

Guilt by Association: The Practice of Communion Fellowship

When Synodical Boundaries Have Become All but Meaningless

Guilt by association; I understand it well: I'm Polish and I'm from Arkansas. (That's so easy that I don't even have to make up a joke for you...but I probably will...later.)

We concern ourselves today with a 'guilt by association' that may have some bearing on our Communion practice, an area that we find particularly troubling because our present situation seems somewhat unlike that of other days, that which was experienced by the dogmatists and polemicists to whom we usually turn to evaluate our analysis and actions. This is, in fact, made clear by the title of one of the works we progeny of the Synodical Conference would wish to consult, C.F.W. Walther's *These of Communion Fellowship with Those Who Believe Differently*. In our situation, we wish he would have written, *Theses on Communion Fellowship with Those Who Believe the Same but Are in Fellowship with Those Who Believe Differently*...because that is the reality of our day, a day in which the old synodical boundaries seem meaningless, as we confess those bodies from which we have come to be deeply entrenched in their peculiar errors, and yet, a day in which we see men who confess as we do still mired within those synods, anchored sometimes by fear but, more often, by duty. To such and such a place they have been Called by God, they tell us, and how can they leave except He Call them elsewhere, or how can they leave their current synod, unless the flock over which the Holy Ghost has appointed them is also brought out with them?

We might address any number of pleas to them, applying clear and pertinent reasoning from Holy Scripture to "mark and avoid" the false teachers (Romans 16:17) and to be joined to us with whom they confess unanimously the truth (1 Corinthians 1:10). Such we are to continue to do, just as St. Paul tells the Thessalonians: "If anyone does not obey our word in this epistle, note that person and do not keep company with him, that he may be ashamed. Yet do not count him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother." (2 Thessalonians 3:14–15) While we cannot "keep company" (συναναμιγνύσθε) with him, cannot be "in the same synod," and so forth, he is not our enemy, but our brother, one with whom we have *koinonia* in Christ. Here is our dilemma: we *have fellowship (koinonia)* with someone with whom we are not *in fellowship*. What does this mean and what are we to do?

For the sake of the laity who are with us and, indeed, for our own clarity of thinking, I wish to offer a brief review of the two aspects of 'fellowship' that must be vigilantly distinguished so that we neither show indifference to God's Word nor to our brethren in Christ.

I'm certain that none of us here would think of 'fellowship' as the world does (or as Schleiermacher considers the Church), thinking only in terms of friendliness or 'like-mindedness' in a generic sense, since we all know that God Himself uses this term and establishes by His usage what we are to understand by it. The New Testament uses the word 'koinonia' both of the relationship of the believers who are the Bride of Christ and of our Bridegroom's Holy Supper. With regard to the latter, it is interesting to see that some translations of the Bible render this Greek word as 'fellowship' and some as 'communion' (and some as 'sharing in', for that matter). We find it in 1 Corinthians (10:16), when St. Paul says that the cup of blessing which we bless is the 'koinonia' of the Blood of Christ and the bread that we break is the 'koinonia' of the Body of Christ. What does this mean? Some misunderstand the 'sharing in' translation to assert that in the Lord's Supper *we* share in the Body and Blood; *we do*, but that's not what it *says!* *We do*, because, as the text says, the *bread* 'shares in' Christ's Body—that is, it

is ‘in communion with it’, it is *united to that Body in such a way that you cannot separate the Body from the bread!*¹

We see from this use of the word ‘koinonia’ with reference to the Lord’s Supper that just as the Body of Christ is united to the bread in such a way as to be inseparable (even in Jesus’ own mind), so is it with the Christians. We are *that close* to one another, that intimately connected, whether we ‘feel’ it or not. Simply put: Fellowship = Communion: You are as close to those with whom you share an altar as the Body of Christ is to the Natural Bread in Holy Communion (Thorough Declaration of the Formula of Concord, VII:37,48,64); you are as close to all in your church body as the Blood of Christ is to the Wine.

We’ll come back to that thought later; for the moment, we simply consider that we are united in this way with *all* true believers in Christ, all who have saving faith (or, indeed, who have now been granted sight after having died with such faith). *In one sense of the word*, you are united to—you are in koinonia with—all true Christians because you are *koinonoi* in the same *koinon*. You pastors—and probably a high proportion of our laity—are familiar with this root: these words all have to do with *commonality*. *koine* is *common*; *koinonia* is *having or holding something in common*, a *koinonos* (the plural of which is *koinonoi*) is *one who partakes in the thing held in common*, and a *koinon* is *the thing held in common*. Again, “*In one sense of the word*, you are united to—you are in koinonia with—all Christians because you have the same *koinon*.” You are in fellowship with all true Christians—are ‘in common’ with them—because you *have Christ in common*: you are one with *them*, because you are one with Christ, having received the *things* of Christ, the ‘holy things’, the Gospel and the Sacraments., by which you have received *Him* (with His forgiveness and all His gifts). It’s like electricity and an ‘electrocution chain’: if someone is being electrocuted and you touch him, what happens? You become part of the chain and the electricity flows through you, too. If you are united to Christ through faith and I am united to Christ through faith, then you and I are united to one another, as well, even if you and I never meet this side of Heaven. Thus, in Galatians 3 (26–28), St. Paul says of us Baptized, “You are all sons of God by faith in Christ Jesus...you are all one in Christ Jesus.” Thus, we are ‘one with’ all who share this faith. Yet, St. Paul in 2 Thessalonians 3 tells us that there are some with whom we are in such fellowship with whom we are not allowed to keep company.

Thus we see this “one sense of the word” in which all Christians are united, a sense that has come to be referred to as *unitas* by theologians; it is the internal unity of the Church, a matter of faith and not sight, something that we confess exists even though we won’t see it until we depart this life. How, then, are we to have any proper visible expression of fellowship? Jesus prays in John 17 that we would all be one just as He and the Father are one...and we want to be one with all believers and *show it* to the world...but since we can’t absolutely know who is and who is not a believer, we look to God’s Word for another way to manifest this unity in the world. There, we find that Jesus says that His “disciples indeed” are those who continue in His Word (John 8:31–32); those who “keep My words” are those of whom Jesus testifies that they love Him (John 14:23). Since we can’t find every believer and be sure that we have only believers, our Lord has given us one outward thing to look to that is determinative of fellowship: “What do they teach and confess?”

1 In fact, Jesus’ choice of gender for the demonstrative pronoun—which *is* not merely a case of grammatical ‘attraction’, since that doesn’t happen with the demonstrative pronoun—Jesus’ choice of gender for the demonstrative pronoun in instituting the Lord’s Supper shows that in His mind the two are one...distinguishable theologically, but inseparable.

While, in one sense of the word, you have fellowship with all believers in Christ simply because you are all joined to Him, in the outward expression of fellowship—we are to restrict ourselves to those who ‘keep His words’, those who “speak the same thing,” as St. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1:10, are united in their proclamation of what God’s Word teaches, so that there are no divisions among them; for those who will not walk in this one true path of doctrine, St. Paul says that we are to “mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them.” (Romans 16:17) Here we find the second aspect or type of *koinonia*, that which has been called *concordia*. *Concordia* is *unity of teaching*, something that we *can* see...but, unfortunately, usually *don’t*. *Concordia* is *harmony*...that singing with a voice that is united even while each singer is singing his own proper part...something would be *discordant* or in *discordia* if the various singers weren’t tied together by that love for Jesus with which the Holy Spirit blesses us, namely, that we always seek to “keep [His] words.” This is what is confessed by the very name of our Lutheran Symbols: while each one does what is proper to his vocation and situation, he does so in harmony with God’s holy Word and with his same-confessing brothers in Christ by being bound to the same pure confession.

So, *unitas* we can’t see, and *concordia* is that for which we must look and strive and teach. *Concordia* is a matter of confession, that which we testify as being our cherished belief, that which is at the heart of ‘who we are’. *Concordia*, then, can be seen and heard. We can find out if someone is in concord with us by seeing if he confesses the truth like we do. We can ask him what he believes...and we can also hear and see what he teaches and practices. Sometimes, these do not align. Indeed, *often* they do not align. People will tell me that they believe exactly what I or my parish has confessed with regard to the Lord’s Supper, perhaps, or abortion, or homosexuality, or the authority of God’s Word in general—or, and this is a big one in our dry county in northern Arkansas, regarding what God’s Word says about the use of alcohol...but when they are questioned a little more, they have no problem with the fact that they belong to churches that teach the exact opposite. They’ll claim to believe as we do regarding the Lord’s Supper, yet hold membership in a church that denies Christ’s gift. They’ll claim that they believe the Bible to be God’s Word, entirely without error, and they’ll continue to listen to their Episcopal priest tell them that Palm Sunday *couldn’t* have happened the way the Bible says. They’ll *know* that the Bible condemns drunkenness, not the having of a beer (much less the use of wine in the Lord’s Supper!), yet they’ll attend a Baptist church in which the pastor would surely excommunicate them if he only knew (he has been known to refuse to eat *rum cake!*). If one’s church membership contradicts the words coming out of his mouth, what are we to believe? Should we believe what such a person tells us in *private* today, or what he *publicly confesses* every week by his church membership?

When spoken of in this way, when considered as a matter of the confession of a layman in a body with such a dramatic and historical difference in their confession from ours, our answer comes quite easily: “Your church membership (and church body membership) is your confession of faith more than what comes out of your mouth is.”

And, yet...what he tells me *might* be what he really believes!

But, how will I know? What he wishes to tell me is compromised by *his associations!* When it comes to questions of fellowship, then, we have to be careful that the message of Christ that we wish to proclaim—indeed, that He has *given* us to proclaim!—is not only not compromised by anything that *we* do, but that it is not compromised by anything done by those with whom we are in fellowship. When it is, we ask with St. Paul: “If the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare for battle?”

(1 Cor. 14:8) That is, St. Paul says, our message must be clear, or no one will know what we *really* mean. What do we really teach if, for example, we condemn abortion as contrary to God’s Holy Word, but then allow an abortionist to remain a communicant member in good standing? A step farther: What do we really teach if we condemn abortion, but we are in fellowship with those who have no problem with it, if a pastor (and congregation) in our church body, for example, continues to keep a man in membership for *decades*, in spite of the fact that throughout this time he is instrumental in pushing a pro-abortion agenda in the United States Senate? (When that was the case in the LCMS, I don’t recall *anyone* even bringing charges against that pastor—myself, shamefully, included.) What does it say when we are ‘in communion’ with such a man, with such a pastor, with such a congregation?

Yes, I understand ‘guilt by association’; I am Polish and I am from Arkansas. I know that such guilt by association may be falsely reckoned...but I also know that there is a time when such reasoning is entirely proper. What is the distinction?

I wasn’t living in Arkansas during most of the time that you people in the liberal north had made my state’s governor into the nation’s president, yet I got blamed for him nearly every place I went. The fact that he neither carried my county in the 1992 presidential election nor in any gubernatorial race didn’t matter to anyone. That’s what a secret ballot and careless analysis does for us: your guilt comes from where you are, rather than for whom you actually voted. It’s not what *you think* as an individual, but what the *majority* that surrounds you thinks and does that shapes others’ perceptions of you.

That’s a little unfair, we might think, when it comes to politics and those things that are determined solely by accident of birth or by virtue of dominical ordering’s relocating us, completely apart from any real choice on our part. And, indeed, it *is* unfair to an extent...although if one is thoroughly ashamed of his government and he is powerless to change it or, at least, improve the situation of those who suffer with him under it, moving would seem like the proper thing to do even in the civil realm...or, at the very least, a bumper sticker saying that you voted for the other guy. Nonetheless, suppositions about one’s intellect, behavior, morals, arrogance, or what have you, that are made based on things that one has little or no control over, such as race, ethnicity, land of residence, and the like, reflect at least as poorly on the one doing the supposing.

When our association with others is *voluntary*, though, such questions of fairness are no longer in play. If we *choose* to be associated with someone—or some group—then that *does* say something about *us*—just as their allowing us to be reckoned as one with them says something about *them*.

As we said earlier, “We see from this use of the word ‘koinonia’ with reference to the Lord’s Supper that just as the Body of Christ is united to the bread in such a way as to be inseparable (even in Jesus’ own mind), so is it with the Christians. We are *that close* to one another, that intimately connected, whether we ‘feel’ it or not. Simply put: Fellowship = Communion: You are as close to those with whom you share an altar as the Body of Christ is to the Natural Bread in Holy Communion (Thorough Declaration of the Formula of Concord, VII:37,48,64); you are as close to all in your church body as the Blood of Christ is to the Wine.” And, again: “If one’s church membership contradicts the words coming out of his mouth, what are we to believe? Should we believe what such a person tells us in *private* today, or what he *publicly confesses* every week by his church membership?...our answer comes quite easily: ‘Your church membership (and church body membership) is your confession of faith more than what comes out of your mouth is.’”

With whom, then, ought we share an altar? Whom should we admit, and who should be kept away? Is it possible that some who ‘ought to be admitted’ according to the words of their mouths ought, rather, be prohibited because of their actions, because of their associations? Indeed, is *association* not also an action, or the lack of disassociation not a testimony that is to be taken into account? Is what would be so clear in a case of extra-marital cohabitation or lodge membership suddenly made less clear or less important when the association is with a false-teaching church body? Or, do we have trouble calling it *sin* to belong to such a body because we know that we, too, engaged in that *sin of association*—that sin of fellowship with those who teach contrary to the doctrine that we learned—all too recently ourselves? Do we fear that our brethren in our former church bodies will not hear us if we speak in such terms? What does our ‘not keeping company’ with them say to them? On the other hand, what would our ‘keeping company’ by receiving them at the Lord’s Table say to them (and to the rest of their erring church body)?

As we would keep the cohabiting away from the altar until they renounce their cohabitation, so also we ought those who are wrongly joined with others ecclesiastically... and when we do so, we ought name their sin as sin. As Walther says in his eleventh thesis on Communion Fellowship, “we do not [thereby] place members of heterodox fellowships under excommunication or declare them to be heretics or damned... [but,] they are merely suspended until such time as by their separation from the false fellowship they are reconciled with the orthodox church.”² Indeed, Walther argues this way in his discussion of his thesis, citing St. Matthew 5:23–24 with specific regard to “Lutheran Christians.”³

Just as we call adherence to any other sect a sin, so remaining in a Lutheran body that tolerates or promotes error is a sin. Certainly, Walther says, “True Christians are also found in heterodox fellowships as a result of their lack of knowledge,”⁴ yet “Every man is obligated to avoid heterodox churches, and in the event that he has belonged to a heterodox church, his obligation is to renounce it and separate himself from it.”⁵ In speaking to this, Walther cites 1 Corinthians 10:18 and asserts that those who take “part in a false communion service” practice “fellowship with the heterodox church.”⁶ Our assertion properly extends this: if one admits those who are in fellowship with a heterodox church, who partake of her Communion services and, more, are in a relationship that is rightly understood as being in Communion Fellowship (expressed, practiced, declared *concordia*), then he has practiced fellowship with that heterodox church every bit as much as if he had gone to her altar.

That this was the understanding of the Church in antiquity, we shall now demonstrate. We will begin with the historic self-understanding of the Church, and we will draw our conclusions both from the self-evidence of that understanding and from its modern day assertion by a particular church body, as well as considering the parallels between the events of the first four centuries and of the past decade, striving with all diligence to avoid anachronism in our application.

In his *Eucharist and Church Fellowship in the First Four Centuries*, Werner Elert notes:

When assembled together, the local congregation knows itself to be the *ecclesia* of God in

2 Walther, C.F.W., *Theses on Communion Fellowship with Those Who Believe Differently*, Lawrence White, tr., Paul McCain, ed., Concordia Theological Seminary Press, Fort Wayne, Indiana, 1990, p. 5.

3 Walther, p. 45.

4 Walther, p. 4, Thesis V.

5 Walther, p. 4, Thesis IV.

6 Walther, p.18.

undivided wholeness (p. 64).⁷ Only distance separates one congregation from another, and the church itself is not captive to space. John’s way of speaking about this is to say that wherever the Father is worshiped in spirit and truth, there are no more local shrines (John 4:21, 23). Peter speaks of the elect as scattered throughout the provinces of Asia (1 Peter 1:1–2). In time past they were not a people. Even now they do not seem so to an unbelieving eye, and yet they are a holy people (2:9 f.), a single flock awaiting the chief Shepherd (5:4). According to Paul, the body of Christ, into which we are baptized (1 Cor. 12:13), is not a local association, but it also includes the Christians in Rome, though Paul has not yet seen them (Rom. 12:5). Self-evidently therefore Baptism received in Corinth is valid also in Rome. The strong churches support the weak ones. The name of brother rings back and forth in the greetings of letters. The local congregations are fully open and welcoming toward one another. Whoever is a full baptized member of one congregation is the same also in another congregation when he moves to that place. The only thing between them is distance.⁸

The *koinonia* is something that is not bounded by geography, then, not circumscribed by the local parish, but something that pertains between the parishes because each parish is the local embodiment of the whole Church. Elert approvingly cites Rudolf Sohm’s *Kirchenrecht*, saying: “in each congregation in each town *the* church of God or of Christ is present in indivisible completeness.”⁹ He continues, “In theology or faith this has never changed. The church of Christ is the body of Christ and therefore similarly indivisible. Where the body of Christ is, there it is fully, and hence the church, too, is always fully there.”¹⁰ There is no other way that it could be; this is in accord with the promise of our Lord to be wherever two or three were gathered in connection with His revelation—that is, gathered by the Gospel for its administration in Word and Sacrament.¹¹

Elert continues by demonstrating the recognition both of this truth and of the proper bounding of each parish in his discussion of the ‘credentialing’ of traveling or relocating parishioners:

The Letters of Fellowship or of Peace are evidence of the freedom of transfer in the church. The barrier of distance is overcome, and yet there are church boundaries. The assignment to the bishop of the new place indicates that no one can belong to “the church” without belonging to a specific parish. Here lies the guarantee that the boundaries of the orthodox confession will not be transgressed. Credentials are naturally only acknowledged by a bishop if they are issued by a man in church fellowship with him. The unorthodox churches next door do exactly the same....

Within the boundaries thus drawn there was an open welcome. By his enjoyment of church fellowship in the local congregation a Christian had part in the universal church fellowship of the whole church. The inclusion of the small circle in the great one found concrete expression in this

7 “The *koinonia* is not the aggregate of members or parts of the church, but a relationship existing within the church and mediated by it, a relationship of members and parts with one another or a relationship of members and parts with the whole church. The unity of the church is there as a datum before the *koinonia*. It is objectively there as the common thing (κοινόν) in which all belonging to the fellowship (κοινωνικοι) participate. But *koinonia* is only what results fellowship-wise (κοινωνι) for the actual life of the congregation and the church.” Elert, W., *Eucharist and Church Fellowship in the First Four Centuries* (electronic ed.), Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, Missouri, 1999, 1966 p. 64.

8 Elert, p. 125.

9 Elert, p. 64, emphasis in original.

10 Elert, p. 64.

11 St. Matthew 18:15–20.

that a Christian who transferred from one congregation to another might join in the Holy Communion there. Thus the altar fellowship of the local congregation was also embraced and upheld by the altar fellowship of the whole church.¹²

[As unity is fractured and synodical appeals are made against those accused of heresy] the Letters of Fellowship assume a new function. As before they are evidence of harmony and doctrinal concord, but their compass is now bounded by the presence of heterodoxy. Heretics can and must be combated. Spoken and written appeals can publicly be made to them to return, but no Letters of Fellowship can be exchanged with them.¹³

We note in that first and third paragraphs that the recognition of credentials—the acceptance of a transfer—is only possible if the bishops are in fellowship with one another. How many of us who served in the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod felt pressured to accept a member’s transfer because we were “in fellowship” with a new resident’s pastor, and had to walk the fine line of trying to bring said new resident to a Lutheran understanding of things without enraging him, his former pastor, and the officers of our own parish? Yet, such acceptance was taken for granted, after the pattern cited by Elert... which, indeed, it should be... if *concordia* and ‘synodical membership’ has any real connection.

And there is the rub: what should be a given has become optional (or is proclaimed in spite of its manifest lack of existence), true *concordia* being replaced by the *pseudo-unitas* of synodical membership. At least within the Missouri Synod, cries are constantly heard for the need of trust, the assumption of a pure confession by those who had already proven themselves either ignorant of or set against scriptural, Lutheran doctrine and the practice that made evident and proclaimed that doctrine. How was it in the early Church?

There is one ground for the denial of church fellowship about which there was never anywhere a difference of opinion in the early church, not even between East and West. Heterodoxy breaks the fellowship ipso facto. The basic foundation for this we have seen when considering the local congregation. What is true there is true also between churches. The divisive significance of dogma is only one side of the matter. Dogma is not only the binding doctrinal norm for those who teach in the church, but it is also the confession of all the members who are included in the “We confess” or “We believe.” For this reason doctrine is the point at which the unity of the church is most grievously wounded and therefore the point at which also the wounds must again be healed. Where church fellowship is broken by heterodoxy, it can only be restored by the achievement of doctrinal unity. Doctrinal unity is part and parcel of orthodoxy. The truly sound faith leads “to fellowship and unity with those who believe the same.” Until the opposite is proven, what a man says is accepted as that which he really thinks (φρσνετ). In the excommunications of the heresiarchs all who think “his thoughts” or “the same” are also included. Similarly the heirs of the Nicene Fathers “who proclaimed the same kerygma” are at one in their “thoughts of the faith.” Threatening divisions are to be avoided by a renewal of the Nicene faith so that thus those “who think the same would be led to unity.”¹⁴

Not calls of “trust your brethren,” but actual demonstration of doctrinal unity is what is necessary for the healing of fellowship. While Elert tells us that among them “Until the opposite is proven, what a

12 Elert, p. 134.

13 Elert, p. 152.

14 Elert, p. 143.

man says is accepted as that which he really thinks (φρονη^ς),”¹⁵ this is a truth that works in two directions and the orthodox must not be kept in shackles by those who speak out of both sides of their mouths: if a man whose practice we do not know claims the orthodox confession as his own, we ought to reckon that such is his confession unless and until he shows us otherwise...but when we have already heard the false teaching and seen the false practice, such claims of orthodoxy are what must be proven if we are to stop accepting his previous words and actions “as that which he really thinks.”

More directly to the point of what is actually under consideration by us, Elert reports the reckoning of Flavian concerning Nestorius:

*In the excommunications of the heresiarchs all who think “his thoughts” or “the same” are also included. Similarly the heirs of the Nicene Fathers “who proclaimed the same kerygma” are at one in their “thoughts of the faith.” Threatening divisions are to be avoided by a renewal of the Nicene faith so that thus those “who think the same would be led to unity.”*¹⁶

Those who agree with the false teacher receive his excommunication. What this says of those pastors who are in agreement with, or accepting of, *or indifferent to* the error of their church body (or who refuse to do anything about it) or those laymen who are in a similar position with regard to their erring pastors is obvious. Just as St. Paul reckons those who approve of homosexuality deserve the same judgment as those practicing it,¹⁷ so also with the matters that are ‘more serious’, the things of the First Table. Confessing oneness by church body membership when in that body remain undisciplined or undisciplinable false teachers—or, indeed, when such are in the majority—reckons one among those who teach falsely, regardless of the proclamation of his personal convictions. So, too, the admission to the Lord’s Table of one who remains in such a relationship. Elert, again:

This question was critical for the very reason that the early church still had a vital understanding of the Eucharist as koinonia. Is it in harmony with the koinonia of the body of Christ that Christians who are not at one should go to the Holy Communion together? By being partakers of the body of Christ in the Eucharist we become of one body (σύσσωμοι) with Christ, says Cyril of Jerusalem, and Cyril of Alexandria tightly concludes that we are then “in Christ” of one body (σύσσωμοι) with one another (p. 29). The partakers become “one body and one spirit.” Therefore there may be nothing separating or dividing them, for that which divides would do injury to the koinonia and so to the unity of the body of Christ. Such divisions are a constant danger even among the baptized. Even though a man must first be baptized before he may partake of the Holy Communion, this does not mean that all the baptized may without distinction partake of the Eucharist together.

Divisions can be of various kinds. In the case of heresy it is a confessional division. The extending or refusing of Eucharistic fellowship is then always a confessional act of the whole congregation.¹⁸

This should never be an issue; there ought never be a time that all Christians are not all accepted at one another’s local altar...but it is an issue, because of those who refuse to teach the truth and, thereby,

15 Elert, p. 143.

16 Elert, p. 143, emphasis mine.

17 Romans 1:32.

18 Elert, p. 80.

destroy our *concordia*, so that they must be refused lest true damage be done to *koinonia*. Just as the Corinthians received judgment so that they might repent and not receive condemnation,¹⁹ so we must not allow a false appearance of *concordia* to prevent the seeking of true *concordia*, lest the allowance of what is false be allowed to damage the *koinonia*, ripping souls away from their Lord by affirming them in false teaching or lukewarmness.

Such was the position of Walther, as well, who in his sixth thesis writes:

Those who are aware of the partial apostasy of the church fellowship to which they belong and yet continue to remain within that fellowship are not to be considered among the weak but are either the lukewarm who the Lord will spit out of his mouth or Epicurean religious sceptics who within their hearts would ask with Pilate, “What is truth?”²⁰

So, Elert:

To the early church a man was orthodox or heterodox according to his confession. He was the one or the other according to that confession with which he was “in fellowship.” The fellowship in which he stood, the church to which he belonged, was shown by where he received the Sacrament. When the Princess Sophia received the Sacrament from a Monophysite priest before the enthronement of her husband (Justin II), it was clear to everyone that she wanted to have no fellowship with the Synodites (Chalcedonians). The reversal of this is reported about her by John of Ephesus (H.E., II, 10). “She came into fellowship with the Synodites” as soon as she began “to communicate with the Synod.” By his partaking of the Sacrament in a church a Christian declares that the confession of that church is his confession. Since a man cannot at the same time hold two differing confessions, he cannot communicate in two churches of differing confessions. If anyone does this nevertheless, he denies his own confession or has none at all.²¹

Shall we allow one to receive the Sacrament in our parishes one week and in his own erring parish (or wider fellowship) the next and think that we have done him any service? Shall we not, rather, have affirmed him in his sin, saying that it matters not to us that either with us or at home he is “[denying] his own confession or has none at all”? Or, if we do not see his membership in a false-teaching body to be an obstacle (because of his ‘personal confession’), why do we see the ‘need’ to be separated from that body ourselves? If we view his membership as acceptable, does not that give us the appearance of *schismatics* for our refusal to be properly united with him? Either such membership is acceptable or it is not. Would we not also, by such a practice, justify those within his church body who hold a confession other than ours and who would seek to practice a similar fellowship with those with whom they agree in other bodies? In every way, such a practice of ‘selective fellowship’ has us encouraging errant doctrine and practice; it is no holier when ‘Confessional Lutherans’ practice it than when ‘Ecumaniacal Liberal LINOs’ do.

Truly, if the other Lutheran bodies are in “partial apostasy,” as Walther’s sixth thesis says, if they are holding to false doctrine and not repenting, ought not those words of St. Paul in 2 Thessalonians 3 be those that guide us? “Do not keep company with him, that he may be ashamed. Yet do not count him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.”

19 1 Corinthians 11:27–31.

20 Walther, p. 4.

21 Elert, p. 182.

May we give due heed to those last three words, too: “as a brother.” I have been called “brother” by so many with whom I have no unity, simply as a show of their self-satisfied piety or bureaucratic nicety, that I often shy away from the use of that word myself...but here we are not exhorted to call one another “brother” so much as to manifest a truly fraternal concern. That is no mere ‘calling them out’ of their erring synod, but of *making a way* for them to do so. Ought we *have to* do so? Of course not. They should all ‘man up’ and leave in whatever fashion we have, right? But, is that what you wish for your *brother*, that he should have to suffer because you have suffered? Certainly not, but we who have “come out from among them” first ought to consider the challenges we have faced as those for which we should find solutions for our brethren, lest some who are, simply, weak, end up under condemnation as “lukewarm...or Epicurean sceptics.” “Admonish him as a brother,” as one whose way to a clear and pure confession you are paving.

So, too, show your brother that you are not rushing him into action...but that time for action has certainly come. I think that we are all acquainted with Pastor Henson’s path out of the Missouri Synod, as well as Bishop Heiser’s—the Keller Resolution and Trinity, Herrin’s “State of Confession”—and I couldn’t help seeing both the process and the conclusion that was reached by these men and their parishes in a passage of Elert:

As soon as Letters of Fellowship or other church letters are limited to a specific compass, we have division among churches. The boundary is not the cause of the division but its consequences. The cause of the division is the dogmatic disjunction. This expresses the constitutive significance which dogma has for church fellowship. Dogma is confession. If there is no confessional concord, the unity of the church and so also church fellowship are, at the very least, in doubt. Breaking fellowship does not always immediately follow the outbreak of dogmatic differences. To be sure, little time was lost in excommunicating the heterodox, but the intention in putting them out of the church altogether was to keep the church undivided. Only when it became clear that this was not being achieved, that excluded bishops in fact remained at their posts or others continued in fellowship with them, only then did rupture of fellowship between one church and another become a reality.²²

A boundary had to be drawn because of the error in Missouri, the “dogmatic disjunction.” The Keller Resolution and the document it references (“That They May Be One”) sought unity, as did Pr. Henson’s call for synodical repentance in Trinity’s “State of Confession.” They called and waited, but “it became clear...that excluded bishops in fact remained at their posts [and] others continued in fellowship with them,” and “only then did rupture of fellowship between one church and another become a reality.” Rolf Preus rightly said that

The offense of Yankee Stadium is not just that the Rev. David Benke was president of the Atlantic District of the Missouri Synod or that he was the Pastor of St. Peter’s Lutheran Church in Brooklyn, New York. It was that he participated in an activity by which he, a Christian, denied the truth into which he was baptized. No Christian has the right to do this.²³

but it is even more than that: the offense of Yankee Stadium is that David Benke’s church body has affirmed and reaffirmed him in that error—indeed, that *every single district president in the LCMS has*

²² Elert, p. 156.

²³ Preus, Rolf, D., “The Orthodox Lutheran Heritage of Confessional Fellowship,”
<http://christforus.org/Papers/Content/confessionalfellowship.html>

affirmed him in this error by continuing to serve with him at LCMS convention celebrations of the Lord's Supper. Every person who has communed at those services has affirmed him and every person in the LCMS who has not objected to his presence is complicit in it...just as I was in not calling Senator Paul Simon's pastor to account for the lack of public correction for the public sins of his erring parishioner. More, by not refusing to commune his parishioners and making such refusal known, one sins against him, against, them, against his own parish...against the *koinonia*, against the Church.

This unity of pastor and parish was a given in the early Church. Generally speaking, fellowship between parishes was recognized by the recognition of fellowship between their bishops...but such was not seen as merely fellowship between the pastors, but between all in each congregation and, therefore, the rejection of the bishop as a false teacher necessitated the prohibition of his parishioners from communing, as well, while reaching out to them to encourage them to reject his false teaching:

There was never any doubt that the manifest heretic who refused instruction should be “cut out” (ἐκκόπτεσθαι in excommunication formulas). In the case of a bishop, however, does that mean his whole church too? In the regular administration of affairs each church grants or denies fellowship through its representative, the bishop. We have, however, already observed Dionysius of Alexandria circumventing the bishop and writing directly to the congregation in Antioch. The justification for this is that the bishop there was in his eyes a manifest heretic. *Fellowship between churches is not merely between bishops but rather between all the members of one church with those of another*; and it can therefore remain intact even when the bishop is put out. Such fellowship is the prerequisite of welcome into another church, and this condition is guaranteed by issuing and mutually recognizing credentials. But the credentials are boundaries too. The boundary runs between orthodoxy and heterodoxy. The hierarchical unity of the episcopate and orthodoxy are both criteria of the unity of the church. However, when these two come into collision, orthodoxy has the unqualified preeminence. One may never have fellowship with a heterodox bishop even though everything else about him may be canonically impeccable. One may, however, have fellowship with an orthodox congregation even without, or indeed in opposition to, its heretical bishop.²⁴

Note what is and is not said in that last sentence: one may have fellowship with an orthodox *congregation*—not with *select orthodox members of* a heterodox congregation; from that, they must flee—and such fellowship will be only by their rejection of their false-teaching pastor. As Herman Sasse writes,

From these biblical facts it must be understood that the Church in all ages up to the 17th century always has seen fellowship between Christians as fellowship between the churches to which the individuals belong. There was never such a thing as private practice of intercommunion, never something like ‘selective fellowship,’ which is an invention of modern Americans.²⁵

Further, we note that such “fellowship between the churches to which the individuals belong” was generally demonstrated when their pastors were together, a demonstration of the oneness of the whole Church:

Fellowship between churches found further expression in the special position accorded visiting

²⁴ Elert, p. 156, emphasis mine.

²⁵ Sasse, Herman, “Selective Fellowship,” *The Australasian Theological Review*, September, 1957, p. 55.

clergy as distinct from visiting laymen. The clergy must also furnish credentials. Things are to some extent harder for them. They cannot simply set off in the same confidence of a ready welcome as a layman can... If they show themselves to be God-fearing preachers (κῆρυκες τῆς εὐσεβείας), they are to be received. If not, their needs are to be supplied, but they are not to be admitted to the koinonia (Canon 34 [32])...

There is a deeper reason for these special requirements imposed on traveling clergy. An essential of church fellowship is the Eucharistic koinonia. For the layman this is fulfilled in receiving (metalepsis) the Eucharist. For the cleric it means in addition the execution of his office in performing the liturgy. According to the Council of Arles (314) visiting bishops “who often come to a town” are to be given opportunity to “sacrifice.” However, in this matter one bishop should not put pressure on another. The Apostolic Constitutions enjoin that a visiting presbyter is to be “received into [their] fellowship” (προσδεχέσθω κοινωνικῶς) by the presbyters, and similarly a deacon by the deacons. In the service a visiting bishop should sit with the local bishop, who should accord him equal honor. The local bishop should call on his visitor to address some words of instruction to the congregation because admonition from a stranger is very effective. He should also permit him to offer the Eucharist. If he modestly declines this, he ought to be induced at least to give the congregation the blessing (II, 58, 3 f.)...

There is, however, more to it than that... a clergyman away from home remains a member of the clergy of his own parish. His name continues there in the “catalog” or “canon.” In this way he is not just a private person, and his participation in the liturgy of another place is evidence of altar fellowship (communicatio in sacris) between the churches. This is also implicit in the invitation to a visiting bishop to address the congregation as set forth by the Apostolic Constitutions. This can happen only between those in doctrinal agreement, for it expresses unity in the teaching office.²⁶

Again, fellowship between bishops is fellowship between congregations, and for an individual to be accepted at the altar of a parish away from home, it is necessary that his pastor would be received by that pastor and allowed to preach and administer the Sacrament. If an erring pastor’s congregation does not stand in opposition to him, but commends him, how would one have fellowship with that congregation? If you cannot let him serve at the altar with you, neither can you commune those who support him... and if they are remaining in membership and paying his salary, they are supporting him. Thus, also:

Church fellowship was not achieved in the early church by the reception of communicants or celebrants from elsewhere. In every case established church fellowship was the indispensable condition of any such reception. Either there was or there was not fellowship between two churches or two bishops, which practically amounted to the same thing. If there was, then the laity and clergy of the one might receive and celebrate the Sacrament in the other; if not, neither was possible... *Never did the relations between two churches and their bishops provide for permitting the laity to receive the Sacrament while denying the clergy the privilege of officiating in it because church fellowship was somehow incomplete or because the congregations or their bishops were of different confessions or only in partial confessional agreement. There was either complete fellowship or none at all.*

26 Elert, p. 161.

When the laity are granted the right to receive the Sacrament and the clergy to celebrate it in another church, we have the implementation of the *communicatio in sacris*. This takes place only in full church fellowship, of which agreement in doctrine and unity in confession are the basis and condition. Within these limits church fellowship, which includes altar fellowship, embraces the whole church. *All the individual members of a local congregation participate also in the fellowship of the whole church.* For this, however, they must be members of a specific parish (p. 133). Decisions regarding fellowship were corporate decisions (parish, province, patriarchate).²⁷

Thus, if the bishop is in error, his parishioners cannot commune (unless, revolting, they seek his removal and replacement with another... a “state of confession” against the wolf who has snuck in). From this, we also come to see that if they are in fellowship with other parishes/bishops who are in error, they share in that error. We trace the following examples from Elert:

Irenaeus adduces a further proof by pointing out that Anicetus of Rome “granted the Eucharist” to Polycarp of Smyrna when he visited Rome. Polycarp was not in Rome incognito, that is, as a private person, but as bishop of his church. Anicetus’ action therefore must be understood to bestow permission to *celebrate* the Sacrament. We see quite clearly what Irenaeus has in mind. What happened during Polycarp’s visit is proof positive of enacted fellowship between the churches of Rome and Smyrna. Practiced altar fellowship is proof of the fellowship between the churches of Rome and Asia Minor. The obvious corollary of Irenaeus is that there can be no altar fellowship without church fellowship, and he could not have used this line of argument unless he was sure that Victor of Rome held the same view. The whole argument is built on the undoubted fact that by revoking fellowship with the churches of Asia Minor Victor also severed altar fellowship with them. This is taken for granted by Irenaeus, Victor, and the bishops who protest against the exclusion of the people of Asia Minor.²⁸

Irenaeus’ argument establishes the ‘transitive property’ of church fellowship: if A is in fellowship with B and B is in Fellowship with C, then A is in fellowship with C, whether he knows it—or likes it—or not. (Thus, the LCMS is in fellowship with the ELCA, because the LCMS is in fellowship with bodies that are members of the Lutheran World Federation, which defines itself as “a global communion of Christian churches in the Lutheran tradition”²⁹—indeed, saying in its constitution that “The Lutheran World Federation is a communion of churches which confess the triune God, agree in the proclamation of the Word of God and are united in pulpit and altar fellowship.”³⁰ You are in fellowship with whomever you are in fellowship with is in fellowship with.) We continue:

Intercession in the service is never confined to the local congregations. Selective petitions first came to be used when the custom emerged of praying for living or deceased individuals specifically mentioned by name. These names were recorded in the diptychs and read at the proper place in the liturgy. Since patriarchs and bishops were also specifically named, it is clear that the distinction was accorded only to those in doctrinal agreement. *In this way the diptychs become documents of fellowship between churches. If fellowship was broken off with anyone named in these documents, whether by dismissal from office or excommunication, his name was*

27 Elert, p. 164, emphasis mine.

28 Elert, p. 165, emphasis mine.

29 http://lutheranworld.org/Who_We_Are/LWF-Welcome.html

30 Article III; http://lutheranworld.org/Who_We_Are/LWF-Constitution.pdf

crossed out in the diptych. His readmission into fellowship brought with it also the restoration of his name to the diptych.³¹

This establishes the use of the diptych. Now, here is how it was seen to play out:

Fifty years later the battle raged about Chalcedon and Emperor Zeno's Henoticon, which was to suppress and replace the Chalcedonian dogma. Rome stood for Chalcedon with implacable rigor, as Acacius of Constantinople did for the emperor. The other Eastern patriarchs also supported the Henoticon. In 483 Pope Felix III sent his legates Vitalis and Misenus to Constantinople to set the emperor and Acacius to rights. There were also supporters of Chalcedon in the East and in the capital. For this reason as well the emperor and his patriarch were not inclined toward a break with Rome. They were, on the contrary, intent on maintaining the appearance of unity. The papal legates were actually ready to celebrate Holy Communion with the patriarch, and *on this occasion the name of Peter Mongo was also read from the diptychs, a man whose heresy was notorious in Roman eyes. Their participation in the Eucharist demonstrated a church fellowship extending from Rome through Constantinople to the heretic in Alexandria. Altar fellowship (communicatio in sacris) is proof of church fellowship.*

The legates here acted contrary to their commission. For Pope Felix[,] a supporter of the Henoticon was a heretic with whom church and altar fellowship were possible only if he recanted his heresy. A Roman synod deprived Vitalis and Misenus of their office and even excluded them from the "unspotted koinonia." This was a standard term for Eucharistic koinonia. Acacius, too, was then (484) pronounced deposed, excommunicated, and damned... Their exclusion was in accordance with the canonical principle that bishops and clergy who communicate with schismatics are themselves excommunicated.³²

Thus, what I have contended is nothing new: the exclusion of a pastor from preaching and serving at the altar you serve has (until the last century) always been seen as excluding both he and his parish from the reception of the Lord's Supper.

The great schisms (Sardica 343, Ephesus 431, between Rome and Constantinople 484) affected not only the disputing bishops but also their churches, not only patriarchs but whole patriarchates. Excommunication by an opponent did not remove a bishop from his church. He continued in his church in both office and fellowship. The case of the legates Vitalis and Misenus illustrates the basic principle that whoever communicates with a man who has been excluded excludes himself. *The exclusion of such a man applies automatically to all the church members joined with him.* The situation is the same as that in the second century when Victor of Rome in excommunicating Polycrates of Ephesus excommunicated his church and all those connected with him in Asia Minor.³³

Of course, this is just common sense...in spite of the desire we often have to deny it. We are, after all, either liberal by nature or absolutely insufferable; I no more want to be happy about not communing those who wish to confess the truth with me than I want to be happy about someone going to Hell, and I don't think I would want to have a pastor who thought differently. I am content, because I know what

31 Elert, p. 160, emphasis mine.

32 Elert, p. 168, emphasis mine.

33 Elert, p. 174, emphasis mine.

God's will is, what His Word has said...but I also know that such was not His desire, but what has to be because of the hardness of men's hearts. John 17 shows His antecedent will, as does 1 Corinthians 1:10; Romans 16:17 and 2 Thessalonians 3:13–14 show His consequent.

I bring this up, though—that this conclusion is simply common sense—precisely because so many do seem to want to deny it, to say that synodical membership is not only “all but meaningless,” but simply irrelevant...because “if they're *my* friends, if they're *my* family, I know that they believe right regardless of in which body they or their pastor holds membership.” For *unitas*, their believing is all that matters; for *concordia*, though, it is not only what they think, nor even what they say, but what their confession as a whole is that matters...and that confession is not only what they teach, but what they tolerate. The sad fact is that there are many who are otherwise orthodox—canonically impeccable, as Elert said—who contribute to the comfort of the false teachers by their lack departure from them.

Some of these will say—and I've heard this over and over again from Missourians; perhaps you have heard it from those in the ELS, WELS, or elsewhere, as well—“The only fellowship I have with them is the insurance and retirement plan.” But that is not true...because the Missouri Synod has a stated self-understanding that is perfectly in accord with common sense and the application of Scripture by the early Church fathers (as well as with the LWF): all Missouri pastors and parishes are in altar and pulpit fellowship with one another. On 23 June 2003, the LCMS's Commission on Constitutional Matters, via its Opinion 03-2352, concerning “Confessional Statements,” reaffirmed its Opinion 03-2328 of 29 April 2003, in which it stated the self-understanding of the LCMS with regard to synodical membership—this is what the LCMS's official understanding of synodical membership is, no matter how many misinformed or self-deluded pastors may claim otherwise:

Subscribing to or requiring a “confessional statement” in place of or in addition to the confessional position of the Synod as set forth in Article II of its Constitution as a condition for fellowship with one another in the Synod is a violation of the covenant relationship in the Synod (Article VI 1; Bylaw 1.03).

Now, what does this mean, or what is the presupposition contained within these words directed against the signers of the Keller Resolution? It is simply that there is no other condition for fellowship to be imposed upon an LCMS member by another LCMS member apart from LCMS membership. That is, all LCMS members *are* in fellowship with *all* other LCMS members (congregations and pastors) simply by virtue of said membership in the synod...and any standard beyond such membership “is a violation of the covenant relationship in the Synod.” To refuse to practice pulpit and altar fellowship with a member pastor or parish of the LCMS requires removal of said member on the basis of Article II of the Synod's Constitution. (Of course, considering that they couldn't remove an errant pastor for gross syncretism and that it seems to be that all ‘practices’ are open questions—since ‘open Communion’ versus ‘closed Communion’ is not considered a doctrinal problem, but only a practical situation that calls for tolerance—I'd have to say that such a removal is ‘somewhat unlikely’ to occur, as Mary Todd would say, “in God's lifetime.”)

Brethren, I may be too simple, but in the above we have seen what Holy Scripture says, what—I believe—sound reason indicates, what the early Church and the early heretics seem universally to have understood, what one of the fathers of the Synodical Conference had to say, and a little of what the contemporary situation is like...and I conclude from this evidence that it is not faithful to practice any

sort of selective fellowship—neither the blanket welcoming of all LCMS, WELS, and ELS “members in good standing” (of whatever erring parish), that Jack Cascione of the United Lutheran Mission Association proclaims,³⁴ nor the welcoming of a select few ‘to keep peace in the family’ or ‘because he’s really with *us*, etc. While I would be loathe to judge anyone for allowances made in pastoral discretion during a very short time of transition after leaving a church body, I can find no justification for such an ongoing practice.

To the early church a man was orthodox or heterodox according to his confession. He was the one or the other according to that confession with which he was “in fellowship.” The fellowship in which he stood, the church to which he belonged, was shown by where he received the Sacrament. . . . By his partaking of the Sacrament in a church a Christian declares that the confession of that church is his confession. Since a man cannot at the same time hold two differing confessions, he cannot communicate in two churches of differing confessions.³⁵

It really is that simple; let us not do harm by muddying the waters and muting the trumpet when what our brethren in Christ need from us is the clarity of the truth spoken in love.

34 <http://www.redeemerlutheranchurch.org/worship.htm>

35 Elert, p. 182.