

“...keep diligently together in unity...”

In the Smalcald Articles, Martin Luther discusses why “the pope is not the head of all Christendom ‘by divine right’ or on the basis of God’s Word,” and of why the church on earth does not require something like the papacy even as a practical matter. In considering the legitimate need for “the unity of Christendom” to be “preserved against sects and heretics,” Luther does not concede that a pope is required for this, but he suggests instead that “the church cannot be better ruled and preserved than if we all live under one head, Christ, and all the bishops – equal according to the office (although they may be unequal in their gifts) – keep diligently together in unity of teaching, faith, sacraments, prayers, and works of love, etc. So St. Jerome writes that the priests at Alexandria ruled the churches together in common, as the apostles also did and afterward all bishops throughout Christendom, until the pope elevated himself over them all.”ⁱ

Luther lists here some of the important ways in which orthodox bishops and pastors mutually strengthen and affirm their unity under Christ and his Word. This includes joint use of the marks of the church (the means of grace), as well as joint participation in spiritual activities that flow from, and testify to, a common adherence to these marks. Since these confessional actions testify to a fundamental unity in faith on the part of those who together engage in them, these actions would in principle *not* be engaged in with those who do *not* confess, or adhere to, the pure marks of the church.

Perhaps the most obvious example of this is joining together in the Lord’s Supper, since “fellowship at the Lord’s table is a testimony of consensus, harmony, and unity in doctrine and faith, as Paul says: ‘We who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread’ (1 Cor. 10:17).”ⁱⁱ But this is not the only religious act or activity which properly testifies to a “consensus, harmony, and unity in doctrine and faith” on the part of those who are together engaging in it. Luther states in his “Lectures on Galatians” – with reference to the “Sacramentarians” of his time – that “we *shall* pray *for* those who slander our doctrine and persecute us out of ignorance, but *not with* those who knowingly offend against one or more articles of Christian doctrine and against their conscience.”ⁱⁱⁱ In saying this, Luther is not just expressing his personal pique, but he is applying the ancient conciliar principle that “No one shall join in prayers with heretics or schismatics.”^{iv}

In an attempt to resolve a twentieth-century controversy among Lutherans in America regarding these matters, the Synodical Conference’s “Overseas Brethren” prepared and offered thirteen theses on “Fellowship in Its Necessary Context of the Doctrine of the Church,” the last three of which are:

11. The marks of the church are all-decisive. Everything must be referred to them. This duty is hindered by presumptuous judgments or statements concerning the faith or lack of it in individuals. It is Enthusiasm to build on subjective faith (*fides qua*) and love, for faith is hidden and love is variable. Both are in man. The means of grace are objective, solid, apprehensible. Since these are God’s own means, we must attend entirely upon them and draw from them the distinction between the orthodox church and heterodox churches. ... 12. The fellowship created by Word and sacraments shows itself fundamentally in pulpit and altar fellowship. It can show itself in many other ways, some of which, like prayer and worship and love of the brethren, the church cannot do without; others of which, like the holy kiss or the handshake or the reception into one’s house, vary from place to place and from time to time. In whatever way the fellowship created by Word and sacraments shows itself, all visible manifestations of fellowship must be truthful and in accordance with the supreme demands of the marks of the church. The “sacred things” (*sacra*) are the means of grace, and only by way of them is anything else a “sacred thing” (*sacrum*). Acts 2:41-47; 1 Cor. 1:10; cf. 15:1-4; 10:16,17; 11:22-34; 12:13; ch. 14; 2 Cor. Chs. 8,9. ... 13. Prayer is not one of the marks of the church and should not be coordinated with Word and sacraments, as though it were essentially of the same nature as they. As a response to the divine Word, it is an expression of faith and a fruit of faith, and when spoken before others, a profession of faith. As a profession of faith it must be in harmony with and under the control of the marks of the church. Dan. 9:18; Acts 9:11; Gal. 4:6; Rom. 10:8-14; 1 Tim. 2:1,2; Acts 27:35. – Ap XIII:16; XXIII:30,31; LC, Lord’s Prayer: 13-30.^v

The point made in Thesis 13 is very similar to a statement that Luther made in his “Lectures on Genesis,” that “*by their nature preaching and prayer are connected with each other. It is impossible to pray unless one has first instructed the people concerning God.*”^{vi}

ⁱSmalcald Articles II, IV:1,7,9, Kolb/Wengert pp. 307-08.

ⁱⁱMartin Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent*, Part II, p. 302.

ⁱⁱⁱMartin Luther, “Lectures on Galatians” (1535), *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 27, p. 41. Emphases added.

^{iv}Canon XXXIII of the Synod of Laodicea, *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, Second Series, Vol. XIV (The Seven Ecumenical Councils), p. 149.

^v“Fellowship in Its Necessary Context of the Doctrine of the Church,” *Proceedings of the Recessed Forty-sixth Convention of the Lutheran Synodical Conference*, 1961, pp. 11-12.

^{vi}Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 2, p. 333. Emphasis added.