

Evangelical Lutheran COMMUNION THESES

(Appendix to the Evangelical Lutheran Communion Theses SUMMARY adopted 8/31/2017)

In DETAIL ...

THESIS III

Unity of Faith and Doctrine Is Prerequisite to Communion Fellowship

¹⁰I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be **no divisions among you**, but that you **be united in the same mind and the same judgment**. ¹¹For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers. ¹²What I mean is that each one of you says, "I follow Paul," or "I follow Apollos," or "I follow Cephas," or "I follow Christ." ¹³**Is Christ divided?** (1 Corinthians 1:10–13 ESV)

¹⁷Because there is **one bread**, we who are many are **one body**, for we all partake of the one bread. ¹⁸Consider the people of Israel: are not those who eat the sacrifices **participants in the altar**? ¹⁹What do I imply then? That food offered to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? ²⁰No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be participants with demons. ²¹You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. **You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons.** (1 Corinthians 10:17–21 ESV)

¹⁴Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For **what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness?** ¹⁵**What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever?** ¹⁶What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, "I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people." ¹⁷**Therefore go out from their midst, and be separate from them,** says the Lord. (2 Corinthians 6:14–17 ESV)

We confess that the "one holy Church is to remain forever. The Church is the congregation of saints [Psalm 149:1] in which the Gospel is purely taught and the Sacraments are correctly administered." ²**For the true unity of the Church it is enough to agree about the doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments.**¹

And, "We believe, teach, and confess also that no church should condemn another because one has less or more outward ceremonies than the other, for those are not commanded by God. This is true as long as they have **unity with one another in the doctrine and all its articles and in the right use of the holy Sacraments**. This practice follows the well-known saying "Disagreement in fasting does not destroy **agreement in faith**."²

We reject all beliefs, teachings, and practices that diminish or deny that agreement in all articles of faith and doctrine is essential for Communion fellowship,³ and likewise, that repentance of

¹ *Concordia*, AC VII 1–2, 34.

² *Concordia*, FC, Ep., X 7, 497.

³ C. F. W. Walther, *Church Fellowship* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2015). "Communion Fellowship," 1870, translated by Lawrence White, Thesis X, 177. "**Holy Communion is also a mark of confession of the faith and doctrine of those with whom one celebrates it. Therefore the admission of members of heterodox fellowships to the celebration of Communion within the Lutheran Church is in conflict with the following: 1. Christ's institution; 2. The commanded unity of the Church in**

37 sins includes all sins of *doctrine*⁴ and life. We also reject the argument that exclusion of other
38 Christians from Communion on the basis of doctrinal (denominational) differences violates the
39 harmony and love of the Christian Church,⁵ and that such exclusion necessarily denies that person as
40 a Christian, or excommunicates them. Rather, they are only suspended until they are reconciled with
41 the orthodox Church.⁶

42 *What does this mean?* As Evangelical Lutherans we hold with St. Paul that to participate at an altar is
43 to participate in all that it confesses and represents (1 Corinthians 10:17–21). Communion fellowship
44 is an expressed unity in what is believed, taught, and received at that altar⁷—a “*koinonia*,” (1
45 Corinthians 10:16), that is, a common possessing or sharing of something. True *koinonia* is where

faith and corresponding confession; 3. Our love for the one to whom the Sacrament is administered; 4. Our love for our own fellow believers, especially the weak, who by this action would be given grievous offense; 5. the command not to become participants in the sins and errors of others.”

⁴ Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, vol. 27 (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1964), “Lectures on Galatians,” 1535, edited by Jaroslav Pelican and Walter A. Hansen, 41–42. “With the utmost rigor we demand that all the articles of Christian doctrine, both large and small—although we do not regard any of them as small—be kept pure and certain. This is supremely necessary. **For this doctrine is our only light, which illumines and directs us and shows the way to heaven; if it is overthrown in one point, it must be overthrown completely.**”

⁵ Martin Luther, “Lectures on Galatians,” 38. “We are surely prepared to observe peace and love with all men, provided that they leave the doctrine of faith perfect and sound for us. If we cannot obtain this, it is useless for them to demand love from us. **A curse on a love that is observed at the expense of the doctrine of faith, to which everything must yield—love, an apostle, an angel from heaven, etc.! . . .** If they believed that it is the Word of God, they would not play around with it this way. No, they would treat it with the utmost respect; they would put their faith in it without any disputing or doubting; and they would know that one Word of God is all and that all are one, that one doctrine is all doctrines and all are one, so that when one is lost all are eventually lost, because they belong together and are held together by a common bond. **Therefore let us leave the praise of harmony and of Christian love to them. We, on the other hand, praise faith and the majesty of the Word. Love can sometimes be neglected without danger, but the Word and faith cannot.**

⁶ C. F. W. Walther, “Communion Fellowship,” Thesis XI, 187. **“Members of heterodox fellowships are not excommunicated by their nonadmission to the celebration of Holy Communion in fellowship with the Lutheran Church, much less are they (declared to be heretics and)¹⁵ condemned, but only suspended until they become reconciled with the orthodox Church by leaving the false fellowship in which they stand.** (¹⁵ Here Walther has the following footnote: “The words in parentheses were inserted into the thesis by resolution of the convention.”)

⁷ *Concordia*, Ap VII and VIII 5, 144. ⁵ But the Church is not only the fellowship of outward objects and rites, as other governments, but at its core, it is a fellowship of faith and of the Holy Spirit in hearts. **Yet this fellowship has outward marks so that it can be recognized. These marks are the pure doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments in accordance with the Gospel of Christ.** This Church alone is called Christ’s body.

Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, vol. 41 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), “On the Councils and the Church,” 1539, edited by Eric W. Gritsch, 152. “Third, **God’s people, or Christian holy people, are recognized by the holy sacrament of the altar, wherever it is rightly administered, believed, and received, according to Christ’s institution.** This too is a public sign and a precious, holy possession left behind by Christ by which his people are sanctified so that they also exercise themselves in faith and openly confess that they are Christian, just as they do with the word and with baptism.”

Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, vol. 53 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965), “An Order of Mass and Communion for the Church at Wittenberg,” 1523, edited by Ulrich S. Leupold, 34. **“For participation in the Supper is part of the confession by which they confess before God, angels, and men that they are Christians.”**

Johann Gerhard as quoted by C. F. W. Walther, “Communion Fellowship,” 171. “Just as the Church is distinguished from worldly fellowships, which are outside the Church, by the preaching of the Word and the administration of the Sacraments, **so it also distinguishes itself through the pure preaching and legitimate administration of the Sacraments from the heterodox fellowships that are within the Church.** (*Locus on the Church*,” par. 131)” [Quoted by Walther, “Communion Fellowship,” 171.]

46 there is full agreement and faith in “the doctrine and all its articles.”⁸ Otherwise there is harmful
47 *disunity*. For God’s Word cannot be broken (John 10:35), and “Do you not know that a little leaven
48 leavens the whole lump?” (1 Corinthians 5:6; Galatians 5:9).⁹

49 Therefore Communion is to be administered only to those who have been properly instructed and
50 publicly confess the Christian faith as taught by the Evangelical Lutheran Church. Likewise,
51 Communion is not to be administered to those of heterodox fellowships until they are reconciled with
52 the orthodox Church.¹⁰ Nor shall be communed those confirmed in the Evangelical Lutheran Church
53 when they, in violation of their confirmation vows, either leave the fellowship of the orthodox Church
54 for that of a heterodox fellowship, or simultaneously engage in altar and pulpit fellowship with a
55 heterodox church body.¹¹

56 Those who persist in teaching and holding to false doctrine separate themselves from the orthodox
57 Church and its Communion fellowship.¹² Such people are to be avoided in matters of altar and pulpit
58 fellowship, as it is written:

59 ¹⁷I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles

⁸ Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, vol. 27 (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1964), “Lectures on Galatians,” 1535, edited by Jaroslav Pelican and Walter A. Hansen, 38–39. “In the issue of salvation, on the other hand, when fanatics teach lies and errors under the guise of truth and make an impression on many, there love is certainly not to be exercised, and error is not to be approved. For what is lost here is not merely a good deed done for someone who is unthankful, but the Word, faith, Christ, and eternal life. **Therefore if you deny God in one article of faith, you have denied Him in all; for God is not divided into many articles of faith, but He is everything in each article and He is one in all the articles of faith.** Therefore when the Sacramentarians accuse us of neglecting love, we continually reply to them with this proverb of Paul’s: ‘A little yeast, etc.’”

⁹ Martin Luther, “Lectures on Galatians,” 36–37. “For the sectarians who deny the bodily presence of Christ in the Lord’s Supper accuse us today of being quarrelsome, harsh, and intractable, because, as they say, we shatter love and harmony among the churches on account of the single doctrine about the Sacrament. They say that we should not make so much of this little doctrine, . . . **To this argument of theirs we reply with Paul: “A little yeast leavens the whole lump.” In philosophy a tiny error in the beginning is very great at the end. Thus in theology a tiny error overthrows the whole teaching.**”

¹⁰ C. F. W. Walther, “Communion Fellowship,” Thesis VIII, 172. “**Holy Communion was not instituted to make people Christians. It was instituted to strengthen the faith of those who already are true Christians. Therefore Communion should be administered to no one who has been revealed as a false Christian.**”

C. F. W. Walther, “Communion Fellowship,” 174. “[Holy Communion should not be given] to those who have not been reconciled in a Christian way with one who has given offense or has been offended, and likewise also the heterodox **as long as they have not renounced their errors and their heterodox fellowship and in this way have reconciled themselves with the orthodox Church.**”

¹¹ Werner Elert, *Eucharist and Church Fellowship in the First Four Centuries*, translated by N. E. Nagel (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1966), 182. “To the early church a man was orthodox or heterodox according to his confession. He was 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. If anyone does this nevertheless, he denies his own confession or has none at all.**”

C. F. W. Walther, “Communion Fellowship,” Thesis IV, 159. “**Everyone is obligated to avoid heterodox churches, and if one belongs to one such as that, he is obligated to renounce it and leave it.**”

¹² C. F. W. Walther, “Communion Fellowship,” 159. “And from Romans 16:17: “I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them,” we see that it is not we—when we break with and keep our distance from the heterodox—that disturb and splinter the unity of the Church, as we have been falsely blamed, **but they themselves who cause division and offense contrary to the pure, saving doctrine of the Word of God.**”

60 contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; **avoid them.** (Romans 16:17)

61 ¹⁰As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, **have nothing**
62 **more to do with him,** ¹¹knowing that such a person is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned.
63 (Titus 3:10)

64 To commune those who hold beliefs contrary to Holy Scripture and the (Lutheran) Confessions of the
65 Church is to commit a gross hypocrisy¹³ and a profaning of the Word of God¹⁴ upon which the true
66 harmony and love of the Christian Church stands. This is to sin against the unity of faith intrinsic to
67 the Sacrament.¹⁵

¹³ C. F. W. Walther, “Communion Fellowship,” 168. “All should indeed come to preaching, but only Christians who confess the proper Christian faith with [their] mouth should come to Communion. Therefore one who goes to Holy Communion in a Lutheran church declares openly before the world: I hold with this church, with the doctrine that is preached here, with the faith that is confessed here, and with all the confessors who belong here. The pastor who administers the Sacrament to him declares the very same thing. . . . Now then, **if heterodox Christians come to our Communion with our knowledge, then they and we are hypocrites. They appear to be Lutherans and yet they are not.**”

C. F. W. Walther, “Communion Fellowship,” 171. “**A communicant becomes a preacher in that, as I said, where he communes he declares his allegiance as to the true Church.** The spokesmen of the Church Council themselves also admit that Baptism and the Holy Communion are distinguishing marks of the orthodox Church. **It is therefore so much the more grievous and a lie in the name of God when they impress the seal of orthodoxy on those who believe differently by receiving them to Holy Communion.** . . . For if the Sacraments are marks of confession, as they are, then they are marks of *pure confession.*”

C. F. W. Walther, “Communion Fellowship,” 175. “We would be sinning dreadfully, you see, if we wanted to hold ourselves separate from all other fellowships only out of mere blind preference or taste. But this division and special position is the command of God and therefore necessary. **We may not draw the heterodox as such into our fellowship, as our opponents in the Church Council do and want to justify, and thereby become guilty of a grievous sin.**”

¹⁴ C. F. W. Walther, “Communion Fellowship,” 177. “The proclamation of the Lord’s death here [1 Corinthians 11:26] includes the entire doctrine of the redemption won through the blood and death of Christ. Therefore, in that someone receives Holy Communion he is professing the whole doctrine of the redemptive work of Christ. **But a Reformed naturally professes a false doctrine, and only a Lutheran [professes] the one and pure doctrine. It is therefore impossible for the former to go to Communion with the latter without a grievous sin against the testament of Christ.**”

C. F. W. Walther, “Communion Fellowship,” 179. “So already two hundred years ago the enemies of the correct doctrine and practice of Communion said that Christians distinguish themselves from the heathen, but not the orthodox from the heterodox, by partaking of this Sacrament. But that is false. All unbelief and every false doctrine is a part of heathenism. **Communion fellowship with all heterodox is forbidden in Christ’s institution.** Even as we do not consider the Reformed [orthodox], so do they not consider us orthodox. **What a cross contradiction and what vile mockery of Christ’s institution are thus involved if both parties celebrate one combined Communion!**”

C. F. W. Walther, “Communion Fellowship,” 182–83. “As for the rest, **it should also be noted that through Holy Communion the Church has always separated itself, not only from heretics and heterodox but also from so-called schismatics.** A schismatic is one who has separated himself from the Church—not indeed because of a fundamental article—but still because of teaching or certain adiaphora. We cannot give the Sacrament to such a one either.”

¹⁵ C. F. W. Walther, “Communion Fellowship,” Thesis XIII, 191. “**The more unionism and syncretism are the sin and corruption of our time, the more the loyalty of the orthodox Church now demands that the Lord’s Supper not be misused as a means of external union without the internal unity of faith.**”

C. F. W. Walther, “Communion Fellowship,” 191. “Now if even the blind heathen did not change their false religions, is it not truly terrible if this is done by *Christians* today when they, as it clearly appears at the Communion practice of the union churches, **combine the truth of the Christian religion with the lie, and would have the latter given equal standing with the former in the Church?**”

68 **THESIS III ... Therefore we hold that unity of faith in the doctrine and *all its articles* is**
69 **prerequisite to Communion fellowship. This unity is intrinsic to the fellowship of the**
70 **Church and its expression in Holy Communion. Communion fellowship is church**
71 **fellowship.**