

# **Annotated Reader on Church Fellowship**

Rev Dr Michael Lockwood

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At present, many people in the Lutheran Church of Australia are wrestling with the question of whether the LCA can or should stay together, or if instead some form of separation is desirable or inevitable. This has largely been prompted by the ongoing dispute regarding women's ordination, though many other disagreements regarding doctrine and practice are also feeding into this question. The purpose of this reader is to lead people back into the Scriptures, the Lutheran Confessions, the *Theses of Agreement*, and the LCA's *Document of Union*, so that our reflections on this matter are not driven by emotional or pragmatic considerations, but instead flow out of what we believe, teach, and confess.

## The Holy Scriptures

Theme 1: The only foundation for the Church is Christ and his Word, as Christ's sheep gather together to hear the voice of their Good Shepherd.

### John 10:1–16 (ESV)

<sup>1</sup> “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber. <sup>2</sup> But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. <sup>3</sup> To him the gatekeeper opens. The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. <sup>4</sup> When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. <sup>5</sup> A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers.” <sup>6</sup> This figure of speech Jesus used with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. <sup>7</sup> So Jesus again said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. <sup>8</sup> All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. <sup>9</sup> I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture. <sup>10</sup> The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. <sup>11</sup> I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. <sup>12</sup> He who is a hired hand and not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. <sup>13</sup> He flees because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. <sup>14</sup> I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, <sup>15</sup> just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. <sup>16</sup> And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.

### Ephesians 2:13-14, 19-22 (ESV)

<sup>13</sup> But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. <sup>14</sup> For he himself is our peace ... <sup>19</sup> So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, <sup>20</sup> built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, <sup>21</sup> in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. <sup>22</sup> In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

Theme 2: It is Christ and his Word that creates the unity of the Church, by drawing the people of God together.

- Our Lord Jesus Christ prayed for the unity of his Church (John 20:21). He also calls us to “maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3). So what does this mean? In the same passages of Scripture Christ tells us, by urging us to be anchored in him and his Word as the source of our unity.
- Thus we can see that this is not unity as we human beings frequently conceive of it. It is not unity based on human compromises, where we whittle down our teaching to a lowest common denominator on which we can all agree. It is not unity based on human good will, where we spout slogans such as “doctrine divides but deeds unite,” and then try to focus on human love and good deeds as the glue that will hold us together. We human beings are sinful

and fractious, so any unity that is based on our efforts will be shallow and easily fly apart. Instead, the true unity of the Church is unity in Christ and his Word, as we follow the Lord Jesus Christ and confess what he has taught us, and in this way discover that he has drawn us closer to all of those who are willing to hear his voice.

### **John 17:17–23 (ESV)**

<sup>17</sup> Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. <sup>18</sup> As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. <sup>19</sup> And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be sanctified in truth. <sup>20</sup> “I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, <sup>21</sup> that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. <sup>22</sup> The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, <sup>23</sup> I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.

### **1 Corinthians 1:10 (ESV)**

<sup>10</sup> I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree [Greek: say the same thing], and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment.

### **Ephesians 4:1–16 (ESV)**

<sup>1</sup> I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, <sup>2</sup> with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, <sup>3</sup> eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. <sup>4</sup> There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call— <sup>5</sup> one Lord, one faith, one baptism, <sup>6</sup> one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. <sup>7</sup> But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ’s gift. <sup>8</sup> Therefore it says, “When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men.” <sup>9</sup> (In saying, “He ascended,” what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions, the earth? <sup>10</sup> He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.) <sup>11</sup> And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, <sup>12</sup> to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, <sup>13</sup> until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, <sup>14</sup> so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. <sup>15</sup> Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, <sup>16</sup> from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

Theme 3: Beware of false teachers and their false teachings, which war against the Church and sow division within it.

On this front, the Scriptures make the following points:

1. False teaching spreads like gangrene or leaven. If we tolerate it, it only continues to spread until all is ruined.
2. It is not only false teaching that we must avoid, but also false teachers. We must not partner with them in any way, so that we do not share in their evil or become infected or encumbered by it.
3. False teaching is at odds with the unity of the Church. It is false teachers who threaten the Church's unity, not those who strive to confess the truth (Romans 16:17; Acts 20:30; 1 Timothy 6:3-5; Titus 3:10).
4. It is easy to be fooled, since the false teachers come like wolves in sheep's clothing. In other words, they appear in the church, masquerading as believers, while leading people away from Christ and his Word. Even the antichrist or "man of lawlessness" himself will not set himself up in the White House or the Kremlin, but in the temple of God (2 Thessalonians 2:4).
5. We can spot false teachers in the following ways:
  - a. Their lack of adherence to the words of Christ and his Apostles
  - b. The way they undermine God's Law and give the green light to sin
  - c. The way they undermine faith in Christ
  - d. Their hypocrisy: that is, their outward veneer of piety that is not matched by the fruit that comes from true repentance and faith in Jesus Christ

### **Matthew 7:15–27 (ESV)**

<sup>15</sup> "Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. <sup>16</sup> You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? <sup>17</sup> So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. <sup>18</sup> A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. <sup>19</sup> Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. <sup>20</sup> Thus you will recognize them by their fruits.

<sup>21</sup> "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. <sup>22</sup> On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' <sup>23</sup> And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'

<sup>24</sup> "Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. <sup>25</sup> And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. <sup>26</sup> And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. <sup>27</sup> And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it."

### **Matthew 16:5–12 (ESV)**

<sup>5</sup> When the disciples reached the other side, they had forgotten to bring any bread. <sup>6</sup> Jesus said to them, “Watch and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.” <sup>7</sup> And they began discussing it among themselves, saying, “We brought no bread.” <sup>8</sup> But Jesus, aware of this, said, “O you of little faith, why are you discussing among yourselves the fact that you have no bread? <sup>9</sup> Do you not yet perceive? Do you not remember the five loaves for the five thousand, and how many baskets you gathered? <sup>10</sup> Or the seven loaves for the four thousand, and how many baskets you gathered? <sup>11</sup> How is it that you fail to understand that I did not speak about bread? Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.” <sup>12</sup> Then they understood that he did not tell them to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

### **Luke 12:1 (ESV)**

<sup>1</sup> In the meantime, when so many thousands of the people had gathered together that they were trampling one another, he began to say to his disciples first, “Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy.”

### **Acts 20:24–32 (ESV)**

<sup>24</sup> But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God. <sup>25</sup> And now, behold, I know that none of you among whom I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom will see my face again. <sup>26</sup> Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all, <sup>27</sup> for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God. <sup>28</sup> Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. <sup>29</sup> I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; <sup>30</sup> and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. <sup>31</sup> Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears. <sup>32</sup> And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.

### **Romans 16:17–18 (ESV)**

<sup>17</sup> 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. <sup>18</sup> For such persons do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the naive.

### **1 Corinthians 5:6–13 (ESV)**

<sup>6</sup> Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? <sup>7</sup> Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. <sup>8</sup> Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity

and truth. <sup>9</sup> I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people— <sup>10</sup> not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. <sup>11</sup> But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one. <sup>12</sup> For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? <sup>13</sup> God judges those outside. “Purge the evil person from among you.”

## **2 Corinthians 6:14–18 (ESV)**

<sup>14</sup> Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? <sup>15</sup> What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever? <sup>16</sup> What 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. <sup>17</sup> Therefore go out from their midst, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch no unclean thing; then I will welcome you, <sup>18</sup> and I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to me, says the Lord Almighty.”

## **Galatians 5:7–9 (ESV)**

<sup>7</sup> You were running well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth? <sup>8</sup> This persuasion is not from him who calls you. <sup>9</sup> A little leaven leavens the whole lump.

## **2 Thessalonians 2:1–12 (ESV)**

<sup>1</sup> Now concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we ask you, brothers, <sup>2</sup> not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by a spirit or a spoken word, or a letter seeming to be from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord has come. <sup>3</sup> Let no one deceive you in any way. For that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, <sup>4</sup> who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God. <sup>5</sup> Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you these things? <sup>6</sup> And you know what is restraining him now so that he may be revealed in his time. <sup>7</sup> For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work. Only he who now restrains it will do so until he is out of the way. <sup>8</sup> And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will kill with the breath of his mouth and bring to nothing by the appearance of his coming. <sup>9</sup> The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders, <sup>10</sup> and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. <sup>11</sup> Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false, <sup>12</sup> in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness.

## **2 Thessalonians 3:14–15 (ESV)**

<sup>14</sup> If anyone does not obey what we say in this letter, take note of that person, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed. <sup>15</sup> Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.

## **1 Timothy 5:22 (ESV)**

<sup>22</sup> Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands, nor take part in the sins of others; keep yourself pure.

## **1 Timothy 6:3–5 (ESV)**

<sup>3</sup> If anyone teaches a different doctrine and does not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching that accords with godliness, <sup>4</sup> he is puffed up with conceit and understands nothing. He has an unhealthy craving for controversy and for quarrels about words, which produce envy, dissension, slander, evil suspicions, <sup>5</sup> and constant friction among people who are depraved in mind and deprived of the truth, imagining that godliness is a means of gain.

## **2 Timothy 2:15–19 (ESV)**

<sup>15</sup> Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth. <sup>16</sup> But avoid irreverent babble, for it will lead people into more and more ungodliness, <sup>17</sup> and their talk will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, <sup>18</sup> who have swerved from the truth, saying that the resurrection has already happened. They are upsetting the faith of some. <sup>19</sup> But God's firm foundation stands, bearing this seal: "The Lord knows those who are his," and, "Let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity."

## **Titus 3:10–11 (ESV)**

<sup>10</sup> As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him, <sup>11</sup> knowing that such a person is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned.

## **2 Peter 1:16–2:3 (ESV)**

<sup>16</sup> For we did not follow cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. <sup>17</sup> For when he received honor and glory from God the Father, and the voice was borne to him by the Majestic Glory, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased," <sup>18</sup> we ourselves heard this very voice borne from heaven, for we were with him on the holy mountain. <sup>19</sup> And we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts, <sup>20</sup> knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. <sup>21</sup> For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

<sup>1</sup> But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction. <sup>2</sup> And many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of truth will be blasphemed. <sup>3</sup> And in their greed they will exploit you with false words. Their condemnation from long ago is not idle, and their destruction is not asleep.

### 1 John 4:1–6 (ESV)

<sup>1</sup> Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world. <sup>2</sup> By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, <sup>3</sup> and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already. <sup>4</sup> Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world. <sup>5</sup> They are from the world; therefore they speak from the world, and the world listens to them. <sup>6</sup> We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us; whoever is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error.



# The Lutheran Confessions

## Luther

Many of those who are concerned about the unbiblical teachings and practices that are being pushed in the LCA will nevertheless say that no matter how bad things get they will never leave. Instead, they say that we should follow Luther's example, who was kicked out of the Roman Catholic Church rather than leaving of his own accord. Thus, they say that we should stay in the LCA and seek to reform it until we get kicked out.

As we have seen, this is not the course of action that Holy Scripture prescribes. The Scriptures do not say that we should continue to associate and work with false teachers until they are sick of us and tell us to go away. Instead, the Bible puts the onus on us to avoid the false teachers.

Yet what about Luther? What course of action does he encourage us to take?

In considering this question, we should first consider Luther's circumstances. By his own reckoning, Luther discovered the Gospel in 1518.<sup>1</sup> Then, by 1521 the Pope had excommunicated him, and the Holy Roman Emperor had placed a death sentence on his head. So in other words, Luther did not have to wrestle with this question for very long, since the decision to leave was made for him within three years. Therefore, his example does not tell us much about what we should do in our situation, where we have been battling women's ordination and other errors for more than a quarter of a century.

Far more relevant are Luther's words about this matter. Here we find that he addresses this question in the *Smalcald Articles*, a document that was later incorporated into the *Book of Concord* and is therefore normative for the Lutheran Church today. And what does he say there? He calls the Pope the Antichrist and says that we should not endure him as our head (SA II IV 14).

## The Formula of Concord

Instead of quoting directly from the *Smalcald Articles*, I have quoted from the *Formula of Concord*, which quotes the *Smalcald Articles* with approval. The clearest statement about church fellowship in the Lutheran Confessions comes from the *Formula of Concord's* article on *adiaphora*.

The background to this article is as follows. Shortly after Luther's death, Emperor Charles V sent his troops into Germany and tried to force the Lutherans to be part of the Roman Catholic Church once more. Faced with this pressure, Philip Melancthon proposed a compromise. He acknowledged that the Lutherans must not surrender their faith in Christ as their saviour. Nevertheless, he suggested that they could accept most of the outward ceremonies of the Roman Catholic Church, since in and of themselves these ceremonies are *adiaphora*. That is, they are neither commanded nor forbidden in Scripture.

The *Formula of Concord* rejects such compromises. Instead, it says that our actions preach a message, and in this case it would be the wrong one. While these ceremonies of the Catholic Church may be *adiaphora* in and of themselves, they are associated with many false beliefs and idolatrous opinions. By participating in these ceremonies, the Lutherans would be giving the impression that they were at one with these errors and with the church that promulgated them. In this way they would be failing to confess the truth, as Christ calls us to do. Rather than compromising for the sake of external peace, the *Formula* urges Christians to refuse to have anything to do with the Pope and his false teachings.

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<sup>1</sup> LW 34:377

It is this opinion of the *Formula of Concord* that lies behind many of the statements on church fellowship in the LCA's *Theses of Agreement*, including its claim that we must avoid doing anything that creates "the impression of unity in faith or of church fellowship, where it does not exist" (TA II.2.d).

### **Formula of Concord X. Church Practices, Called *Adiaphora*, or Indifferent Things**

<sup>10</sup> We also believe, teach, and confess that at a time of confession, when the enemies of God's Word want to suppress the pure doctrine of the Holy Gospel, God's entire church, indeed, every single Christian, but especially the ministers of the Word, as the directors of the community of God (God's church), is bound by God's Word to confess the doctrine freely and openly. They are bound to confess every aspect of (pure) religion, not only in words, but also in works and actions. In this case, even in adiaphora, they must not yield to the adversaries or permit these adiaphora to be forced on them by their enemies, whether by violence or cunning, to the detriment of the true worship of God and the introduction and sanction of idolatry. <sup>11</sup> For it is written:

For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery. (Galatians 5:1)

Yet because of false brothers secretly brought in—who slipped in to spy out our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might bring us into slavery—to them we did not yield in submission even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you. (Galatians 2:4–5)

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<sup>15</sup> The article about Christian freedom is at stake here. The Holy Spirit, through the holy apostle's mouth, sincerely told His Church to preserve this article, as we have just heard. As soon as Christian freedom is weakened and human traditions are forced on the Church with coercion, as though it were wrong and a sin to omit them, the way is already prepared for idolatry. In this way, human traditions are multiplied and regarded as a divine worship, not only equal to God's ordinances, but even placed above them.

<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, idolaters are confirmed in their idolatry by such yielding and conforming in outward things, where there has not previously been Christian unity in doctrine. On the other hand, true believers are grieved, offended, and weakened in their faith. Every Christian, for the sake of his soul's welfare and salvation, is bound to avoid both of these, as it is written:

Woe to the world for temptations to sin! (Matthew 18:7)

But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea. (Matthew 18:6)

<sup>17</sup> But what Christ says is to be especially remembered:

So everyone who acknowledges Me before men, I also will acknowledge before My Father who is in heaven. (Matthew 10:32)

<sup>18</sup> However, this has always and everywhere been the faith and confession about such matters, by the chief teachers of the Augsburg Confession. We are following in their footsteps and we intend to persevere in their confession by God's grace. Their confession is shown by the

following testimonies drawn from the Smalcald Articles, which were composed and signed in the year 1537:

*From the Smalcald Articles (1537)*

<sup>19</sup> The Smalcald Articles (On the Church) speak about this as follows:

We do not agree with them [the papal bishops] that they are the Church. They are not the Church. Nor will we listen to those things that, under the name of Church, they command or forbid. Thank God, today a seven-year-old child knows what the Church is, namely, the holy believers and lambs who hear the voice of their Shepherd [John 10:11–16]. [SA III XII 1–2]

And shortly before this (“Ordination and the Call”):

If the bishops would be true bishops and would devote themselves to the Church and the Gospel, we might grant them to ordain and confirm us and our preachers. This would be for the sake of love and unity, but not because it was necessary. However, they would have to give up all comedies and spectacular display of unchristian parade and pomp. But they do not even want to be true bishops, but worldly lords and princes, who will neither preach, nor teach, nor baptize, nor administer the Lord’s Supper, nor perform any work or office of the Church. Furthermore, they persecute and condemn those who do discharge these functions, having been called to do so. So the Church should not be deprived of ministers because of the bishops. [SA III X 1–2]

<sup>20</sup> In the article “The Papacy,” the Smalcald Articles say

Therefore, just as we cannot worship the devil himself as Lord and God, so we cannot endure his apostle—the pope or Antichrist—in his rule as head or lord. For what his papal government really consists of ... is to lie and kill and destroy body and soul eternally. [SA II IV 14]

<sup>21</sup> In the Treatise on the Power and Primacy of the Pope, which is appended to the Smalcald Articles and was also signed by the theologians present with their own hands, are these words:

Do not let them burden the Church with traditions. Do not let the authority of anyone prevail more than God’s Word. [Tr 11]

<sup>22</sup> And shortly afterward:

This being the case, all Christians should beware of participating in the godless doctrine, blasphemies, and unjust cruelty of the pope. They should desert and condemn the pope with his followers as the kingdom of Antichrist, just as Christ has commanded, “Beware of false prophets” [Matthew 7:15]. Paul commands that godless teachers should be avoided and condemned as cursed [Galatians 1:8; Titus 3:10]. And he says, “Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers.... What fellowship has light with darkness?” (2 Corinthians 6:14). [Tr 41]

<sup>23</sup> To want to separate one's self from so many lands and nations and to profess a separate doctrine is a serious matter. But here stands God's command that everyone should beware and not agree with those who hold false doctrine or who think of supporting it through cruelty.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> McCain, P. T. (Ed.). (2005). [\*Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions\*](#) (pp. 598–601). St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House.

## **LCA Foundational Documents**

Our Lutheran forebears here in Australia wrestled long and hard with the issue of Church unity, for the following reasons:

1. Many of them came to Australia to escape the religious persecution that resulted from the Prussian Union. That is, in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century the Princes of Prussia forced the Lutherans in their territories into a merger with the Reformed, and prohibited them from using the old Lutheran liturgies that unambiguously confessed the bodily presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper. As a result, many Lutherans came to Australia so that they could maintain the purity of the faith.
2. After arriving in South Australia in 1838, Pastor Kavel and Pastor Fritzsche had a doctrinal dispute that divided the Lutherans in the new colony. From then on, the Lutherans in Australia were divided into multiple synods that took more than a century to come together.

As a result of this history, the leaders of the former ELCA and UELCA who were involved in the dialogues that led to the formation of the LCA in 1966 were acutely aware of how easily their proposed union could fall apart. They therefore had much to say about church fellowship in the foundational documents they drafted for the LCA.

In particular, these Lutheran forebears stressed the following things:

1. Church unity must be built on the foundation of God's Word, as it is given to us in the Holy Scriptures. This includes unity in the pure teaching of the Gospel and in the administration of the Sacraments according to Christ's institution. Where this is lacking—as a result of part of the church persistently rejecting biblical teachings and resisting correction—this must eventually lead to separation (TA I.3.a).
2. We have a God-given responsibility to confess the truth. This includes the confession we make through our practice of church fellowship. As such, we must refuse to be part of a heterodox church. Likewise, we must refuse to participate in a fellowship in which error is given an equal place with the truth.

### **Document of Union**

**CHURCH FELLOWSHIP AND COOPERATION** We adopt the following statements as an expression of the agreement that has been reached between us on matters of church fellowship and cooperation:

...

4. We uphold the distinction between the one, holy, Christian Church and the visible, organized Churches. We believe that the one, holy, Christian Church is present in those visible Churches where the marks of the Church are to be found, that is, where the Gospel of Christ is purely taught and the Sacraments are administered according to Christ's institution (Theses of Agreement, VI).

5. We believe that true Christians are found in every denomination in which to a greater or lesser degree the marks of the one, holy, Christian Church are present, in spite of existing errors, and we rejoice in the unity of the Spirit that binds all true believers to their one Lord. Nevertheless, according to the Word of God and our Lutheran Confessions, church fellowship, that is, mutual recognition as brethren, altar and pulpit fellowship and resultant cooperation in the preaching of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments, pre-supposes unanimity in the pure doctrine of the Gospel and in the right administration of the Sacraments.

6. We reject all religious syncretism or unionism (see Theses of Agreement II, 2, and V. 14,15). Accordingly, we cannot acknowledge ourselves to be in fellowship with Churches with which we are not one in doctrine and practice.

7. We declare that wherever continued cooperation in the preaching of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments and worship exists, there we have a witness to the world of unity in the faith and a profession of church fellowship.

### **Theses of Agreement I: Principles governing church fellowship**

3. We agree that for church fellowship the uniting Churches must be one in the acceptance of the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, as the inspired Word of God and as the only and true source, norm, rule, and standard of all teaching and practice in the Christian Church.

a. We believe that where differences in teaching and practice exist or arise between Churches uniting, these differences are to be removed by willingly submitting to the authority of the Word of God. Where a difference in teaching or practice is a departure from the doctrine of the Bible, such difference cannot be tolerated, but must be pointed out as an error, on the basis of clear passages of Holy Writ; and if the error is persisted in, in spite of instruction, warning, and earnest witness, it must at last lead to a separation.

...

4. We believe that the formal and the material principles must not be brought into opposition to each other, for the Scriptures are the Word of Christ and they testify of Him. Loyalty to Christ requires loyalty to His Word, and loyalty to the Scriptures requires loyalty to Christ, His person, His work, His means of grace. We dare not stress the material principle at the expense of the formal principle, or vice versa.<sup>3</sup> Churches uniting should make their pledge of loyalty to both Christ and His Word (cf Eph 4:1–16).

5. We believe that it is a solemn obligation of the Church to teach the whole counsel of God, rightly dividing the Word of Truth, feeding milk or meat as the case may demand, but never compromising the truth of Scripture, never permitting reason or feeling to undermine the authority of the Word, or substituting for it any form of subjectivism.

### **Theses of Agreement II: Joint prayer and worship**

2. We agree that when joint prayer shows the marks or characteristics of unionism, it must be condemned and avoided. Such marks and characteristics of unionism are:

- a. failure to confess the whole truth of the Divine Word (*in statu confessionis*);
- b. failure to reject and denounce every opposing error;
- c. assigning to error equal right with the truth;
- d. creating the impression of unity in faith or of church fellowship, where it does not exist.

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<sup>3</sup> When it speaks of the formal and material principles, the Theses of Agreement is referring to the two complementary reasons why we as Christians pay heed to the Holy Scriptures. The formal principle means that we listen to the Bible because it is God's Word. The material principle means that we listen to the Bible because it leads us to Christ our saviour. These two principles support each other, rather than being at odds.

## Theses of Agreement V. The Church

14. The term 'Church' is by common usage applied also to visible ecclesiastical organizations or church bodies, usually consisting of a smaller or greater number of congregations having not only their distinctive creeds and confessions, but also modes of worship, rules of life and conduct, polities, ideals, legal incorporation and representation, etc. All such church bodies are only *ecclesia late dicta* and *ecclesiae mixtae*. They are 'true Churches' only in the sense and to the extent that the Word of God is taught by them in its truth and purity and the Sacraments are administered according to Christ's institution.

15. According to the revealed will and command of God, all believers are directed to that visible Church, which teaches the Word of God in its truth and purity and administers the Sacraments according to the institution of their Founder. Conversely, they are directed to avoid all erring and heterodox churches (cf. Theses on Joint Prayer and Worship No. 4).

## Final Comments

So how should we take these passages cited above and apply them to the situation that faces us in the LCA today? This is a difficult question that requires much thought and prayer. Nevertheless, we can say the following things with confidence.

### False teaching is rife within the LCA

First, we should note that false teaching is now widespread within the LCA. This is not simply about women's ordination. Instead, we are now confronted with errors that contradict what the Bible teaches about each member of the Holy Trinity and every article of the Creed.

The Father and his work in creation. For many decades the teaching of evolution has been tolerated in the LCA. This contradicts what the Bible teaches about how God created all things in the beginning to be "very good," without the violence, death, and curse upon creation that have come into the world as a result of human sin (Genesis 3:17-19; Romans 5:12).

More recently, another aspect of the doctrine of creation has been challenged within the LCA, and that is what the Bible teaches about God's creation of human beings as male and female, and the different yet complementary roles that God has given men and women within the family and the Church. We see this not just with women's ordination. We also see it with the way that many people and institutions within the LCA have rejected biblical teaching about marriage and family, by rejecting things like male headship within the family, and by endorsing things like de facto marriage, same-sex marriage, gender fluidity, and easy divorce.

Christ and his work of redemption. The LCA is no longer united around the one Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. Instead, a new and strange gospel has arisen to challenge it. The old Gospel is about the forgiveness of sins and free gift of salvation for all who come to Christ in repentance and faith. The new gospel tries to excuse and justify sin instead. The result is that we no longer perceive any need for forgiveness, and feel secure in our own self-righteousness instead of in the righteousness that comes through faith in Jesus Christ. This new gospel is justified in the name of tolerance, inclusivity, and love, though it is neither tolerant, inclusive, nor loving. Instead of lovingly supporting sinners in turning from their sin, it leaves them to wallow in the misery of their sin. Instead of treating all people the same—as sinners in need of God's mercy—it excuses certain sins, while showing no mercy towards those who commit sins that it cannot tolerate or excuse. This new and false gospel is evident in much of the preaching within the LCA. It is also evident in the way that many of our people and institutions will now justify certain sins, while showing no mercy towards those who commit other sins, by denying to them such things as the seal of confession.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> In the past, private confession and absolution was the one safe place in the entire world where someone who had done something truly terrible could come clean, knowing that he or she would receive forgiveness and mercy instead of condemnation and punishment. As such, it was a perfect example of the old, biblical Gospel. Recently, the LCA's College of Bishops decided to remove the vow to keep inviolate the seal of confession from the LCA's ordination rite. Now the expectation is that instead of doing what Christ does, by forgiving sins and remembering them no more (Hebrews 8:12), pastors will bow to pressure from the world to do in certain sinners to the civic authorities to face punishment at their hands. So at the same time as many voices in the



The Spirit and his work of renewal. For many decades the teaching of historical criticism of the Bible has been tolerated within the LCA. This is an approach to studying Scripture in which it is treated as if it is an error-prone human record of the evolutionary development of human thinking about God, and not God's own inerrant Word to us about himself. Often the same people who pursue this approach will pay lip service to the Bible by calling it God's Word, while in practice they deal with it as if it is not.

More recently, we have found new ways to sideline the Spirit-filled words of the Bible, by simply neglecting them. Evidence of this includes:

- A growing biblical illiteracy in the LCA, as we neglect any detailed study of the Bible in things like confirmation instruction, Bible studies, and family devotions.
- The growing tendency amongst our people and within our institutions to make decisions and implement policies that are informed by worldly thinking and "what seems right to us," instead of by God's Word.
- Approaches to evangelism that focus on human methods of persuasion, instead of on the power of the Holy Spirit to change hearts and minds through his Word.

The extent to which Scripture is being neglected is evident in *ALC Towards 2028 – Our Strategic Direction* ( <https://alc.edu.au/assets/about/ALC-Towards-2028.pdf> ). This is the new strategic plan for Australian Lutheran College that has been devised by the ALC Board, to which all faculty members are now expected to adhere. Words like "Bible" and "Scripture" never appear in this document, since it never mentions the Bible and how important it is to teach future pastors and church workers to know the Bible and its implications for ministry and the Christian life. This is remarkable, given the fact that the strategic plan does mention training the students in agendas that our culture has set for us, including "indigenous theologies, gender and theology, changing culture (responding to the royal commission), climate change and sustainability" (see strategic priority 5.4). It is not hard to guess what impact this policy of sidelining the Bible will have on the future direction of the LCA, as we allow the world to set the agenda instead.

### **So what should we do about it?**

It is not possible to completely eliminate false teaching from the Church. Instead, we will continue to battle against it until Christ returns. Nevertheless, false teaching does not need to become systemic or institutionalised. The following distinctions are helpful:

1. Are we dealing with ordinary sheep, or with shepherds who should know better? Ordinary laypeople, particularly children and new converts, often have many false understandings about the Christian faith. In their case, the job of their pastors is to instruct them over time so that their understanding improves. With shepherds, including pastors and bishops and other church leaders, it is a different matter. They have no excuse for not knowing God's Word.
2. Are we dealing with people who are teachable, or with people who have hardened their hearts by resisting repeated attempts to correct their false teaching?

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LCA will excuse certain sins like fornication or same sex relations, many of the same voices will show no mercy towards those who commit other sins that are not so socially acceptable.

3. Are we dealing with the casual intrusion of error, that can be dealt with by instructing those who are in error or by disciplining those who refuse to change? Or are we dealing with errors that have become systemic and institutionalised, so that false teachers are not disciplined but instead encouraged, as the institution grants an equal or even superior place to error than it does to the truth?
4. Is there a realistic chance that the institution can be reformed? Or are the errors too entrenched to expect this outcome, barring an unforeseen miracle of God?

For many decades certain errors such as historical criticism and theistic evolution have been tolerated in the LCA, and in this way error has been assigned an equal place with the truth. Now many new errors are being tolerated or even encouraged. It takes much wisdom to discern when things are so far gone that separation becomes necessary. Nevertheless, if the present descent into error continues, the time will inevitably come when all who are faithful to Christ will have to leave the LCA to establish a new and orthodox church body. If not, we will no longer be able to claim that we are faithful to the Bible, the Confessions, or the *Theses of Agreement*, since all of these tell us that we must avoid fellowship with those who persistently promote false teaching.