

An Appeal for Charity with Clarity: Observations and Questions on Terms and Phrases in Need of Clarification

The ongoing theological discussions in synod will benefit from a close look at key words in two documents and a related synodical resolution. When the stakes are as high as they have become, we do well to pay careful attention to the words we use and to remember that charity and truth are still closely related. The documents referred to in this essay are (1) a CTCR study, “The Lutheran Understanding of Church Fellowship” (hereafter TLUoCF) in *Convention Workbook: Reports and Overtures, 61st Regular Convention, LCMS, 375-387*; (2) a subsequent report (also called “response”), which summarizes discussions of the study at the district level and is titled “The Lutheran Understanding of Church Fellowship: A Report on Synodical Discussions” (hereafter “Report”) in *Workbook, 48-51*; and (3) Resolution 3-07A of the 2001 synodical convention in *Convention Proceedings: 61st Regular Convention, LCMS, 137-138*.¹ In this essay, selected passages from the documents are excerpted and related to comments and questions regarding the meaning of key terms.

The Terms: Their Contexts, Meanings, and Implications

A critical term in the discussions is “fellowship.” The documents leave no question about its meaning: “Historical doctrinal differences among Lutheran, Reformed, and Roman Catholic churches remain and tragically go to the very heart of the Gospel that creates and preserves church unity” (“Report.” *Workbook, 50*; IV. B., paragraph 1). “. . . LCMS pastors and congregations agree as a condition of membership in the Synod not to take part in the services and sacramental rites of heterodox congregations or of those of mixed confessions” (“Report.” *Workbook, 50*; V. A., paragraph 1).

It is clear that “fellowship” refers to engaging in religious activity with others who profess a Christian faith. The “Report” makes no reference to participating in any kind of religious event with those outside that body, for example, Jews, Unitarians, Muslims. “Fellowship” is always understood in this way, as *church* fellowship in an inter-Christian context. “TLUoCF” is even more explicit: “‘fellowship’ describes a wide range of activities among Christians” (TLUoCF. *Workbook, 375*; paragraph 1).

“Worship” is also a key term in that it denotes a public religious act. It is defined in “historic LCMS understanding” as “any occasion in which the Word of God is preached and prayer is made to Him by a fully authorized church worship leader” (Report. *Workbook, 50*; V. A., paragraph 2). Clearly, an “occasion” sponsored by a civic entity can include worship activities, in which case the kingdom of the left intrudes into the Kingdom of the Right. Thus, if a civic event is publicized as a worship service, includes religious acts (prayer, spiritual songs, and/or homiletical content), and features worship leaders who are not or do not consider themselves Christian, “fellowship” guidelines do not apply; that is, Christians do not participate. The First Commandment is clear on such matters, as are other biblical mandates (see also below).

In regard to the question of participating in a pastoral capacity in a civic event with non-Christians, some confusion has arisen about the implications of the following statement: “Without such a restriction [i.e., a directive not to mention Jesus in a prayer], a Lutheran pastor may for valid and good reason participate in civic affairs such as an inauguration, a graduation, or a right-to-life activity” (“Report.” *Workbook, 50*; V. B., paragraph 2).

Mention in the fellowship “Report” of a “restriction” on using the name of Jesus in a prayer does not at all imply that a Christian (layman or pastor) would participate in prayer or worship on a platform with those who call on false gods as long as there is no restriction on using the name of Jesus. Such a restriction might well occur in any civic context in which sponsors of an event perceive that mention of Jesus’ name might offend

¹ All documents are also available on the LCMS Web page. Page numbers refer to printed documents; section numbers/letters should be used to locate citations in the PDF Web documents. Addresses of documents on LCMS Web page (or access from pull-down menu on the home page): “The Lutheran Understanding of Church Fellowship” (“the study”) at www.lcms.org/ctcr/docs/pdf/flwshp2k.pdf; “TLUoCF: a Report on Synodical Discussions” at www.lcms.org/ctcr/docs/pdf/chfellfinal.pdf; 2001 LCMS Convention—list of resolutions (see 3-07A on 42 of 155) at www.lcms.org/convention/2001finalres.pdf.

non-Christians in attendance, for example, a political gathering to which the organizers invite a pastor to offer a prayer or invocation but do not want to risk alienating any political supporters, or a high school graduation at which the principal or school board is concerned that the name of Jesus would offend some students or parents.

It is important to note that, commonly, *a* pastor (not several pastors) is asked to serve as the spiritual representative at an event. (Even civic leaders can be sensitive to “fellowship” issues.) Note also the typical “civic affairs” cited; the religious act (a prayer or invocation) is incidental to the primary agenda.

Several of the most contentious terms in the continuing crisis are “cases of discretion,” “once-in-a-lifetime situations,” and “exceptions.” In the “Report” (“Cases of Discretion”) we read, “We do not want to fall into the trap of case-law rigidity by setting down rules for every conceivable situation. At the same time, the exception should not become the rule, lest the truth of the Gospel be compromised” (“Report.” *Workbook*, 51; V. B., paragraph 4).

Such an observation suggests that we would like to have it both ways, but the second statement raises serious questions. An exception assumes a standard. If the gospel is “compromised,” is it not the “exception” that does just that (indeed, may be anticipated to do so)? Wherein does the “compromise” lie if not in the “exceptional” participation, pastorally justified as a “case of discretion” in an “exceptional” context? If participating *more* than once can compromise the gospel, is not that precisely why one does not participate in the “exceptional” event in the first place? If the gospel can be compromised in a fellowship context, in an inter-religious context—civic or otherwise—the risk is unthinkable high and is to be avoided; a Christian does not participate. It is also important to note that in the “Report,” “once-in-a-lifetime situations”² is an expression referring to fellowship, specifically to “pastors . . . equally committed to LCMS *fellowship* principles [emphasis mine]” (“Report.” *Workbook*, 50; V. B., paragraph 3). It does not apply to participation in inter-religious events.

What is the implication of the phrase “case-law rigidity”? Does it preclude the use of helpful, typical examples for guiding practice? Similarly, the term “proof-texting” has been used pejoratively in related discussions. Yet, is not a matrix of relevant passages, for instance, Romans 16:17, 1 Corinthians 10:14 and following, 2 Corinthians 6:14-18, and others cited in the document the foundation for practice in worship relationships? On what is pastoral judgment based if not on clear scriptural mandates such as these? While “consultations” with counselors and presidents may be helpful and “on-the-spot decisions” occasionally necessary, they do not obviate the need for the counsel of Scripture, nor can they be in contradiction to Scripture.

Furthermore, we read that a “pastor may question even his own decision and wish he had taken another course of action” (“Report.” *Workbook*, Part V. B., “Cases of Discretion,” paragraph 5). To be sure. If one has sinned against the First Commandment, does any amount of “consultation” or, in rare cases, the fact that it required a pastoral “on-the-spot decision” justify the offense? What is needed then is an attitude of humility and contrition and a readiness to admit poor judgment, despite one’s good intentions, and to ask forgiveness for the offense. Even more to the point, given the high risk of ambiguous or false witness inherent in many “exceptional” public circumstances, is the trusty saw: When in doubt, just say no. Red flags are red for good reason. A conscience formed from Scripture is a reliable guide; first concerns and initial hesitations are often “spot on” and most useful for “on-the-spot” decisions, especially in regard to public pastoral acts that give public witness. If charity is to prevail, we first acknowledge that love for God (Matthew 22:37-38) precedes and is the source of charity toward the brother and the neighbor.

Resolution 3-07A

Probably most debated is the intent of the fourth Resolved in Resolution 3-07A: “commend for use and guidance to build that unity where it is still lacking.” Speaking directly to this Resolved are the closing paragraphs of the “Report”:

²Even in the context of fellowship, the potential for the “Gospel [to] to be compromised” can be considerable when a nebulous “once-in-a-lifetime” situation is multiplied by some 6-7000 active pastors.

The desire of some for a *more detailed examination* of scriptural and confessional passages cited in the [study] . . . is a positive sign. Obviously LCMS members want the Synod's fellowship principles and practices to be firmly grounded on their biblical and confessional foundations. Encouraging *continued study* does not mean that the LCMS has no position on fellowship. . . . For the sake of our unity in the pure doctrine of Christ, we ask God to bless our church *as we continue to study this issue* [emphases mine] ("Report." *Workbook*, 51; A concluding word on the responses).

The full Resolved reads as follows: "Resolved that we commend this study³ and response⁴ for continued use and guidance to build that unity where it is still lacking" (*Proceedings*, 137).

We see that the "Report" closes with a clear emphasis on "*more detailed examination*" and "*continued study*," even imploring God's blessing "*as we continue to study this issue* [emphases mine]." The verbal context is quite clear. Thus, the fourth Resolved of Resolution 3-07A "commend[ing]" the study and response for "use and guidance" – given also the unresolved questions cited in the "Report" – is best understood as "use and guidance" for "*continued study*," as the "Report" itself urges. That is to say: Disagreements have been noted, summarized, and even responded to in some degree; now there is need for further study aimed at accord (concord). We are not yet (no longer) "walking together" in fellowship doctrine and practice. Do we need further evidence than the sad events of the past two years? Indeed, we regretfully observe that using a proof text – "once-in-a-lifetime situations" – from the "Report" as a guide for practice has resulted in greater disunity within the synod. It is fair to ask if those who claim that the resolution "commends" both documents as guides for practice also endorse using a phrase from the "Report" on district discussions on fellowship to defend participation in inter-faith events sponsored by either civic or religious entities.

It is true that a resolution to recommit "TLUoCF" (the "study") to the CTCR and synod at large for additional study failed. (Take note that the "Report" / response document was not included in this motion.) However, even a cursory reading of the defeated resolution (*Proceedings*, 138) reveals the intent of its framers and the reason for its defeat. The Whereases take issue with the content of the CTCR study, stating, for example, that "numerous questions and concerns remain unresolved, . . . including the study's own commitment to a genuinely Lutheran understanding of church fellowship." Demonstrating their disagreement with this judgment, the delegates defeated the resolution to recommit and, with their negative votes, supported "TLUoCF" (the "study"). It is no leap of logic to conclude that the delegates who subsequently passed Resolution 3-07A understood their action as again endorsing "TLUoCF" and that the inclusion of the "Report" ("response"), in the fourth Resolved was hardly given passing notice. If one were to judge the intent of Resolution 3-07A fairly *in the context of the defeated motion*, that intent would be to endorse "TLUoCF." Thus, if any document might be understood as commended to guide practice, it would be "TLUoCF" (the "study"), not the "Report on Synodical Discussions."

In effect, ultimately, Resolution 3-07A paired a comprehensive CTCR study on fellowship (with its exhaustive scriptural and confessional apparatus) with a less formal summary of responses to and discussions of that study – a mix of documents most unusual for a church body to adopt (or even "commend") as a basis for practice, truly an "odd coupling." There is much that is useful and informative in the "Report"; a goodly portion of it, however, is simply descriptive of fellowship concerns in the post-modern cultural milieu. Thus,

³The Lutheran Understanding of Church Fellowship (Office of the President and CTCR of the LCMS).

⁴The Lutheran Understanding of Church Fellowship: A Report on Synodical Discussions.

"Study" refers to this initial CTCR document (a term it uses of itself), although in other Resolveds and Whereases the "study" is generally referred to as the "document." In the third Resolved, "study" refers to the "document"; yet in the second Resolved, "study" refers to the act of studying the "document." Also, the term "Report" is part of the title of the "Response," i.e., the account of discussions, rather than of the title of the more formal document, which, as noted above, is called the "study." Inconsistent and counter-intuitive language is not helpful in important documents and resolutions.

by its very nature and purpose, it lacks the characteristics, style, and tone of a document framed to guide practice. In any case, the "Report" also deals only with fellowship, that is, religious activities with other Christians. As noted above, the section entitled "Cases of Discretion" has already been misapplied to worship activities outside that context and has proven to be far more open to misinterpretation than the framers or delegates could have foreseen. The devil is in such details.

Finally, one might reasonably ask what "commend," as opposed to "adopt," means in the context of scriptural and confessional practice. Do we not "commend" for study and "adopt" for practice? Or did "commend" here simply mean that there was not agreement enough to "adopt"? Precision in language is critical. We dare not jeopardize the unity that we have in Christ by sounding an uncertain or tentative trumpet in these crucial matters. In the midst of such uncertainty, as the Resolved itself notes "unity . . . is still lacking" (an accurate observation), but unity is not likely to be attained by premature application or misapplication of statements or guidelines on which consensus is lacking.

What Does This Mean? (A Theological/Practical Postscript)

In the sea of relativism that is our pluralistic American culture, we take seriously the charge to "make disciples . . . , teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you." Even as the message of the gospel includes (is directed to) all people, just as surely it excludes those who exclude themselves by rejecting its unique and distinctive saving message. Jesus Christ, in His particularity and revealed fullness, is, and will remain, an offense to many (see John 15:18-21 and Matthew 5:10-12). We can expect nothing different. These words of Jesus remind us of the futility of engaging in "public relations" in well-intentioned efforts to make the message of sin and grace, of law and gospel, culturally acceptable or attractive. By the same token, despite what we might consider good intentions, we avoid giving the public impression that Christians are but another branch of one (more-alike-than-different) multi-religious family of sincere believers. The pressures to adjust the message of the gospel to the culture are subtle, and we are not always aware when we succumb to them. In our personal relationships with others we attempt to be "all things to all men . . . for the sake of the gospel, that [we] may share its blessings" (1 Corinthians 9:22-23). In pluralistic public circumstances, however, love is best expressed by not obscuring important distinctions—or the saving message of the gospel—by "once-in-a-lifetime" or "exceptional" public displays that imply or give witness to believers and unbelievers alike a unity (or an equality or approval of beliefs) that does not exist. For the only unity we have is grounded in "one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who rules over us all and works through us all, and lives in us all" (Ephesians 4:4-5).

Addendum:

Since this essay was written and submitted for publication, the CTCR has responded to a question posed by a dispute resolution panel regarding the practical application of the documents commended by Resolution 3-07A.

Panel Question: "Would offering a prayer by an LCMS pastor in a 'civic event' in which prayers would also be offered by representatives of non-Christian religions be in and of itself a violation of the paragraph under 'Section V point B. Cases of Discretion' in the CTCR document 'The Lutheran Understanding of Church Fellowship,' a document adopted by the 2001 Convention of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod 'for continued use and guidance?'" [Take note that the document referred to is the "report" of district discussions of the "study." As noted above, it was "commended," not adopted, by Resolution 3-07A.]

CTCR Answer: "No. Section V, B. does not explicitly address the issue of 'offering a prayer by an LCMS pastor in a "civic event" in which prayers would also be offered by representatives of non-Christian religions.'" The CTCR is presently considering assignments with respect to this issue, including the formulation of guidelines for participation in civic events and the definition of 'civic event.'" (Adopted February 18, 2003.)

That is, the CTCR clearly states that the paragraph in the document commended by Resolution 3-07A does *not* apply to such a situation. Even more important than the one-word answer is the reason given. In essence, the CTCR said: No, the document does not prohibit such participation because the document is not relevant to events which include non-Christian participants. In other words, the "cases of discretion" clause cannot be

used either to prohibit *or to permit* participation in such events. “Cases of discretion” may relate to fellowship among Christians, but not to offering a prayer in an event involving non-Christians.

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