

Calov Conference  
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Session Two: The Christian's Fellowship with Christians

If I enjoy fellowship with God through faith in Christ and you enjoy fellowship with God through faith in Christ, then you and I enjoy fellowship with each other through faith in Christ. "I believe in one holy Christian and apostolic church." The unity of the church is an article of faith.

Listen to the wonderful description of the unity of the church that Luther gives in the Large Catechism:

I believe that there is upon earth a little holy group and congregation of pure saints, under one head, even Christ, called together by the Holy Ghost in one faith, one mind, and understanding, with manifold gifts, yet agreeing in love, without sects or schisms. I am also a part and member of the same, a sharer and joint owner of all the goods it possesses, brought to it and incorporated into it by the Holy Ghost by having heard and continuing to hear the Word of God, which is the beginning of entering it. LC Creed paragraphs 51-52

The unity of this church is an article of faith. That we cannot see it does not mean it is not so. When Jesus said that the Holy Spirit would convict the world of righteousness he added, "because I go to my Father and you see me no more." Righteousness is not seen because Jesus, who is our righteousness, is not seen. The church is the church because she has been justified through faith. The unity of the church is no more visible than is the righteousness that God imputes to faith. This is why we confess that we believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Christian church, the Communion of Saints. As Jesus said to Thomas, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."

We could not believe that there was any perfectly righteous man in all the world if we did not believe that the righteousness of Christ is true righteousness by which we are justified by God. Just so, the very existence of the church as the Communion of Saints is impossible without the reckoning to faith of Christ's perfect righteousness. To conceive of the church and the fellowship of the church apart from the doctrine of justification through faith alone will yield a false doctrine of what the church and her fellowship are.

The Roman Catholic Church condemns the doctrine of justification through faith alone. I'm sure you're all familiar with the anathemas that Trent issued against the evangelical teaching. Canon IX reads:

If anyone says that the ungodly is justified by faith alone in such a way that he understands that nothing else is required which cooperates toward obtaining the

grace of justification and that it is in no way necessary for him to be prepared and disposed by the movement of his own will; let him be anathema.

Notice that Trent accurately describes the Lutheran teaching and rejects it outright.

Canon XI says:

If anyone says that a man is justified either solely by the imputation of Christ's righteousness or solely by the remission of sins, to the exclusion of the grace and charity which is poured out into their hearts by the Holy Spirit and stays with them, or also that the grace by which we are justified is only the favor of God; let him be anathema.

Again, Trent sets forth the Lutheran teaching correctly and condemns it.

Canon XII says:

If anyone says that justifying faith is nothing else than trust in divine mercy, which remits sins for Christ's sake, or that it is this trust alone by which we are justified, let him be anathema.

A clearer statement of the pure doctrine of justification would be difficult to verbalize. Again, Trent knows what it is rejecting and rejects it.

Canon XIII says:

If anyone says that the received righteousness is not preserved and also not increased before God through good works but that the works are only the fruit and signs of the justification obtained, not also a cause of its increase; let him be anathema.

It is perfectly clear that when Rome condemned the evangelical Lutheran doctrine of justification in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, they understood correctly the doctrine they were anathematizing. The present doctrine of Rome is the same as it was in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Written in more irenic tones, as is fashionable in our day, the Catechism of the Catholic Church reaffirms the Tridentine doctrine on justification. Here are just a few citations from the Catechism of the Catholic Church to prove my point. In paragraph 1992 we read:

[Justification] conforms us to the righteousness of God, who makes us inwardly just by the power of his mercy.

In paragraph 1991 we read:

Justification is at the same time the acceptance of God's righteousness through faith in Jesus Christ. Righteousness (or "justice") here means the rectitude of divine love.

With justification, faith, hope, and charity are poured into our hearts, and obedience to the divine will is granted us.

In paragraph 2010 we read:

Since the initiative belongs to God in the order of grace, no one can merit the initial grace of forgiveness and justification, at the beginning of conversion. Moved by the Holy Spirit and by charity, we can then merit for ourselves and for others the graces needed for our sanctification, for the increase of grace and charity, and for the attainment of eternal life.

Rome does not derive her doctrine of justification from the Holy Scriptures, but rather from the tradition she inherited that posited the false truism, *facere quod in se est*, that is, do what you can do. Do what you can do and, well, God is gracious. But your justification, aided by grace to be sure, is something that you do. The righteousness of justification is not the obedience and suffering of Jesus. It is the rectitude of divine love that God works in you as you, exercising your free will, cooperate with his grace to become more and more righteous until you are good enough.

Christ is the foundation of the church. Not as a newer and better lawgiver than Moses, but as the propitiation for our sins, as our Redeemer, our Savior, our righteousness before God. The church is born from each of her members being justified through faith and through faith entering fellowship with God. Church fellowship is born of the gospel, strengthened by the gospel, and recognized by the pure preaching of the gospel. We look for the true church by looking for the true gospel because we know that if we have the pure gospel, we will have the true church and if we don't have the pure gospel, we will never find the church or enjoy her fellowship.

Rome does it the other way around. She begins with the claim to be the true church, the church that Jesus founded. She claims Peter as the first pope, and she relies on her apostolic succession and fellowship with the pope for her claim that she is indeed the true church. There isn't a shred of gospel here. There is no need for the gospel. Fellowship with the church is a matter of submitting to the rightly established polity which has the pope as the head with the bishops, the magisterium, the entire bureaucratic edifice, what is visible, and at root political. The church is a political entity like the legislature and governor of the state of North Dakota. It has the authority to establish and repeal laws that are binding on Christians to obey. Fellowship in this church is not the communion of saints receiving their status as saints from the gospel of the forgiveness of sins, but is established by political, that is, legal means.

Is the church our mother? Rome says yes. Think of the church lady on the old Saturday Night Live episodes. She's your mother. We Lutherans confess the church as our mother because Christ gave to the church the means of grace by which we were born again and became children of God. The Jerusalem that is above is free. The freedom granted by holy mother church is the freedom in the gospel that we enjoy because we are justified by God's grace alone, without any work of merit on our part, through faith in Christ who has

redeemed us with his blood. Choose your mother wisely! Do you want a mother who gives you the gospel? Or do you want a mother who mocks your spiritual poverty with a sneer and the sarcastic comment: "How convenient!"

The evangelical foundation of Christian, that is, church fellowship is established by the apostle Paul in Ephesians 4:1-6,

I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.

Our unity comes from the Holy Spirit who calls us into one body and gives us all the hope of everlasting life. One Lord Jesus Christ. One faith, that is, one body of Christian doctrine. One baptism for the remission of sins. One God and Father of all. God establishes the fellowship we enjoy in his church. When the Holy Spirit calls us in baptism, he is making us God's children through faith. Baptism isn't a legal requirement. It's an evangelical promise and guarantee. Forgiveness brings about fellowship. Conforming to rules and submitting to regulations and adhering to sound fellowshiping principles do not bring about fellowship. Christian fellowship is established by God through the gospel.

It is the gospel that brings about the lowliness and gentleness that St. Paul describes. To be patient and to bear with another in love does not happen by legal coercion or by promises of some kind of reward. It happens from being forgiven by God. The experience of divine mercy is essential. The Holy Spirit is not an academic. He doesn't provide abstract principles by which we can order our lives correctly. He brings to our hearts the forgiveness that flows from the cross. This is the source of love and humility we show to one another in Christ. A Christian's fellowship with his fellow Christian is church fellowship. The whole concept of fellowship entails a corporate entity. And those who are part of the body are part of the body by the individual faith the Holy Spirit has engendered in them. To have fellowship with one Christian is to have fellowship with all Christians. The church is not an abstraction to which we give assent. It is the body of all Christians who are each individuals. Christian fellowship is church fellowship. It is both strengthened and expressed in public worship. We worship together. We sing together. We confess together. We listen together. We eat and drink together. To express fellowship with fellow Christians is to worship with them.

Fellowship pertains to faith and love. Faith apprehends it. Love expresses it. If it is not apprehended by faith, there is no fellowship. It is first and foremost a fellowship with God that is in the heart, hidden from sight. It is the fellowship that comes from being forgiven by God, at peace with God, set free by God from the power of sin and the devil, and rescued by God from all that we by our sins have deserved. This fellowship with God is hidden. And it is revealed. As Jesus was preparing to go the cross, he said to His disciples,

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another. (John 13:34-35)

There is an unbreakable bond between the love of God in Christ for us Christians and our love for one another. St. John writes,

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God, for God is love. In this the love of God was manifested toward us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. (1 John 4:7-11)

The fellowship we enjoy with God and with fellow Christians is marked by love. God's love is revealed on the cross where Jesus bore the wrath of God against all sinners, thus propitiating Him, and establishing peace between God and the world. We enter this love as we are brought to faith. The faith that receives this love is expressed by love.

We must not confuse the receiving with the expressing. Faith looks to God's love alone. The condition, needs, obligations, and circumstances of our fellow Christians do not enter in. "Faith looks to Jesus Christ alone." "I know my faith is founded on Jesus Christ my God and Lord." We sing of faith as exclusively receptive, and we distinguish it from the love that follows. Should we mix together as indistinguishable from each other the faith that receives God's love with the love that emanates from it we will lose both faith and love. This is what Rome, the Eastern Orthodox, and most Protestants do. Mixing our love with God's as the object of our faith will always result in trusting in ourselves, which is idolatry.

As surely as we must distinguish between faith and love, we cannot separate them. When we do we destroy them. Many Lutherans do not understand this. So let me repeat. If you separate love from faith, you destroy faith. As I was taught at the seminary, "Faith alone saves, but faith is never alone." If faith is faith, it will express itself in love.

The fellowship we enjoy with fellow Christians is of both faith and love. Faith is unity in the divine teaching. Divine teaching is the explanation of, the exhibition of, the exposition of divine love. The unity of faith is a unity of confession. The unity of love is not strictly speaking a confession. One's life of love is an expression, a reflection, a fruit of the faith that receives God's love. The life of love doesn't articulate the divine doctrine. It expresses its implications. We love one another because God has first loved us.

This is evaded by Lutherans who can only be described as dead orthodox. All of us have heard the accusation that unionistic doctrinal indifferentists make against Bible believing confessional Lutherans that we have no heart and care only about pure doctrine and nothing about Christian love. Knowing this caricature to be a lie, we ignore the bitter truth within this lie, the truth being that there is indeed a dead orthodoxy among us. It is not orthodox. It is orthodox only in name. "Having a form of godliness but denying its power."

(2 Timothy 3:5) Dead orthodoxy is not an excessive devotion to the pure doctrine. You cannot be too devoted to the truth. Dead orthodoxy is not a hatred of all false doctrine. You cannot hate false doctrine too much. Dead orthodoxy is a theoretical orthodoxy that excludes love for our brothers and sisters in Christ. This love is essential. It belongs to our fellowship with God and one another. It is not optional. Dead orthodoxy bypasses, excludes, and ignores this essential love. It does so in two ways. First, by consigning brothers to an inferior status so that the obligation to love does not apply. Second, by a false distinction between the kingdom of God's right hand and the kingdom of his left hand that excludes God from the kingdom of his left hand.

Your brother is your brother, and Christians treat brothers as brothers. They must do so, and they know it, so when they find a brother that they would rather hate than love their task is obvious. They must render him something other than a brother. It is called dehumanizing. Or demonizing. The purpose of it is to justify withdrawing the protections of God's commandments from that brother. If I want to do harm to my brother or sister in Christ but the commandments get in my way I can evade the commandments by denying their applicability to the one I wish to harm. Every pastor should know what I am talking about. Betty Jones from St. Mary's Lutheran Church in Mayberry dislikes her pastor, Rev. Smith, for one reason or another and goes to Rev. Johnson to complain about him. What does Rev. Johnson ask her? He asks, "Have you talked to Pastor Smith?" And what does she answer? "You can't talk to him." He's this way and that and impossible to talk to. Since he's this way Betty is not obligated to apply to his protection the requirements of God's law of love that include putting the best construction on what your neighbor says and does. Betty would be shocked if you told her that she is rejecting God's love. Oh, no! She would protest. But how can she embrace God's love in faith while simultaneously embracing hatred toward her brother in Christ? This is a common story. Such judgments and attacks proliferate among Christian people who seem to think they are in Christian fellowship with one another but that this fellowship need not be expressed in love. To which we do well to point to the familiar words of St. Paul from 1 Corinthians 13.

Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing. (1 Corinthians 13:1-3)

God's love is revealed in the suffering of Christ where He died for us to take away our sin. God's love is expressed in his mercy toward us, as he treats us with kindness and fatherly compassion even when we have erred and gone astray. Jesus tells us to be merciful as our Father is merciful. We are His children. But when we shut our hearts to the needs of our brothers, when we repeat false and defamatory judgments against our brothers, when we justify the withholding of love from those we deem unworthy of it we are denying not only the fellowship into which God has placed us, but its foundation in the obedience and suffering of Jesus. Mercy and the life of mercy is not optional for a Christian. It is essential. The life of faith is the life of repentance, and this life is lived by mercy. We sing:

Thy love and grace alone avail to blot out my transgression;  
 The best and holiest deeds must fail to break sin's dread oppression  
 Before thee none can boasting stand, but all must bear thy strict demand  
 And live alone by mercy. (TLH 329 2)

We rely on God's mercy to live. When we show mercy, it is God's mercy we are showing because it comes from God. The doctrine of fellowship cannot be truncated by eliminating from it the mercy we show to our brothers and sisters in Christ. Demonizing, dehumanizing, call it what you will, runs directly counter to the orthodox Lutheran doctrine of fellowship. It devises and follows ways of depriving our brothers of the protection God's law provides them.

The second way the law of Christian love is evaded is by a false distinction between the kingdom of God's right hand and the kingdom of his left hand that excludes God from the kingdom of his left hand. The kingdom of God's right hand is his rule over our souls by his grace, the Holy Spirit governing our hearts by bringing us the forgiveness of sins and nurturing faith within. The kingdom of God's left hand is his rule over our bodies by means of the civil authorities who punish those who do wrong with the sword and issue penalties to keep peace in this world. The Christian lives in both kingdoms. This distinction, taught by Luther, is quite helpful.

A noxious error has risen among us that goes beyond distinguishing the two kingdoms from each other and separates them entirely. This enables Christians to engage in matters concerning the kingdom of God's left hand without regard to the kingdom of God's right hand. For example, we have the right to sue a brother, refusing his pleas for brotherly reconciliation, if we think we can make a legal case against him. A Christian may put on hold his Christian duty to love his brother if he can categorize his actions as belonging to the civil realm. This replaces God's moral law with man's positive law, thus effectively excluding God from the kingdom of his own left hand. The promotion of this perversion of the two kingdoms doctrine has been going on for some years now in full view of the highest leadership of our synod and with no rebuke of it in sight. It is an end run around the obligation to love your brother. It is an assault on the church and her fellowship.

The proud, haughty spirit that will not bow before God in humble repentance and live alone by mercy will not humble himself before his brother and seek reconciliation with him. The spirit of self-vindication is incompatible with the doctrine of Christian fellowship taught in the Bible. Loveless, unforgiving, harsh, condemnatory, judgmental behavior combine to rip apart the church because they attack faith. Reconciliation with God and reconciliation with your brother belong together. To claim to enjoy the first while despising the second is to deny the first altogether. Using Luther's two kingdoms distinction to acquit the Christian of his duty to be a Christian also in the kingdom of God's left hand is to distort this teaching beyond recognition. Dead orthodoxy is dead. The fellowship we Christians enjoy with one another is living. They will know we are Christ's disciples if we love one another. Defending unbiblical divorce, suing brothers, demonizing those with whom we disagree, transferring doctrinal fidelity to a church political loyalty, striving for more status, more

money, more comfort, more acceptance from the world with contempt for the brothers we hurt along the way, this is dead orthodoxy, not worthy to be considered orthodox or Christian. May God in his mercy deliver us from this counterfeit Christianity!

Faith and love. The love with which we love one another as members of the same body is an extension of our love for God. It is an expression of that love. To love God is to love the brotherhood. To love God is to love what he says. It is to treasure what he says. It is to place a greater value on what he says than on anything else in all creation. For God's Word is our life. It is a means of grace. The means of grace engender faith. To despise God's Word at any point is faithlessness. It is to attack the source and power of faith. Since we love God, we love His Word and the pure teaching of it. We embrace it wherever we find it. We hate false teaching contrary to God's Word. We condemn it and refuse to express any fellowship with it.

Faith and love. They go together. What God has joined together let not man put asunder.

We've already covered the central teaching of the faith – justification through faith alone – and shown how it informs the doctrine of fellowship. In contrast to Rome where fellowship is a legal and political relationship, for us Lutherans fellowship flows from the gospel. It is a spiritual relationship that can be enjoyed only by the saints, that is, those whose sins have been forgiven and who have been justified by Christ's blood. We are forgiven. We are at peace with God. We are heirs of eternal life in God's kingdom. All this is given us in the gospel. We love the gospel as we love the God who has revealed it to us. We cannot separate God from what He says. Our fellowship with God and our fellowship with fellow Christians is fellowship in the truth of God's holy Word.

Hating false doctrine does not mean hating those who teach it. It does mean that we cannot express Christian fellowship with those who promote it. On this matter, we Bible believing, conservative Lutherans from the theological tradition of the old Synodical Conference are regularly scorned and condemned because our refusal to express Christian fellowship with the heterodox is interpreted to mean that we do not believe the heterodox are Christians. But should we concede that they are Christians, their errors will be excused or downplayed because, after all, they are Christians, and they hold to these teachings, so while we may not agree with those teachings, we can hardly regard them as so serious as to prevent our expressing fellowship with those that promote them.

Consider various popular errors promoted by churches in America today. 1) The denial of the real presence of Christ's body and blood in the Lord's Supper. 2) The denial of the efficacy of baptism, denying it is a means of grace, and denying it to babies. 3) The ordination of women to serve as pastors in the church. 4) The denial of the verbal inspiration and inerrancy of the Holy Scriptures. 5) The teaching of the synergism of Protestants that while acknowledging that we are justified through faith alone turns faith into man's work by denying the bondage of the will. 6) The teaching of the synergism of Rome and the Eastern Orthodox that denies justification by faith alone without any ifs, ands, or buts. 7) The teaching of doctrinal agnosticism that dogmatically insists we cannot be certain of our doctrinal assertions because they are manmade. 8) The LGBTQ doctrine

that requires acceptance of various sexual perversions as permissible for Christians. 9) The teaching that man evolved from a primary organism. 10) The adoption of the feminist agenda whereby godly patriarchy is denied and condemned. The list goes on. Bible believing, Confessions subscribing, orthodox Lutherans hate these errors. They cannot tolerate them. They cannot express fellowship with them. They must condemn them out of love for God and his precious gospel. And because we won't express fellowship with those who promote these errors we must be regarded as sectarians who think they are the only Christians. Either that or meekly acquiesce to errors we know are contrary to Scripture and harmful to the faith.

In response to this, let me make just two points and with that conclude this session. The first point is that God commands us to mark and avoid false teaching and false teachers. St. Paul writes in Romans 16:17-18,

Now I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them. For those who are such do not serve our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly, and by smooth words and flattering speech deceive the hearts of the simple.

The citing of this passage to apply to errorists of every description, even nominal Lutherans, has been criticized in Missouri Synod circles since the Statement of the Forty-Four. This should not dissuade us from appealing to and adhering to what the apostle, as a spokesman for Jesus Christ, teaches us to do. Mark and avoid. If our Baptist or Methodist friends don't understand why we won't worship with them, it is not our responsibility to explain it to them before obeying God's Word. By all means, try to explain it. Explain that we're not claiming to be the only Christians, that we aren't judging anyone's hearts but only their public teaching. But right is right whether or not people acknowledge it. It is right to mark and avoid false teachings and false teachers because the Bible says so.

The second point leads into the topic of the next session, "Confessional Fellowship." It is that even as God Himself is indivisible, so is His Word. We confess a body of doctrine, not a list of doctrines. It's not as if you can pick and choose what you will believe among a list of options with each option applying only to that topic. All doctrine is related to all doctrine. In the Bible, the plural of doctrine is used to refer to the devil's teaching. For example, the doctrines of demons (1 Timothy 4:1). The pure doctrine is in the singular. Attack it at one point and you attack the entire body. This is why we cannot tolerate false doctrine.

A challenge that immediately faces us is the matter of distinguishing between divine doctrine on the one hand and theological opinion on the other. There are many examples of this. Do you believe in the perpetual virginity of Mary? Do you believe in her bodily assumption into heaven? Fine. But don't claim this is divine doctrine. What do you think about the office of parochial schoolteacher? Or the matter of synodical authority? Well, since the Bible says nothing about parochial schoolteachers or synods, we must be careful not to confuse our own enlightened theological opinions with divinely revealed truth. This goes also for various moral judgments. How short should a woman's skirt be and how low

her blouse? What about gambling, charging interest, voting for various political candidates? Judgments are elevated to doctrinal status where they don't belong.

Here is where we Lutherans are blessed because we have the Book of Concord. It doesn't address every doctrinal issue that we must confront, but it is a wonderful summary of the Christian faith and as a norm that is normed by the Bible and found to be trustworthy, it remains a faithful teacher for us as we seek to express Christian fellowship faithfully.