

# FELLOWSHIP AT THE LORD'S SUPPER

Colleagues,

Jeffrey Anderson supplies today's Thursday Theology whilst Robin and I are both out of town. One of the pleasant memories of my first semester as prof at Concordia Seminary (35 yrs ago) was great students. One of that creme-de-la-creme bunch was Jeff, who still remembers that first semester encounter where he learned to have "sufficient grounds" for anything he said or wrote in Systematic Theology 101. And that for any assertion claiming to be Christian that "sufficient grounding" had to be the crucified and risen Messiah. From his piece below you'll see whether he still practices what his prof once preached. What's happened since then? "After 20 years, I retired from parish ministry. And for 12 years I have been enjoying my second career as an operating system and network engineer in the computer world. I teach or lead Bible Classes from time to time. And I am part of a long-lived men's Bible Study in our LCMS congregation. My wife Judith and I have chosen to live 'in the city.' And we have found a warm and intentional Christian fellowship in a small Episcopal congregation in the inner city of Akron, Ohio. This parish family, which gets its life from the Sacrament, supports us in our life in the city."

Concerning the text that follows Jeff says: "The theses were written on Luther's birthday Nov. 10, 1982—one year before he turned 500! At that time the 'prayer fellowship' issue had temporarily receded to the back burner in the LCMS, and the 'close/closed' communion issue was hot. It is probably enough to say that these theses were my contribution to the debate at that time. This communion debate, along with a rejuvenated 'prayer fellowship' debate, have both flared up again in the LCMS. I

suspect that they remain unsettled because God's promisory Word has not yet been the chief tool applied to the issue. For that reason, 'these 28 old theses' may be a paradigm of how the Gospel can be applied to these and other sticky spiritual/church issues."

Jeff's a gem. Enjoy his Gospel-grounded proposals below.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

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## **THESES ON FELLOWSHIP AT THE LORD'S SUPPER**

**Jeff Anderson**

**November 10, 1982**

### **INTRODUCTION**

*Lutheran congregations which have adopted a less restrictive practice of administering Holy Communion, sharing the Sacrament with confessing Christians of other synods or other denominations, should not do so quietly or in a hidden manner, for they are celebrating the highest feast God has given us in this world. Rather, they should be able to proclaim boldly the hope they are celebrating and to do so with a clear conscience.*

*On the other hand, a less restrictive practice dare not be an expression of spiritual indifference or mere Christian friendliness. It must be an expression of the Good News of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ for me and all sinners. Therefore, the following statements are offered for fraternal discussion to examine whether various practices of administering the Sacrament enjoy the support of Scripture and*

of our Lord Jesus, who gives us this great feast of his body and blood.

**A. Eucharistic fellowship is different from “church” fellowship.**

1. Declarations of “synodical fellowship” or “church union” are legitimately in the hands of synods, councils, and commissions, for such declarations are adiaphora. Scripture neither commands nor forbids the formation of synods or church bodies, nor their union or independence, as the case may be.
2. Christian fellowship in the Eucharist, however, is commanded by Christ. Therefore no human rule and no synodical affiliation dare hinder Christ’s will and command. Jesus says, “Take and drink, all of you” [Matthew 26:27], not “Take and drink, Lutherans,” or “Take and drink, Catholics.” He addresses all his disciples.
3. The presence of disagreements or doctrinal differences between synods or church bodies may be signs of sin. But such brokenness does not exempt Christians of different affiliations from eating and drinking the Sacrament with each other.
4. Christian fellowship in the Eucharist is indeed the Lord’s Supper when it is celebrated under Christ’s promise: “Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins” [Matthew 26:28]. Faith in this promise, and not “agreement in all doctrines,” constitutes proper reception of the Lord’s Supper.
5. It is a theology of works which mingles “eucharistic fellowship” and “synodical fellowship” or predicates the first upon the second. A theology of grace keeps first things first and recognizes Christ’s primary fellowship

**B. Eucharist precedes consensus on all articles of faith.**

*in the Eucharist where sinners eat and drink together despite differences of affiliation.*

- 6. The Sacrament is abused when it is used legalistically as a "carrot" which one can eat and drink only after one first is holy, pure, and perfect. The Sacrament is precisely for those who are not holy, pure, or perfect but who need to be made holy by the Sacrament itself. "Come to me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" [Matt. 11:28].*
- 7. Likewise, the Sacrament is used legalistically when it is held out as a "carrot" which Christians of different churches cannot share together until they have achieved a uniformity and consensus.*
- 8. A theology of works builds Communion fellowship on a human foundation of agreement on articles of faith and of consensus on many doctrines. Such agreements reached at conference tables bring honor to human beings, but they do not comfort the hungry soul, for such human agreements come and go with the changing tides of human history.*
- 9. A theology of grace, by focusing on the Eucharist, celebrates a certain and lasting oneness based on Christ's changeless promise: "Given and shed for you."*
- 10. Consensus on the spectrum of doctrinal issues is a valid priority for the Church and a God-pleasing goal. But common sharing of the Sacrament by Christians is a higher priority because it expresses the unity we already have. "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all" [Ephesians 4:4-7 RSV].*
- 11. A married couple refusing to live together commit sin, even though living together may express a greater uniformity than the couple really has. A marriage should*

be consummated in love and celebration, even though the husband and wife have not reached full consensus on “marriage and all its articles.”

12. Likewise, the bride of Jesus Christ consummates her Eucharistic relationship with the Bridegroom, Jesus Christ, and with her brothers and sisters in Christ, even though all articles of doctrine are not yet settled between God and Church, or synod and synod, or denomination and denomination.
13. To place full doctrinal agreement ahead of Eucharistic fellowship places sanctification ahead of justification. Doctrinal growth and doctrinal consensus are fruits of the Spirit, which are advanced by the power of the means of grace given to those who share the Lord’s Supper. To place sanctification (full doctrinal agreement) ahead of justification (given for you for the forgiveness of sins) is neither Lutheran nor biblical. **C. Eucharistic fellowship makes the invisible church visible.**
14. Declarations of “church fellowship” are fitting actions to express human consensus, but “eucharistic fellowship” is God’s visible expression of the oneness which he gives in Jesus Christ. 1 Corinthians 10:17 : “Because there is one loaf, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the same loaf.”
15. If the Sacrament has the power to reconcile the sinner and God – a fact which is true, but invisible – then surely the Sacrament has the power to unite organizationally disparate Christians – although that union is also, at first, invisible, except in the common eating and drinking in the Eucharist.
16. Eucharistic fellowship around the table of Jesus Christ is an expression of faith in the Gospel, for no human eye can discern the oneness of German and Norwegian, ELCA and LCMS, scholar and mentally limited, plant manager and

union leader, liberated woman and traditional patriarch, Lutheran and Catholic.

17. If the Lord's Supper is shared only when the relationship of one synod or church body to another is complete, then the Lord's Supper is reduced to a symbol of man-made unity already achieved.
18. But if the Lord's Supper is celebrated between church bodies which do not have external fellowship or union, then it is elevated to its rightful place as a sacrament, which puts into action God's power to heal, unite, and reconcile diverse and different Christians. **D. The serious implications of non-fellowship in the Eucharist.**
19. To say that other Christians receive the Sacrament when they celebrate it, but to refuse to receive the Sacrament with them denies our own discipleship in the footsteps of Christ. For if Jesus "receives sinners and eats with them," (e.g., with other synods or Christians not yet officially "members" of the congregation), then we are breaking fellowship with Jesus Christ when we refuse to eat with those same "sinners" [Luke 15:2].
20. "One Lord, one faith, one Baptism" [Ephesians 4:5] is Paul's expression of proper Christian solidarity within the variegated Body of Christ. Fellowship at one table is Christ's expression of the one Body He creates in giving his body and blood for you.
21. To confess invisible love of my neighbor, while I publicly avoid him, is to live a lie. To confess the invisible oneness of all Christians while I publicly refuse to eat at Christ's table with them, or allow them to eat with me, is to confound the Gospel in front of a lost and puzzled world.
22. Paul says that those Corinthians who gorge themselves, get drunk, and fail to save food and drink for the poorer brothers and sisters are defiling the Lord's Supper

because they do not discern that rich and poor, early-comer and late-comer, are all part of the body of Christ [1 Corinthians 11]. So we fail to discern the body of Christ (all believers) and we eat unworthily when we exclude other Christians from the eating and drinking of the Lord's Supper. It is his meal – and not our private party. **E. Implications of Eucharistic fellowship.**

23. It is lazy discipleship to join with other Christians in the Lord's Supper and then uncaringly ignore their doctrinal weaknesses. It is also lazy discipleship to confront other Christians with their doctrinal weaknesses, but then fail to take the hard step of kneeling beside them at the one table to accept God's forgiveness for one's own doctrinal weaknesses.
24. It is only by the power of the Holy Spirit that one can both join with other Christians in the Lord's Supper and then also care enough to nurture and confront them with their doctrinal weaknesses while also accepting their nurture and counsel [Colossians 3:12-17].
25. The debate over Eucharistic fellowship with denominations closest to one's own is a smoke-screen of Satan to keep us from facing the radical vision of Christ's world-wide fellowship. For if one allows Eucharistic fellowship to extend to the church body closest to one's own, then there will be no excuse for stopping it from being extended to all Christians who confess Christ's presence in the Holy Supper.
26. There will always be a line between who is welcome at the Lord's Table and who is not. These theses simply suggest that the line not be drawn along lines of denominational affiliation but along the wider lines of which the Small Catechism speaks: "He is truly worthy and well prepared who has faith in these words: Given and shed for you for the remission of sins."

27. *Christians (those who have been baptized into Christ) who recognize their need and confess trust in Christ's promise – "This is my body and blood given for you and others for the forgiveness of sins" – are welcome at the eucharistic table for they are Christ's body in the world [1 Corinthians 12:27].*
28. *Practices which carry out this wider understanding of the Eucharist affirm the threefold benefits of the Sacrament:*
- a. Forgiveness – which sustains our relationship with God in the body of his Son [Matthew 26]*
  - b. Strength – to live as members of the body of Christ [Ephesians 2:10]*
  - c. Unity – with the rest of the body of Christ [1 Corinthians 10:16-17]*