

Church and Ministry
Part 3: The Fellowship of the Church

The doctrine of the church which is confessed in Augsburg Confession Article 7 is beautiful and very comforting. God himself causes the Word of his Son's atonement and the forgiveness of sins to be preached and delivered in the sacraments to poor miserable sinners. By this Word he gathers believers, forgiven sinners, into one holy church, where he daily forgives them, comforts them in their need, and causes them to grow in virtue and in all good works.

But the obvious trouble of the church at the time of the Reformation, as in our own day and in every age of the church, was the presence of lies and evil within the church. By these evils faith was destroyed, the church was divided, love grew cold, and the glory of God was neglected. We hear these sorrows lamented in the Lutheran hymns of that time. Luther paraphrased Psalm 12,

O Lord, look down from heaven, behold
And let Thy pity waken;
How few are we within Thy fold,
Thy saints by men forsaken!
True faith seems quenched on every hand,
Men suffer not Thy Word to stand;
Dark times have us o'ertaken.

With fraud which they themselves invent
Thy truth they have confounded;
Their hearts are not with one consent
On Thy pure doctrine grounded.
While they parade with outward show,
They lead the people to and fro,
In error's maze astounded.

May God root out all heresy
And of false teachers rid us
Who proudly say: "Now where is he
That shall our speech forbid us?
By right or might we shall prevail;
What we determine cannot fail;
We own no Lord and master."

The hymn continues with the Lord God himself arising to help his poor, beleaguered church. It reminds us that God uses such trials within the church to purify his church from human dross. It closes with this prayer,

Defend Thy truth, O God, and stay
This evil generation;
And from the error of its way
Keep Thine own congregation.
The wicked everywhere abound
And would Thy little flock confound;
But Thou art our Salvation. (TLH 260.1-3, 6)

When the Roman Catholics received Augsburg Confession Article 7, they condemned the Lutherans for not taking the evil and false Christians within the church into account. After all, they had defined the church as the congregation or assembly of saints only, believers. When the Lutherans defended their confession of the church in the Apology, they summarized the Roman Catholic Confutation this way:

The authors of the Confutation have condemned the seventh article of our Confession, in which we said that the church is the assembly of saints. And they have added a lengthy dissertation, that the wicked are not to be separated from the church, since John the Baptist [Matthew 3:12] compared the church to a threshing floor on which the wheat and the chaff are heaped up together, and Christ [Matthew 13:47] compared it to a net in which there are both good and bad fish, etc. (Ap 7&8.1)

It is clear that because the church was directly identified with the papacy, it had to be defined by its external appearance. The Roman Catholics could not concede the Lutherans' definition of the church because it not only dismissed the papacy from the definition, but also restored the teaching of justification by faith alone to the doctrine of the church. The church is the congregation of those who have been justified by grace for the sake of Christ's obedience and atoning work, which is reckoned to them by faith and not by works or human merit. The Lutheran confession of the church struck at the heart of the papacy.

But the Lutherans, as they pointed out in the Apology, had already anticipated this objection and could demonstrate that their doctrine of the church took into account the teaching of our Lord. Article 8 of the Augsburg Confession continues the thought of Article 7 and reads in the German text,

Likewise, although the Christian Church is, properly speaking, nothing else than the assembly of all believers and saints, yet because in this life many false Christians, hypocrites, and even public sinners remain among the righteous, the

sacraments – even though administered by unrighteous priests – are efficacious all the same. For as Christ himself indicates [Matthew 23:2-3]: “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat....” Condemned, therefore, are the Donatists and all others who hold a different view. (AC 8.1-3)

In the Apology, the Lutheran Confessors explain why they added the eighth article:

This article has been presented for a very necessary reason. We see the endless dangers that threaten the destruction of the church. There is an infinite number of ungodly persons within the church itself who oppress it. This article in the Creed presents these consolations to us: so that we may not despair, but may know that the church will nevertheless remain; so that we may know that however great the multitude of the ungodly is, nevertheless the church exists and Christ bestows those gifts that he has promised to the church: forgiveness of sins, answered prayer, the gift of the Holy Spirit. (Apology 7&8.9)

The key phrase in Article 8 for understanding the distinction the Lutherans are making is this, “properly speaking,” or later in the Apology, “principally.” The church is, properly speaking or strictly speaking, only believers in Christ. “The church is... principally an association of faith and the Holy Spirit in the hearts of men.” (Ap 7&8.5) “For we must understand the thing that principally makes us members of the church – and living members at that... The church is a spiritual people, that is, not a people distinguished from the Gentiles by civil ceremonies, but a true people of God, reborn through the Spirit.” (Ap 7&8.13, 14) And we repeat this point throughout the Apology.

Now the gospel brings not the shadow of eternal things but the eternal things themselves, the Holy Spirit and the righteousness by which we are righteous before God. Therefore the people according to the gospel are only those who receive this promise of the Holy Spirit. (Ap 7&8.15-16)

And our Confession adds one more way of making this distinction between the church, properly speaking, and the church as it is in the world.

Therefore, although hypocrites and wicked people are indeed associated with this true church according to the external rites, nevertheless when the church is defined, it must be defined as that which is the living body of Christ and as that which is the church in fact as well as in name. (Ap 7&8.12)

The true church is the assembly of those who are living members of the body of Christ, justified through faith, truly a part of the bride of Christ, and citizens of his heavenly kingdom.

In explaining the presence of unbelievers and the wicked within the church, our Lutheran Confession repeatedly returns to the efficacy of the gospel – the Word and sacraments – in the doctrine of the church. We quote Ephesians 5:25–27 to show the teaching in Scriptures:

Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by the Word, so as to present the church to himself in splendor, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind – yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish. (Ap 7&8.7)

The Holy Spirit is present wherever the gospel is purely taught and given, making a holy Christian church, the Bride of Christ.

Nevertheless, there are many who are present in this assembly of believers who do not believe the gospel and are not, properly speaking, a part of the church. The church as we see it in the world, or the church broadly speaking, is a mixed assembly.

For this very reason we added the eighth article, so that no one might think that we separate the wicked and the hypocrites from the outward fellowship of the church or deny efficacy to the sacraments when administered by hypocrites or the wicked.... For we grant that in this life hypocrites and evil people are mingled with the church and are members of the church according to the external association of the church's signs – that is, the Word, confession of faith, and sacraments – especially if they have not been excommunicated. Neither do the sacraments lose their efficacy when they are administered by the wicked. (Ap 7&8.3)

In our Confession we are particularly intent on teaching that the Word and the sacraments do not depend on the persons of the ministers or the piety of the congregational members, but on the institution and promise of Christ. This in no way releases us from Christ's command to remove teachers of false doctrine from our midst or excommunicate those who persist in impenitence. Nevertheless, when such erring preachers have not yet been removed and the impenitent are still present in the church, we may be comforted that the gospel and the sacraments still retain their power when used according to Christ's command. So we confess:

Indeed, we may legitimately make use of the sacraments that are administered by evil people. For Paul also predicts [2 Thessalonians 2:4] that the Antichrist “takes his seat in the temple of God,” that is, he will rule and hold office in the church.” (Ap 7&8.3–4)

Now we come to the point that is taught and emphasized in the Apology, the point which will help us to understand the Lutheran doctrine of church fellowship. Let me quote it from two places in the Apology:

However, the church is not only an association of external ties and rights like other civic organizations, but it is principally an association of faith and the Holy Spirit in the hearts of men. It nevertheless has its external marks so that it can be recognized, namely, the pure teaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments in harmony with the gospel of Christ. Moreover, this church alone is called the body of Christ, which Christ renews, sanctifies, and governs by his Spirit as Paul testifies in Ephesians 1[:22-23], when he says, "And God has made him head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all." (Ap 7&8.5)

You see here that we call the Word and the sacraments the "marks" of the church. A mark is a sign or evidence by which something else can be recognized. The marks that identify Christians are the means by which Christians are made and saved eternally. The marks by which we locate and know the true church of Christ are the pure gospel and sacraments by which the Holy Spirit creates and sustains the church. Here we restate this confession,

Therefore in accordance with the Scriptures we maintain that the church is, properly speaking, the assembly of saints who truly believe the gospel of Christ and have the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, we admit that in this life many hypocrites and wicked people, who are mixed in with these, participate in the outward signs. They are members of the church according to their participation in the outward signs and even hold office in the church. Nor does this detract from the efficacy of the sacraments when they are distributed by the unworthy, because they represent the person of Christ on account of the call of the church and do not represent their own persons, as Christ himself testifies [Luke 10:16], "Whoever listens to you listens to me." When they offer the Word of Christ or the sacraments, they offer them in the stead and place of Christ. The words of Christ teach us this so that we are not offended by the unworthiness of ministers. (Ap 7&8.28)

The doctrine of the fellowship (or communion) of the church is necessary because of false teachers and other impenitent sinners in the church. The doctrine builds upon the definition of the church in Article 7, giving particular attention to the unity of the church and the purity of her marks. What do we mean by this word, "fellowship" (or communion)? The word in Greek is *koinonia*. It is used in the New Testament to describe the Lord's Supper, the union of the bread and the body of Christ in the Sacrament, and the bond that Christians have with the Holy Trinity and with each other. It means, plainly speaking, to have a part in or a share in a common thing. When

we speak of the fellowship of the church, we are not talking, first of all, about the relationships which people have with each other in the congregation. Rather, we have as our common possession the Triune God, which we have through our common participation in the pure Word of God and in the Lord's Supper, the Holy Communion. This common faith and participation in the gospel brings us into the fellowship of the church.

Let us return to 1 John 1:1-10 to show how this doctrine is taught in Holy Scriptures:

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the Word of life – the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us – that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have **fellowship** with us; and indeed our **fellowship** is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. And we are writing these things to you so that your joy may be complete.

This is the message we have heard from him and proclaimed to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. If we say we have **fellowship** with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have **fellowship** with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned we make him a liar, and his Word is not in us.

This is a very rich passage, teaching us the incarnation of Jesus, eternal life, fellowship, the Trinity, the vicarious satisfaction of Jesus' sacrifice, forgiving and cleansing from sin, lies and the truth, and much more. Fellowship, *koinonia*, begins in the Trinity, is obtained **for** sinners by the blood of Christ, and is obtained **by** sinners when their sins are forgiven and they are cleansed of unrighteousness. In this way they become the children of God, have fellowship with him, and thereby also have fellowship with one another. But we should carefully note that this fellowship is demarcated by the truth. To deny one's sin, or to hold to the lie and not the truth, is to remain in sin and darkness. God and his church have no fellowship with unforgiven sin or lies.

The apostle Paul teaches the fellowship of the church in a passage which focuses on Holy Communion, 1 Corinthians 10:16-17:

The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a **participation** [*koinonia*] in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a **participation** [*koinonia*] in the body

of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.

In the Lord's Supper the consecrated wine shares in the blood of Christ; it is the blood of Christ (Matthew 26:28): "This is my blood of the covenant." The consecrated bread participates in or has communion with the body of Christ (Matthew 26:26): "This is my body." Through the common participation of the communicants in the same consecrated bread, that is, the body of Christ, the Holy Spirit unifies the church, "We who are many are one body." The contrast is given a few verses later (1 Corinthians 10:21-22), "You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and of the table of demons. Shall we provoke the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than he?" The Lord jealously defends the distribution of his body and blood in the sacrament.

The Holy Spirit returns to this theme in 2 Corinthians 6:14-16, where he emphasizes the exclusivity of the church's fellowship:

Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership [*metoche*] has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what **fellowship** [*koinonia*] has light with darkness? What accord [*symphonesis*] has Christ with Belial? Or what portion [*meris*] does a believer share with an unbeliever? What agreement [*synkatathesis*] has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God.

In Romans 16:17-18 God gives the command to maintain the church's fellowship by the attention to the purity of their doctrine and the separation from those who teach lies:

I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them. For such persons do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the naive.

The doctrine that the church in Rome had been taught in Paul's epistle was the pure, apostolic doctrine. So we learn here that any teaching contrary to the doctrine of the apostles causes divisions in the church and creates stumbling blocks to Christian faith and piety. Marking and avoiding those who err in doctrine takes place primarily in the Holy Communion, in the practice of closed communion.

In 2 Thessalonians 3:13-15, the Holy Spirit teaches that the command to "mark and avoid" has a special nuance to it. Not all those in error are non-Christians:

As for you, brothers, do not grow weary in doing good. If anyone does not obey what we say in this letter, take note of that person, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed. Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.

This separation from the brother still has to do with doctrine, “what we say in this letter.” But not all errors in doctrine place the brother outside of the Christian faith. This separation from fellowship is a warning, that is, an act of love toward the brother. It is also the obedience to the Lord’s command to remove or silence those “who teach a different doctrine” (1 Timothy 1:3) in the church.

The apostle Paul writes in 2 Timothy 3:16–17, “All Scripture is breathed out by God and is profitable for **teaching**, for **reproof**, for **correction**, and for **training** in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.” This text is demonstrated also in the doctrine of the church. The Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are written for the church. They **teach** and illustrate the great matters that we have considered thus far. They also teach the practical application of this doctrine in the daily life of the church. They carry God's **rebuke** not only of false doctrine or a wicked life in the church, but of a great variety of sins that do harm both to the individual soul and to the fellowship of the church. The Scriptures **correct** both doctrine and life in the church. By their many examples and exhortations they **train and educate** Christians for a piety of life that is proper for the church of the living God. And while doing all these things, the Scriptures bring the doctrine of the church to us to **comfort** us in affliction, need, conflict, and in the hour of our death (Romans 15:4).

Here let me illustrate just a few applications of these teachings. The Holy Spirit teaches us to distinguish between the teaching and maintenance of pure doctrine and practice, on the one hand, and useless disputes and wars over words and traditions, on the other hand. “Maintaining the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” is not an easy task. It requires the constant study and the use of God's Word, both by pastors and their hearers. Not all differences or disagreements involve false doctrine. We do well to consult the Confessions of our church for a salutary example and to obtain the help of other faithful Lutheran pastors and churches. Neither error nor separation can be taken lightly.

In our confession of pure doctrine, the Lutheran Confessions set an example for our own life in the church. In particular, they teach us not only to confess what is true and right in clear and precise language, but also to reject or deny the errors which contradict the biblical truth. In the ordination vows of our pastors we explicitly ask them to reject the errors condemned in the Creeds and Confessions of our church.

Christians also do well to remember that our Lord’s command to beware of false prophets (Matthew 7:15) does not contradict the command to love one another, just as he loved us. How often our Lord bids us to be meek, bear with the sins of others, and

love our enemies! How often the apostles urge their congregations to live in peace with each other! Jesus urgently commands Christians to go and be reconciled with those who have sinned against them or against whom they have sinned. He commands us to forgive those who sin against us, and teaches us to pray for it in the Lord's Prayer. These are great matters in the church, because they were of such importance to Jesus himself (John 13:34-35), "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." And he shows the way by dying for both friends and enemies, while praying (Luke 23:34), "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

In the closing minutes of this section, let me put before you some application of the doctrine of the church and her fellowship, putting it into practice. There is no path to true church unity except by way of pure doctrine and rightly administered sacraments in the confession and practice of a church. On the other hand, because the unity of the church is a matter of faith taught by the Holy Spirit in the Word of God, we are to confess that truth by seeking out such congregations and church bodies that demonstrate sound doctrine and practice. Nothing should hinder us from acknowledging such fellowship when it exists. What is true of individual Christians is also true of churches and church bodies. Neither family, nor possessions, nor employment, nor the scorn of neighbors, nor even the threats of government should keep us from this fellowship of the church when it rightly exists. Congregations and church bodies should exhibit such love for the unity of the church in the way they pursue it in the pure doctrine of God's Word.

The Lutheran doctrine of the church's fellowship is also worked out in forming congregations and receiving members. Members of a Lutheran church confess the pure doctrine of the Holy Scriptures as they learned it from the Bible and the Small Catechism. Catechesis into membership includes not only this teaching, but also a corresponding examination of the catechumen's doctrine and life. Membership in the congregation continues as long as both the confession and the use of the pure doctrine of the gospel and the sacraments continues.

Putting the doctrine of the church into practice includes especially the practice of closed communion. This practice is the very embodiment of the Biblical doctrine of the church. Our churches admit to the altar those whose public church membership testifies that in their church "the gospel is purely preached and the holy sacraments are administered according to the gospel." Our churches turn away not only the unbaptized and those who have no Christian confession, but also those Christians whose doctrine and life are not in accord with our pure Confession. We regard them as erring brothers, as Christians who have been suspended from our communion until they are reconciled with us in the pure doctrine of God's Word.

As we consider all that is taught us in Holy Scriptures and all that we confess in our Lutheran Confessions concerning the church's fellowship, we recognize that the ecumenical scene is as difficult for us as it was for Luther in the Reformation. Our most dangerous enemies are oftentimes those within the churches, and likewise we often find friends and allies in unexpected places. The faithfulness and purity of the Lutheran doctrine should make us bold, not only to reject the errors taught and carried out by unfaithful churches and erring Christians, but also to cooperate with them in matters that do not involve a public confession of doctrine or the practice of it in worship. As we seek for the knowledge of the divine truth and the wisdom and courage to confess it boldly in speech and in life, we also long for the church's unity and pray for it earnestly. Luther shows us the way in the prayer he teaches us to sing at the Lord's Supper, in the very place where both the divisions and the unity of the church are most evident.

May God bestow on us His grace and favor
That we follow Christ our Savior
And live together here in love and union
Nor despise this blest Communion! O Lord, have mercy!
Let not Thy good Spirit forsake us;
Grant that heavenly-minded He make us;
Give Thy church, Lord, to see
Days of peace and unity: O Lord, have mercy! (LSB 617.3)