

# A Statement on Confessional Fellowship

## The One, Holy Church – Hidden and Revealed

The one holy Church is the congregation of saints, in which the Gospel is rightly taught and the Sacraments are rightly administered (*AC VII – Concordia Triglotta*).

The Church properly speaking is the collective body of saints and true believers under Christ the Head. This Church is the mystical Body of Christ, created from above by Christ, and joined to Him through faith which the Holy Spirit works in the hearts of all believers. This holy fellowship is essentially hidden. It is known only to God and, thus, is an article of faith as the Nicene Creed states: “I believe one holy, Christian and apostolic Church.”

The Holy Spirit effects faith in Christ in the hearts of individuals and He effects the holy fellowship of faith among believers, joining them to one another and to Christ. He does so only through the external Ministry of teaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments as through instruments (*AC V*). Where the Gospel is preached in its purity and the Sacraments are administered rightly, there is Christ. Where Christ is, there His saints are gathered together in Him, though there may also be hypocrites and evil persons mingled therewith (*AC VII*), for the Lord promises, “So shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth; it shall not return to Me void, but it shall accomplish what I please, and it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it” (*Isaiah 55:11*).

The Gospel and Sacraments, then, are the visible marks by which the Church can be outwardly identified in the world. The one, holy, Christian and apostolic Church is manifested in churches where the Gospel is preached in its purity and the Sacraments are administered rightly.

## The Distinction Between Orthodox and Heterodox Churches

An orthodox church is one in which the word of God is preached purely (doctrine), that is, in conformity with the Holy Scriptures and the Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church; and the Sacraments administered according to Christ’s institution (*John 8:31; 1 Timothy 1:3, 4:6, 6:3–5; SD Basis, Rule, and Norm 1–13*).

A heterodox church is one that does not conform its doctrine and practice in all points to the Holy Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions and/or does not rightly administer the Sacraments.

A church is judged to be orthodox or heterodox not only by virtue of its official confession, but also by virtue of what is actually preached, taught, and practiced in its midst, and/or by what is tolerated in its midst with regard to preaching, teaching, and practice.

## Altar and Pulpit Fellowship in the ACLC

Through the pure marks of the Church (the preaching of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments) the Holy Spirit effects the inward, hidden fellowship among true believers in Christ. The Spirit manifests such hidden fellowship outwardly when churches, in which the Gospel is preached in its purity and the Sacraments are administered rightly, express outward fellowship with one another by the sharing in the Holy Things, that is, in sharing pulpits and communing at the same altar.

Because sharing pulpits and communing at the same altar is an expression of unity in the true faith (*Acts 2:42; 1 Corinthians 10:16–18*) and is pleasing to the Lord (*John 10:16; 17:20–21*), the Holy Scriptures command that orthodox churches maintain such unity and express church fellowship with all other orthodox churches (*Ephesians 4:1–6*).

Fellowship is not to be expressed outwardly by the orthodox with those who are heterodox, because such expression of oneness where it does not exist is a lie. It serves no godly purpose, but compromises the truth (Galatians 5:9). Rather, the orthodox are to mark and avoid the heterodox (Matthew 7:15; Matthew 10:34–39; Romans 16:17; 1 Timothy 6:3–6; 2 John 9–11). This obviously includes the overtly heterodox; however, it also includes churches whose teaching and practice is orthodox, but who tolerate heterodox practices within their external fellowship, or practice fellowship with those who are heterodox, thereby denying the pure faith and tacitly condoning heterodoxy.

Because the church is one body in Christ (1 Corinthians 10:17), the fellowship expressed between orthodox churches belongs to all orthodox churches (i.e., if you commune at the altar of one orthodox church, you commune at the altar of all orthodox churches; since it is one and the same altar, manifest in various physical locations). Thus, church fellowship is and always has been practiced between orthodox churches, only after it has been established and recognized by all orthodox churches that such fellowship exists. For this reason, churches have, historically, practiced fellowship with other churches only where and when fellowship has been openly and officially declared.

The churches of the ACLC uphold and defend this Scriptural, confessional and universal practice. Thus, they practice fellowship only with churches that they formally recognize as orthodox through a public declaration of altar and pulpit fellowship. Furthermore, the churches of the ACLC seek to formally establish and practice fellowship with other churches and groups of churches that they recognize as being orthodox.