formally acknowledge and subscribe to the Book of Concord of 1580 or some later orthodox formula in harmony with that good confession, such as the Brief Statement of 1932 or the Confession of Faith Professed and Practiced by All True Lutherans of 1950, or might even go so far as to hold that there can be no such thing as "unionism" involved in church fellowship with those who profess to be "fellow Lutherans". Against such a misunderstanding it should be sufficient to quote the following from the Brief Statement of 1932, par. 29: "The orthodox character of a church is established not by its mere name nor by its outward acceptance of, and subscription to, an orthodox creed, but by the doctrine which is actually taught in its pulpits, in its theological seminaries, and in its publications." Such practice of church fellowship with all who might be assumed to be in confessional fellowship would indeed involve a reckless disregard of good order and of those who are our brethren in the true faith, and a promiscuous unionism based upon nothing more than the use of a name to which half the state churches of Germany as well as those of the Scandinavian countries lay claim, when in fact they are "Lutheran" in name only. Such is the unionistic basis of the Lutheran World Federation as well as of the National Lutheran Council in our country. Need more be said?

Before dealing more specifically with another sort of confusion between these two terms which, regarding confessional fellowship as an equivalent term to church fellowship instead of merely being one necessary prerequisite for the exercise of the latter, takes a negative attitude toward confessional fellowship beyond the sphere of existing church fellowship, we shall first briefly define the two terms in accordance with accepted ecclesiastical usage.

Confessional fellowship is the actual discoverable fact that two or more individuals, congregations, or church bodies are teaching the same doctrine in conformity with an accordant confession. To the existence of this fact, in the first place, the orthodoxy or heterodoxy of the confession is irrelevant. Two Presbyterians who are actually teaching the same doctrine in conformity with the Westminster Confession are in confessional fellowship. They are in true confessional fellowship inasmuch as their conformity to the same confession is an actual fact. That the Westminster Confession itself does not accord in many respects with Holy Scripture makes their fellowship heterodox. Two Lutherans who are actually teaching the same doctrine in conformity with the Book of Concord are in confessional fellowship. They are in true confessional fellowship inasmuch as their conformity to the same confession is an actual fact. That the Book of Concord itself accords in all respects with Holy Scripture makes their fellowship orthodox. To the existence of this fact of confessional fellowship, in the second place, the recognition of such fellowship is irrelevant. The existence of an actual discoverable fact does not depend upon its actual discovery. Facts are facts though no one knows them, and they remain facts even when those who could know them ignore them. Since confessional fellowship is not, like the inner faith of the heart which produces the spiritual fellowship of all Christians in the *una sancta*, a fact of faith, but a fact of experience, it is not in any respect unknowable, though it may in many instances be unknown. Like spiritual fellowship it is, when sincere and orthodox, a gift of God, not a human production. The existence of confessional fellowship, in the third place, has a definite relation to church

fellowship, but does not in itself constitute church fellowship. An existent confessional fellowship which is unknown and unrecognized cannot form the basis of church fellowship. A known and recognized confessional fellowship is one prerequisite for rightful church fellowship, but not the only one. Church fellowship without confessional fellowship is unionism. The refusal to heed confessional fellowship beyond the sphere of existing church fellowship is a schismatic tendency. But a recognition of existing confessional fellowship does not in itself involve any practice of church fellowship.

We proceed to define the second term of the two which we are endeavoring to distinguish the one from the other. Church fellowship is Joint worship and work in the religious sphere, or the practice of altar fellowship, pulpit fellowship, and prayer fellowship between individual church members, congregations, or federations of congregations (church bodies). Such fellowship between those not united in doctrine is unionism. Such fellowship between those united in doctrine is true church fellowship inasmuch as it is based upon actual doctrinal unity, though it may still be heterodox fellowship if the doctrine in which the participants are united is not pure Scriptural doctrine. For the heterodox to join in the worship or support the work of the orthodox is not sinful unionism, though it may involve sin against the (mistaken) convictions and the (erring) conscience of the heterodox. For the orthodox to join in the worship or support the work of the heterodox is unionism; but contacts which do not involve these elements or in any way identify the orthodox with the heterodox in the religious sphere, are not unionism or false church fellowship (in fact, are not church fellowship of any kind), though they may in other respects be wise or unwise, advisable or inadvisable. To raise the question of church fellowship where there is no joint worship or work in the religious sphere, where no altar, pulpit, or prayer fellowship is actually practiced, is to confuse the issue. Church fellowship cannot, like confessional fellowship, exist without being known or exercised, but is a conscious practice of those who go to the same altar, exchange pulpits, or join each other in prayer. Those who are actually doing these things are in church fellowship with one another. The doctrine of church fellowship is the teaching of God's Word which governs such practice of fellowship, telling us with whom God requires us to practice fellowship (e.g., 1 Cor. 1:10; Eph. 4:3) and with whom He forbids us to practice fellowship (e.g., Matt. 7:15; Rom. 16:17). Those who are in the same congregation or church body are actually in church fellowship, are openly confessing it by their very membership, and are more or less constantly practicing it according as they are more or less faithful in their worship and church work. Those in one church body who practice church fellowship with those in another church body not in declared fellowship with their own are either unionistic in principle (as are most of the American sects and many so-called "Lutherans"), ignoring the Biblical doctrine of church fellowship, or they transgress it by indifference to doctrinal unity and purity, by disregard for their acknowledged brethren in the faith, and by contravening good Christian order. Those who are bound together in church fellowship thereby obligate themselves to arrange all matters pertaining to church fellowship together. This being so, it is evident that one cannot practice church fellowship with those outside his own church body without involving his brethren within it, and that one cannot remain uninvolved in the unionistic practices of others in his own church body except by raising vigorous public protest against such practices (*status confessionis*), which, if unheeded, must lead to severance of fellowship with former brethren.

It remains that we discuss the proper relation and distinction of the two terms. To say that confessional fellowship is a necessary prerequisite for rightful church fellowship is simply to reassert in ecclesiastical language the Scriptural requirement of unity in doctrine as the foundation for God-pleasing joint work and worship. In saying that this is not the only requirement, we are thinking of the orderly procedures for joint recognition of this fellowship, of the necessity for the severance of any existing organizational bonds with those no longer united in the true confession in order to enter upon the practice of fellowship with true brethren in the orthodox faith, the conscientious conformity of the principles of practice with an orthodox confession, and the necessary mutual willingness to worship and work together as recognized brethren. For true church fellowship is necessarily mutual, not one-sided. Those who believe in an "allowable and wholesome latitude of theological opinion" may indeed be willing to allow

an orthodox "brother" to express himself in their midst or even to commune at their altar without insisting upon a like recognition being accorded them on his part. But such indifferentism would clearly indicate a basically unionistic principle, the absence of any true confessional principle, and hence the impossibility of any church fellowship with such an indifferentist. The orthodox Lutheran will not practice fellowship with those who do not recognize his orthodoxy and that of his brethren, and who do not desire mutual recognition because of true unity of mind and spirit in matters of Christian doctrine and practice. But while all these factors enter into the establishment of true church fellowship, its basic principle is confessional unity. And therefore such confessional unity must be very important and very precious to us wherever it may be found.

We must realize that confessional fellowship will always be prior to church fellowship, for it is only on the foundation of existent and recognized confessional fellowship that true church fellowship can be built. To take a negative or disinterested attitude over against those outside our fellowship who are confessing the same pure truth with us would be denying one of the very objectives for which we exist as an Orthodox Lutheran Conference: "To offer encouragement and assistance to pastors, teachers, laymen, and entire congregations who are in a state of confession (*in statu confessionis*, that is, in protesting membership) in heterodox Lutheran bodies, and who share our Confession of Faith" (Constitution of the O.L.C., Article III, 3).

It is true that there are a number of manifestations of sincerity and cordiality which we can justly expect from those who profess the same faith with us, such as, that they inform us of such agreement, declare fellowship of faith with us, publicly acknowledge us in the face of our adversaries (cf. 2 Tim. 1:8), support our work, etc., and it grieves us when these fruits of brotherhood in confession are not forthcoming; but remembering that we ourselves are compassed about with infirmity, and that God knows who are our true brethren better than we (cf. 1 Kings 18:13; Luke 9:49,50), we still hope in His grace alone for others as well as for ourselves, and we prize the confession of His truth from any quarter.

We shall, as we find opportunity, continue to intercede at the throne of grace for all confessors of the truth, known or unknown to us, and to invite and urge publicly and privately that they sever all false fellowships, and acknowledge those, and those alone, as their brethren, with whom God has joined them in the unity of the one true faith. Thus confessional fellowship and church fellowship are properly distinguished, and also properly related to each other, the former as a God-given prerequisite for a God-pleasing exercise of the latter.

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