

The AALC and the Doctrine of Church Fellowship

Introduction

There appear to be two dangers in establishing a position on Church fellowship.

- 1) Other Lutherans can define Church fellowship and the extent of fellowship, and then impose that concept on the AALC.
- 2) The historical predecessors of the AALC may not accurately reflect the current Lutheran situation nor the current stance of the AALC.

Regarding # 1, the WELS/ELS position restricts fellowship even to prayer with other confessional Lutherans. On the other hand, the ELCA position advocates fellowship that extends far beyond Lutheranism to the very edges of the Christian faith (i.e. UCC), in which case confessional identity and fellowship lose all meaning. Thus, the AALC must be clear about what it determines “Lutheran” to mean, so that the Biblical and confessional position is not compromised or directed by perceptions or statements that go beyond the fellowship as outlined in the Confessions. Regarding # 2, the temptation for the AALC is to revert to predecessor formulations that might appear satisfactory but lead to false conclusions. For instance, the *Galesburg Rule* (“Lutheran pulpits for Lutheran pastors; Lutheran altars for Lutherans only”) has been a beacon used by many in American Lutheranism since 1875. However, given the changed environment, in which the ELCA has altar and pulpit fellowship with Reformed, Episcopalian and UCC church bodies and yet retains the name “Lutheran,” suggests that the Galesburg Rule is no longer adequate. Certainly, the *Minneapolis Theses* move in the right direction because they deny the term “Lutheran” to any “Lutheran” church that exchanges pulpit/altar with non-Lutheran church bodies. These competing forces put additional pressure on the AALC to carefully weigh what is, and is not, determinative of fellowship among Lutherans.

A Starting Point: Augsburg Confession

This might seem obvious as a starting point, but I think that clarity on the CA will eliminate much confusion on the topic of fellowship. Consider Article VII “Concerning the Church”¹

It is also taught at all times there must be and remain one holy, Christian church. It is the assembly of all believers among whom the gospel is purely preached and the holy sacraments are administered according to the gospel. (German text)

Likewise, they teach that one holy church will remain forever. The church is the assembly of saints in which the gospel is taught purely and the sacraments are administered rightly. (Latin text)²

Often the Latin text is quoted, especially in regard to the sacraments. But note that comparing and relating the two, “administered rightly” is the equivalent to “administered according to the gospel.” Thus, the sacramental aspect of Church is Gospel-motivated and Gospel-controlled; hence the Law (expressed as legalism) does not control the sacrament. This critical distinction helps us as Lutherans avoid the legalism that is often inherent in a statement about who should and should not commune. But even more, notice that the essence of what is Church is grounded on “Gospel preaching” and “Gospel sacraments.” Any discussion of church fellowship must begin and end with the Gospel nature of the Church, the proclamation, and the Sacraments, which is repeatedly emphasized in the Confessions.

The ELCA moves the discussion of fellowship away from this central thesis because the “purely preached Gospel” has been compromised, both by watering down the Law and by offering a diluted Gospel, which in effect is another gospel (Galatians 1).

Continuing with Article VII, we read:

For this is enough for the true unity of the Christian church that there the gospel is preached harmoniously [with one accord] according to a pure understanding and the sacraments are administered in conformity with the divine Word. (German text)

And it is enough for the true unity of the church to agree concerning the teaching of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments. (Latin text)³

Again coordinating the two texts, we find that the terseness of the Latin text is balanced by the fuller German text. However, the essence of each depends on the clear understanding of what is “pure gospel” and what it means to “administer” the sacraments in accordance with the divine

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all references to the Confessional writings are from *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, translated by Charles Arand, Eric Gritsch, Robert Kolb, William Russell, James Schaaf, Jane Strohl, and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2000), abbreviated Kolb/Wengert.

² Kolb, p. 42, #1 (German); and p. 43, #1 (Latin).

³ Ibid.

Word. That is, what constitutes “pure gospel” and what constitutes “rightly administering the sacraments”? For the “pure gospel,” Article IV of CA, and expanded in Article IV of the Apology (“Justification”), establishes the foundation of what that means.

Apology, VII and VIII: The Church

This article in the Creed presents these consolations to us: so that we may not despair, but may know that the church will nevertheless remain; so that we may know that however great the multitude of the ungodly is, nevertheless the church exists and Christ bestows those gifts that he promised to the church: forgiveness of sins, answered prayer, the gift of the Holy Spirit. Moreover, it says “church catholic” so that we may not understand the church to be an external government of certain nations. It consists rather of people scattered throughout the entire world who agree on the gospel and have the same Christ, the same Holy Spirit, and the same sacraments, whether or not they have the same human traditions.⁴

Thus, the critical point here is the “rightly administering the sacraments.” For Baptism, there does not seem to be much concern or division among Lutherans (apart from the ELCA). But the Lord’s Supper presents additional concerns and questions: How far does that administration extend? Does the phrase refer to the liturgical formulation used in the Lord’s Supper, including the Words of Institution? Does it include the teaching about the Sacrament of the Altar, what its essence is, and what it gives/offers? Does it include the examination of those who receive the Sacrament at the altar? And ultimately, is the administering based on the Gospel or the Law? How does that Gospel-administering work out in practice? Is a public announcement of the belief of the church sufficient and the burden rests upon the communicant? What happens if someone not in the congregation/denomination receives the sacrament?

Moving into the American Lutheran scene, part of the heritage of the AALC includes the *Galesburg Rule*, essentially “Lutheran pastors for Lutheran pulpits; Lutheran altars for Lutherans.” While such a formulation was important at the time (1875), the additional commentary/explanation of the “Rule” by C. P. Krauth permits us to examine it anew in light of the ELCA actions with regard to “fellowship” with those who are not Lutheran. And more importantly, Krauth provides us with the Gospel framework and compulsion of Word and Sacrament ministry.

⁴ Kolb, Apology, p 175, para. 9–10.

Galesburg Rule, 1875

That the General Council expresses its sincere gratification at the progress of a true Lutheran practice in different synods since its action on communion and exchange of pulpits with those not of our Church, as well as the clear testimony in reference to those subjects officially expressed by the Augustana Synod at its convention in 1875; nevertheless, we hereby renewedly call the attention of our pastors and churches to the principles involved in that testimony, in the earnest hope that our practice may be conformed to our united and deliberate testimony on this subject, viz.: the rule, which accords with the Word of God and with the Confessions of our Church, is: “Lutheran pulpits for Lutheran ministers only — Lutheran altars for Lutheran communicants only.”⁵

Theses on the Galesburg Declaration on Pulpit and Altar Fellowship, C. P. Krauth

1. ... the word “Rule” is not used in the sense of “prescriptive regulation: but in the sense of “general principle,” a principle of intrinsic validity and right. The Rule is meant to assert, not legislatively, what shall be done, but morally what ought to be held as true. It appeals to conscience, not to disciplinary authority.
2. ... No exception can be made which implies that the Rule is *not* in accord with the Word and the Confessions, or is only a human rule of order, or that a claim of right to our pulpits and altars can be made in any case whatever by those not Lutherans.
12. ... the “interdenominational” exchange of pulpits and “interdenominational” invitations to altars, whether regular or occasional, were regarded not only as not cases of exception, but as pre-eminently the cases which need to be guarded against by the Declaration.
17. Exceptions regarding the altar may be defined *positively* as cases of peculiar exceptional necessity “which arise,” such as are produced by times of pestilence, by imminent death, by close imprisonment, by extreme peril from persecution, ... In most such cases there is tacit consent to our faith, in none is there conscious opposition to it.
19. Even members of Lutheran Churches should not, in a place where they are sojourning, come to the Lord’s Table without a previous interview with the pastor, who should be well assured that they are in good standing as church members.⁶

⁵ Fred W. Meuser, *Church in Fellowship: Pulpit and Altar Fellowship Among Lutherans*, Vilmos Vajta, editor, (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1963), p. 28.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 28–29

Krauth sets the limits of understanding what the *Declaration* means by “Lutheran altars and pulpits,” and where the boundaries are set for each. Even with exceptions, there is an understanding that “Aunt Sarah visiting from out of town” is not an exception. Also, the notion of “open Lutheran communion” is not tolerated, rather respect for the ministry of the local congregation and its confession of the faith are held as part of the *Galesburg Rule*.

44. The Lutheran Church *owes her being* to the conviction that her Confessions depart in no respect from the faith taught in God’s Word; that she teaches the Gospel in its complete purity; that all her doctrines are divine; that she is the most perfectly homogeneous portion of that Church visible, of which the Church Catholic is the soul, that in a supreme and unique degree she has the marks of the true Church, to wit, the pure Word of God and the right sacraments.

45. In maintaining this claim, the Lutheran Church of necessity implies that to the degree, and in the respects in which *other parts* of Christendom depart from the faith and truth confessed by the Lutheran Church, they depart from the faith and truth of God’s Word.

47. That Confession (Augsburg) means by its very existence and the Church means by her very existence under it, that the pulpit, which is the organ of the pure Word, and the altar, which represents the true Sacraments, are to be sacredly guarded as at once the witnesses and conservators of her true unity and of her genuine catholicity.⁷

Interestingly, Krauth notes that when discussing who may be admitted to the pulpit/altar, it is not only the testimony of the Church (and local congregation) that is at stake, but the very essence and testimony of the Word and Sacraments themselves. This is a critical point to maintain in any discussion about fellowship with other church bodies.

52. On whatever else thoughtful Christians may differ, they should agree on this, that the awful levity with which sects are originated in Protestantism, is a crime against God and His Church, and that a rule shown to be necessary to purify the judgments of men in regard to the sacredness of truth, and of unity in the truth, so that they shall refuse every possible compromise with these great principles, is a rule which accords with God’s Word and with every pure confession of God’s Church.

54. As the Word of God and the Confessions teach the inviolable sacredness and supremacy of truth, and the obligation of the utmost simplicity and directness in asserting and defending it, that **RULE FOR THE ALTAR** alone accords with both, which withholds from coming to our altars those who deny any part of divine truth, those who are voluntarily ignorant of it, and who neither desire nor permit us to teach it to them, who have never examined and do not mean to examine the grounds on which we rest our confession of it ... those who are in,

⁷ Ibid., 29–30.

and intend to remain in, communions which owed their existence to a denial of the very truths which gave our Church her full distinctive being.⁸

In the contemporary scene, the above statements provide valuable assistance in dealing with a church body which retains the name Lutheran, yet denies its “Lutheran-ness” by mingling truth and falsehood and by compromising on the nature of the Lord’s Supper (i.e. accepting either Reformed or Roman/Eastern Orthodox understanding of the sacraments as permissible for admittance to the Sacrament).

62. No man remaining in a denomination whose confessed faith is wrong, has any moral right to the benefit of a mere *private* disclaimer that *for his part* he rejects its errors.

63. No man has a right to enter the pulpit, or approach the altar of the Church, who has not conformed to the Church’s solemnly appointed mode of previous testing and who is not subject to her divine law of duty, and to her discipline.⁹

Krauth prevents an easy “solution” which would permit a congregation to admit anyone dissatisfied with the Lutheran Church “down the road,” but which person is not willing to confess the faith of the congregation nor put himself/herself under its authority and blessing. That is, spiritual discipline that invites easy access to the altar is really no discipline at all, and ultimately, no confession of the faith.

102. We must either demand Lutheran authentication from every man who enters a Lutheran pulpit or demand it from none ... it is simply moral suicide for a church to *discriminate against her own children* and exact from her own preachers pledges and guarantees which she does not exact of others.

103. The principle on which rests *constant* admission to Lutheran altars, demands that those who are there received shall have been taught and examined as to their knowledge of the fundamental truths of the Gospel system, which is the confessed system of our Church; shall have solemnly bound themselves, by God’s help, to persevere in the Lutheran faith, and to its divine government and discipline. There can be no principle of an *occasional* admission to the altar distinct from and in conflict with this.

105. ... The Rule is not only not in conflict with Christian love, but is demanded by it, for Christian love requires faithful dealing with those who are in error. It requires that unwavering testimony shall be sustained by unequivocal act.¹⁰

With great insight, Krauth has nailed the essential problem with opening altars and pulpits without restriction. Even stronger, he challenges all Lutherans, and today the AALC in particular, to be faithful in the catechetical life of the Church. It *does* matter what is publicly

⁸ Ibid., 30.

⁹ Ibid., 30–31.

¹⁰ Ibid., 31.

confessed by the AALC *and* what is practiced in the congregations. And so, the “closed” nature of our confession necessitates the closed nature of our altars and pulpits, because of Christian love.

In addition to the *Galesburg Rule*, the *Minneapolis Theses* (1925) have been influential in the heritage of TAALC.

Minneapolis Theses (1925)

I. The Scriptures

The synods ... accept without exception all the canonical books of the Old and New Testaments as a whole and in all their parts, as the divinely inspired, revealed, and inerrant Word of God, and submit to this as the only infallible authority in all matters of faith and life.

II. Church Fellowship

These synods agree that true Christians are found in every denomination which has so much of the divine truth revealed in Holy Scripture that children of God can be born in it; that according to the Word of God and our Confessions, church fellowship, that is mutual recognition, altar and pulpit fellowship, and eventually cooperation in the strictly essential work of the Church, presupposes unanimity in the pure doctrine of the Gospel and in the confession of the same in word and deed.

Where the establishment and maintenance of church fellowship ignores present doctrinal differences or declares them a matter of indifference, there is unionism, pretense of union which does not exist.

They agree that the rule “Lutheran pulpits for Lutheran pastors only, and Lutheran altars for Lutheran communicants only,” is not only in full accord with, but necessarily implied in, the teachings of the divine Word and the Confessions of the evangelical Lutheran Church. This rule, implying the rejection of all unionism and syncretism, must be observed as setting forth a principle elementary to sound and conservative Lutheranism.

The changed atmosphere from the time of the *Galesburg Rule* to the *Minneapolis Theses* is reflected in the concern for unionism and syncretism in the practice of church fellowship.

It is critical that the AALC declare that the term “fellowship” refers to full fellowship between churches, including altar and pulpit fellowship. Unless such a view is held, it might easily slip into the acceptance of “partial fellowship,” “limited open communion,” “selective fellowship,” “levels of fellowship,” or some other innocuous term, that detracts from the New Testament and Confessional understanding of fellowship.

Brief Statement of the Doctrinal Position of the Missouri Synod (1932)

Brief Statement is an officially approved LCMS doctrinal statement, which was the basis for fellowship exploration between the LCMS and the ALC (1930). Both church bodies accepted *Brief Statement* as doctrinally correct. Two pertinent passages apply to church fellowship discussions:

28. On Church-Fellowship. — Since God ordained that His Word only, without the admixture of human doctrine, be taught and believed in the Christian Church, 1 Pet. 4:11; John 8:31, 32; 1 Tim. 6:3, 4, all Christians are required by God to discriminate between orthodox and heterodox church-bodies, Matt. 7:15, to have church-fellowship only with orthodox church-bodies, and, in case they have strayed into heterodox church-bodies, to leave them, Rom. 16:17. We repudiate unionism, that is, church-fellowship with the adherents of false doctrine, as disobedience to God's command, as causing divisions in the Church, Rom. 16:17; 2 John 9, 10, and involving the constant danger of losing the Word of God entirely, 2 Ti. 2:17-21.

29. The orthodox character of a church is established not by its mere name nor by its outward acceptance of, and subscription to, an orthodox creed, but by the doctrine which is actually taught in its pulpits, in its theological seminaries, and in its publications. On the other hand, a church does not forfeit its orthodox character through the casual intrusion of errors, provided these are combated and eventually removed by means of doctrinal discipline, Acts 20:30; 1 Tim. 1:3.¹¹

Notice the similarity of the language of *Brief Statement* and the *Minneapolis Theses*, especially regarding unionism and the need to separate from (break fellowship) with those church bodies that participate in unionistic practices. Likewise, the concern in para. 29 of *Brief Statement* is what is actually practiced in the congregations, taught in the pulpit, again reflecting what Krauth presented in the explanation of the Galesburg Rule.

¹¹ *Brief Statement*, CPH, 1932.