



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

**An Introduction to Lutheran Doctrine
and the Church of the Lutheran Confession
Lesson 6 – Religious Fellowship: Its Basis and Limitations**

VI. Religious Fellowship: Its Basis and Limitations

We are confident that many people, though they may be members of other church bodies (visible churches) and do not openly share with us the profession of the true Bible teachings, nevertheless are Christians and children of God through faith in Christ.

However, in worshiping together with others, and in doing joint church work, God directs us in His Word to join in confessional fellowship with them based on complete agreement in all doctrines of Holy Scripture.

We are also aware that in any church there may be hypocrites who in spite of their outward confession are not true believers in Christ.

1 John 1:7: But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin.

1 Corinthians 1:10: Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.

Romans 15:5-6: Now may the God of patience and comfort grant you to be like-minded toward one another, according to Christ Jesus, that you may with one mind and one mouth glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Matthew 15:8: These people draw near to Me with their mouth, and honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me.

2 Corinthians 6:14-18: ...What fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness? ...Therefore "Come out from among them and be separate..."

Ephesians 5:6-7: Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. Therefore do not be partakers with them.

2 John 1:10-11: If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into your house nor greet him; for he who greets him shares in his evil deeds.

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.

Romans 14:1: Receive one who is weak in the faith, but not to disputes over doubtful things.

Comments:

In the previous lesson we established that the Holy Christian Church is made up of all those persons throughout the world in every age who believe in Jesus Christ, God's Son, as their Savior from sin and eternal death. Only God can look into people's hearts, and therefore only God knows who these believers are. Since the Holy Spirit creates faith in Jesus through the means of grace (the Gospel in

Word and Sacrament), we are confident that wherever the Gospel is proclaimed, there the Holy Spirit creates and sustains faith in Jesus.

The most important kind of fellowship any Christian can have is fellowship with the true God through faith in Jesus. At the same time, a Christian also has spiritual fellowship with every other believer in Jesus as a member of the Holy Christian Church. John speaks of this fellowship when he says: **“But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin”** (1 John 1:7). John also says that **“our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ”** (1 John 1:3).

Some religious leaders teach that we should practice this fellowship with every person, organization, or church body that claims to be Christian and professes to believe in Jesus Christ. But this is not what our Lord teaches us in His Word. Jesus said: **“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves”** (Matthew 7:15). The apostle John said: **“Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they are of God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world”** (1 John 4:1). Our Lord wants us to test all religious teachers and church organizations in order to determine whether each one is a true teacher or a false teacher. In other words, we are to determine whether the teaching and practice of a church body or congregation is orthodox (true-teaching) or heterodox (false-teaching). The only way to do this testing is to compare what the person or group says and does with what God Himself says in the Bible. Every Christian needs to do this testing, because the words of Jesus and John (quoted above) are directed to all believers, not just pastors or teachers. Christian pastors and teachers, however, especially need to do this testing in order to properly guide and train the Christians in their care.

False teaching has many different degrees. Some people deny that there is a God. Such persons are obviously false teachers. Some deny that Jesus is true God. Again, such persons are obviously false teachers. But there are others who teach correctly in many things, but are wrong on one or two relatively minor teachings of the Bible. Are these true teachers or false teachers? Our Lord answers that question by telling us: **“A little leaven leavens the whole lump”** (Galatians 5:9). A little false teaching spoils the good teaching, and any false teaching spreads. Therefore, any false teaching must be eliminated. The apostle Paul said concerning the false teachers Hymenaeus and Philetus: **“Their message will spread like cancer”** (2 Timothy 2:17).

In 1 Corinthians 1:10 and Romans 15:5-6, Paul calls for the elimination of all false teaching. He says that we all should **“speak the same thing”** so that there are **“no divisions”** among us, and that we glorify our God **“with one mind and one mouth.”** If we do not agree and someone teaches something contrary to Scripture, God tells us what to do: **“Note those who cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them”** (Romans 16:17). The apostle John teaches the same thing when he says: **“If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into your house nor greet him; for he who greets him shares in his evil deeds”** (2 John 1:10-11). Our Lord does not want those who believe in Him to support, promote or join in with any false teaching. We are to separate ourselves from unrighteousness.

As we attempt follow these teachings of our Lord, we in the Church of the Lutheran Confession find ourselves in a minority. Almost all churches in our day who call themselves Christian are openly tolerant of many different kinds of false teaching and practice. They seem to believe that if we are to love our neighbors as ourselves, we cannot find fault with the false teachings our neighbor may follow. But what would you think of a doctor who, in his so-called love for a patient, fails to tell his patient that the patient has a dangerous illness that threatens the patient’s life. False teaching is dangerous and leads people away from faith in Jesus. It is not love to ignore the presence of false teaching, no matter how minor it may seem. Our Lord and His apostles, as well as the prophets of old, continually warned against false teaching, and they called upon their listeners to separate themselves from it and not support it in any way.

Nevertheless, we do not deny that there may be true believers in Christ who are members of false-teaching churches. They may be unaware of the dangers or do not know what God has told us to do in such situations. At the same time, there may be members of orthodox church bodies who are hypocrites and fit the description Jesus gives of them in Matthew 15:8 (above).

We should mention also that we do not immediately avoid those Christians who, in weakness, have wrong ideas about some Bible teachings, but are willing to learn what God's Word has to say and are not spreading or promoting the false teachings that they still accept in their minds.

Because the teaching and practice of our church body regarding religious fellowship is different from that of most other religious groups in our time, the CLC Statement of Faith and Purpose adds some further words to make sure that what we teach is clearly and properly understood.

In our practice therefore:

1. We hold that the name "Christian" is not properly applied to those who, in any way, reject the blood-bought salvation of Jesus Christ.
2. We follow Scripture which limits all forms of religious fellowship to Christians who express full agreement with the teachings of Scripture and do not by word or act reject any part of God's Word.
3. While in our religious fellowship we avoid all who preach, teach, or advocate error, we gladly receive those who, though partly uninformed or weak in understanding, profess faith in their Savior, welcome instruction from the Word, and are willing to bow to its authority.
4. We are encouraged and heartened by every testimony, written or spoken, that confesses and glorifies our Lord Jesus Christ. We reject and condemn the false ecumenism that would require us to make common cause in worship and church work with those who claim the Christian name, or even the Lutheran name, but publicly adhere to that which contradicts any part of His Word.
5. We condemn separatism – the denial of fellowship with others for reasons not in harmony with God's revealed will.
6. We joyfully acknowledge that the Lord knows His elect children even though some are members of false-teaching churches. However, by their membership they are identifying with and promoting error by which the salvation of souls is threatened.
7. We pray that all who believe in the Lord Jesus may be preserved in this faith to their end and finally receive, by His merits and mercy, the crown of eternal life.

Questions

1. What are some of the main differences between the invisible Church and visible churches?
2. How do we know that not all those who call themselves Christian will teach God's Word in truth and purity?
3. What terms are used for false-teaching churches and true-teaching churches?
4. Why is it possible for some false-teaching churches to have members who are true Christians?
5. In what way are we united with every Christian in the whole world?
6. Which words of God tell us what to do with respect to heterodox church bodies?
7. How can we tell whether a church body is orthodox or heterodox?
8. Who should test the teaching of teachers and churches?