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## WORKS OF MERCY AND CHURCH UNITY DOES SERVICE UNIFY AND DOCTRINE DIVIDE?

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## ACKGROUND

While it is somewhat prevalent to blame divisions in the church on the Reformation<sup>1</sup> in the sixteenth century or the rise of denominationalism<sup>2</sup> in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the fact is people have been divided over Jesus ever since he ministered on earth.<sup>3</sup> This division over Jesus even has entered into the church. Saint Paul warned the Corinthians, the Galatians, and the Romans about divisions.<sup>4</sup> Jude says that those who cause divisions are worldly people and devoid of the Spirit.<sup>5</sup> From the time of the Apostles, the church faced both heresy and schisms. “The church has always from its beginning suffered such divisions.”<sup>6</sup> Knowing that his church would face heresy and division, Jesus prayed that his church might be “one.”<sup>7</sup> In the Nicene Creed, the church confesses, “And we believe in one holy Christian and apostolic church.” Yet this one holy Christian church is not seen with the eye, but is believed by faith. The eye sees the Christian church divided into several major confessional families and 9,000 denominations<sup>8</sup> with some estimates reaching 20,000 to 30,000. Herein, lies the problem. The church that can be seen is fractured and that fracture causes offense both to the world and to those in the church.



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“The question of the one church of God,” wrote Hermann Sasse, “arose on the mission field as a necessary question in light of the division of churches. It was a practical necessity born of the multiplicity of denominations carrying on mission work, and a necessity of the faith which had arisen as a result of the work.”<sup>9</sup> The divisions of the

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<sup>1</sup> Werner Elert, *Eucharist and Church Fellowship in the First Four Centuries*, trans. Norman E. Nagel (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1966), 43. “Hans Asmussen, speaking for many, sees their origin in the ‘confessional churches’ which arose from the Reformation. ‘The division at the Lord’s Table as we have it today has a history of four hundred years.’ According to the context of this statement it is clear that in his view such divisions first arose 400 years ago.”

<sup>2</sup> Ronald E. Osborn, “Role of the Denomination: An Essay in Ecclesiology,” *Encounter* 22, no. 2 (1961): 160. “Parallel denominational structures, their true nature hidden as well as revealed by their designation as churches, emerged with the grant of religious toleration in the generous world-view of the Enlightenment. Since then denominationalism has increased and multiplied, not only in the United States, where it is seen in extreme form, but throughout the Christian world wherever freedom prevails.”

<sup>3</sup> John 7:43, “So there was a division among the people over him.” (ESV)

<sup>4</sup> Romans 16:17; 1 Corinthians 11:18; Galatians 5:20.

<sup>5</sup> Jude 19.

<sup>6</sup> Elert, *Eucharist and Church Fellowship in the First Four Centuries*, 44.

<sup>7</sup> John 17:22.

<sup>8</sup> “World Christian Database,” Christian Denominations, August 8, 2009, [worldchristiandatabase.org/wcd/about/denominations.asp](http://worldchristiandatabase.org/wcd/about/denominations.asp).

<sup>9</sup> Hermann Sasse, “The Question of the Church’s Unity on the fission Field,” in *The Lonely Way*, vol. 2 (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2002), 182.

Christian church hindered missionary activity. “Non-Christians often reacted to missionary efforts with the feeling that, before asking them to convert, the missionaries ought to agree among themselves what Christianity is.”<sup>10</sup> Not only did the divisions in the Christian church cause scandal but also it seemed to be a waste of resources. What sense did it make to have three or four, let alone ten different denominations send missionaries to a given country? More often than not it was the missionaries themselves asking these questions and not the church bodies in Europe or America.<sup>11</sup> In the case of Africa, major missionary activity took place in the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries, and during the twentieth century, there were many different denominations in Africa.<sup>12</sup> It is from the mission field where the question of Christian unity was asked in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>13</sup>

In 1910, the World Missionary Conference of Edinburgh was held to address how the gospel could be proclaimed to the whole world.<sup>14</sup> For all intents and purposes, the ecumenical movement was born from this gathering of missionary societies, although before this there were some efforts to cooperate across denominational lines in the area of Christian education, particularly for Sunday school.<sup>15</sup> From the movement came the World Conference on Faith and Order in the 1920s and eventually the World Council of Churches in the late 1940s. One of the outcomes of the 1910 Edinburgh meeting was that Protestants would not proselytize Roman Catholics and the Orthodox;<sup>16</sup> they were considered “Christian” and not in need of missionary work. It should be noted that many of the denominations that participated in the Edinburgh conference were spiritual descendents and offshoots of the Anglican Church such as the Episcopalians, Presbyterians, Baptists, Methodists, etc. Many of these groups had a similar theological heritage and foundation in the Reformed tradition. From a certain perspective, these groups were not so much divided by fundamental doctrinal differences as they were by practice and church government. This recognition may help to explain some of the initial growth of the ecumenical movement. Many of the denominational developments from the Old World and America did not seem applicable on the mission field. The time was also ripe for such a development as the ecumenical movement was a child whose mother was Pietism and whose father was the Enlightenment.<sup>17</sup>

### Doctrine Divides But Service Unites

Out of the ecumenical movement came the phrase, “Doctrine divides, but service unites.”<sup>18</sup> It has been a rallying cry in ecumenical circles at least since 1925.<sup>19</sup> When the attempt to pool missionary resources for the preaching of the gospel was hindered by the confessional stances of some churches, the ecumenical movement turned to *diakonia* as a means of unity. If doctrine or theology might prevent two different denominations from sharing a missionary

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<sup>10</sup> Avery Robert Dulles, “Saving Ecumenism from Itself,” *First Things*, no. 178 (2007): 24.

<sup>11</sup> James Good, “Kikuyu 1913: A Cradle of Ecumenism,” *AFER* 25, no. 2 (1983): 86–89. “The beginnings of ecumenism in this century were, of course, motivated by something other than the unselfish desire for Christian reunion. The missionaries of the colonial era simply found themselves with more territory than they could handle, and the only viable arrangement was to parcel it out among themselves.”

<sup>12</sup> Setri Nyomi, “Christian World Communions in Africa: Their Impact in Overcoming Denominationalism,” *Ecumenical Review* 53, no. 3 (2001): 333.

<sup>13</sup> Sasse, “The Question of the Church’s Unity on the fission Field,” 180. “It is no accident that in our century the mission field was the place from which the question of the unity of the church was raised, and indeed the first in the form of the call to unify Christianity. Since the days of the apostles, the mission field has always been the place where the church and that which is not church, divine truth and demonic lies, encounter each other and separate. It is also the place where the deepest questions of the Christian faith first arise and where the last judgments in the history of the church are rendered.”

<sup>14</sup> Brian Stanley, “Defining the Boundaries of Christendom: The Two Worlds of the World Missionary Conference, 1910,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 30, no. 4 (2006): 181.

<sup>15</sup> Forrest L. Knapp, *Church Cooperation: Dead-End Street or Highway to Unity* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1966), 169. “In Christian education we have one of the oldest fields of cooperation across denominational lines.” *Ibid.*, 170. “The insistent need of all Sunday schools for lesson materials led to a decision in the 1872 International Sunday School Convention (United States and Canada) to appoint a committee to prepare uniform lessons. After a struggle with the difficult task, the committee produced results, and the cooperative preparation of Uniform Lesson Outlines continues to this day, now under the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches.”

<sup>16</sup> Stanley, “Defining the Boundaries of Christendom,” 176. “Edinburgh 1910 implicitly declared Protestant proselytism of Roman Catholics and, rather less clearly, of Orthodox and Oriental Christians to be no valid part of Christian mission.”

<sup>17</sup> Carter Lindberg, “Luther’s Critique of the Ecumenical Assumption That Doctrine Divides but Service Unites,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 27, no. 4 (1990): 694. “These endeavors are rooted in pietism and the Enlightenment, not the Reformation.” See also Sasse, “The Question of the Church’s Unity on the fission Field,” 188. “The modern Protestant world mission effort is a child of Pietism, and it cannot deny its origin. But Pietism has never had any understanding of dogmatic questions, and thus neither any understanding for the unique significance of pure doctrine.”

<sup>18</sup> The phrase is attributed to Dr. Hermann Kapler (1867–1941), president of the Federation of German Evangelical Churches (1925–1933).

<sup>19</sup> Ruth Rouse and Stephen Charles Neill, eds., *A History of the Ecumenical Movement, 1517–1948*, vol. 1, 2nd ed with revised bibliography. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1968), 540. “At Halsingborg, the International Committee had before it the suggestion, made by the General Secretary of Faith and Order, that Life and Work might be interested in holding its conference in Washington in 1925, just after the first World Conference which Faith and Order was planning to hold in that city in May of that year. After thorough consideration, the International Committee arrived at the conclusion that it would be better to keep the two conferences separate. The goal of the Faith and Order movement was relatively distant, whereas the Christian churches should be able ‘without difficulty’ to unite at once in an effort to apply Christian principles to burning social and international problems. The answer of the Committee quoted Dr. Kapler: ‘Doctrine divides, but service unites.’ The Life and Work movement, it said, was aiming at common service; such common service in the field of practical problems might well help to break down walls and prejudices between church bodies, and create a spirit of brotherhood which would make it easier to realize also the aims of the Faith and Order movement.”

or preacher, what theological or doctrinal objection could be raised to different denominations sharing resources in order to dig a well or to establish a medical clinic? If the unity of the church could not be seen in preaching and teaching, perhaps it could be seen in *diakonia* — in works of service and mercy.<sup>20</sup> The world would see the church working together on projects involving human care rather than being divided. The cooperating together in matters external to doctrine made a good and positive witness.

Several factors contributed to the phase “doctrine divides but service unites” arising in the mid-1920s. Pietism from the eighteenth century contributed to it. The Enlightenment and the events of the nineteenth century made contributions to it. Both of these movements fed into the ecumenical movement with the effect of de-emphasizing orthodoxy, that is, doctrine, while emphasizing orthopraxis, this is, deeds.<sup>21</sup> The end of World War I also created a desire for churches to work beyond their traditional confessional lines. Other events in the twentieth century such as World War II, the civil rights movement, socialism, church denomination unions, etc., affected how “doctrine divides but service unites” developed. An examination of the assertion that “doctrine divides but service unites” is a mere snapshot of a given period of its development over the past century. Nevertheless, there are certain common themes that remain throughout its development.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, an important development was the division of evangelism into three components: *kerygma*, *koinonia* and *diakonia*. Sometimes *kerygma* — the proclamation of a Gospel for the whole world, *koinonia* — the welcoming of all into the new covenant, and *diakonia* — Christian service are described as “forms of communication.”<sup>22</sup> The three together are the church’s mission to the world. This way of speaking about the mission of the church and *diakonia* emerged as socialism and secular and government humanitarian efforts were on the rise. Those who promoted the notion that “doctrine divides but service unites” pondered the question of the way in which humanitarian aid given by church differs from that of government and secular agencies? In a certain sense, if churches are cooperating with each other in matters apart from doctrine and external to the sacred things, the humanitarian efforts of the church are not clearly distinguishable from that of secular and government agencies. This recognition led to the recognition that “Christianity has no monopoly of humanitarian service to mankind” and that “secular loyalties” might be a stronger motive to serve than the “Christian conscience.”<sup>23</sup>

Humanitarian work, once the domain primarily of the church, became the domain of the secular world and government. Some even imagined the day when secular entities and governments, inspired in part by socialism, would do most if not all of the humanitarian work in the world. Theodore Wedel wrote, “Christian *diakonia* will, accordingly, have to accustom itself to the presence in our modern world of this rival religion of brotherhood without God.”<sup>24</sup> Increasingly, as the world became concerned with issues such as racism, justice, and liberation of the oppressed, so did the church as both pursued similar humanitarian aid and service. During the 1960s and 1970s these concerns, which arose in the secular world, were “theologized,” creating a “theological” rationale for *diakonia* work and service in the church. In the absence of a biblical, creedal, and confessional theology, a humanistic theology, that is, anthropology, would fill the vacuum.

Some thought that the increasing presence of governmental and secular agencies in humanitarian work would only increase *koinonia* (fellowship) between church bodies in works of *diakonia* (service). As denominational specific agencies were subsumed by the state, as Christian hospitals and orphanages gave way to state supported and/or run hospitals and orphanages, the role of the lay church member was seen as even more important. A Christian doctor working in a state run hospital will seek the companionship and fellowship of other Christians, even those who are

<sup>20</sup> Stephen Cranford, “Aid and the Unity of the Church,” *Mid-Stream* XVIII, no. 2 (1979): 157. “Too often the world sees only a divided church; inter-church aid is one way, however, of demonstrating visibly the essential unity which is God’s gift to his church.”

<sup>21</sup> Lindberg, “Luther’s critique,” 680. “The idea that ecclesial unity is rooted in ethics arose in pietism. It was Gottfried Arnold (1666-1714) who forcefully advanced the claim that the mark of true Christianity is piety (orthopraxis), not doctrine (orthodoxy).”

<sup>22</sup> Theodore Wedel, “Evangelism’s Threefold Witness: Kerygma, Koinonia, Diakonia,” *Ecumenical Review* 9, no. 3 (1957): 239. “The kerygma proclaiming a gospel for the whole world, the koinonia welcoming all into the new-covenant-life, and then a demonstration of the power of the Spirit in diakonia (Christian service)-only when the ‘people of the mission’ utilize the full orb of these three forms of communication as an inseparable triad can the church witness rightly to itself and to its Lord. This triad has never been disrupted by internal rivalry except when the church has lost its sense of mission to the world.”

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 235. “Christianity has no monopoly of humanitarian service to mankind. Indeed, puzzling paradox though it may be, if the concept of ‘welfare’ is equated with that of ‘salvation,’ the Church’s diakonia may soon find itself outdistanced by its secular rivals. Even the motive for service to the needy may, when judged by external standards of sacrificial devotion to a cause, appear stronger under secular loyalties than that which animates the Christian conscience.”

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 236.



not a part of his confessional or denominational heritage, as he carries out his Christian witness. In this way, it was thought that lay people, rather than clergy, would promote the *koinonia* between church bodies.<sup>25</sup>

The thought that the laity would play a greater role or perhaps even the greatest role in church unity was not entirely new in the ecumenical movement. Since the earliest days of the ecumenical movement, a contingency thought that church unity had been hindered since the time of the Reformation by the clergy who unnecessarily divided the church by rigidly holding to non-essential and divisive doctrines. It is not surprising that a lay movement went through the entire church during this time. As service and humanitarian aid increasingly became associated with the mission of the church, the role of the laity as missionaries becomes more prominent. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, in many church bodies, lay missionaries vastly outnumbered professional missionaries or clergy missionaries. There seems to be no reduction in this trend.

For our purposes, the theological rationale for the increased role of the laity given by any particular church body is not of primary importance. Theological principles or a new biblical understanding of the laity was not the primary impetus in this movement. The focus in this movement is on orthopraxis not orthodoxy. The focus is on getting what is necessary done and developing the rationale after the fact. In some ways, it seems as if the ecumenical movement was seeking how to address issues raised from the doctrine of the two kingdoms and Christian vocation-to use Lutheran categories. In this sense, perhaps, the churches of the Augsburg Confession, rather than ignoring the ecumenical movement or being drawn into its presuppositions, might have done better to speak clearly on the doctrines of the two kingdoms and vocation.

During the 1960s and 1970s, the understanding that doctrine divided while service united shifted once again. Works of service were seen as a theology in and of themselves. The lack of cooperation in works of service was seen as the source or origin of heresies, schisms, and divisions within the church.<sup>26</sup> Nikos Nissiotis wrote, “The greatest sin of the people of God is that they have neglected to perceive the theological, vertical dimension of *diakonia* in the ecclesiological, horizontal one.”<sup>27</sup> In other words, the failure of the church to cooperate in works of service indicates a theological problem in *koinonia* (fellowship). There are really only two alternatives: either 1) *diakonia* (works of service) is not doctrinal, in which case there is little to distinguish the humanitarian work of churches from that of government and secular agencies, or 2) *diakonia* has a doctrinal component related to ecclesiology and church fellowship. Many in the church were not willing to give *diakonia* wholesale to the secular realm. *Diakonia* must be redefined not as a good moral act or as the expression of compassion but as the “overflowing of the grace which binds and moves their inner life as a total fellowship.”<sup>28</sup> Thus, *diakonia* attached to a doctrine of ecclesiology and *koinonia* would become one of the primary vehicles by which to obtain visible unity of the church on earth.<sup>29</sup> This line of thought leads to the conclusion, “This greatest sin has been in the past, and still is, to hasten to offer service to the world without practicing *diakonia* between the separate churches. It is our calling now to restore church unity through a practical, existential, living process of sharing each other’s life beyond any confessional barriers.”<sup>30</sup>

By the late 1970s, the ecumenical movement had come full circle. Initially, it was said that doctrine divided but service united. Jürgen Moltmann wrote in “Fifty Years of Faith and Order,” “... fifty years ago in the early days of the ecumenical rapprochement it was said ‘Doctrine divides-service unites’ ... Today the situation is almost completely reversed. Now, after many years of patient, painstaking work it would be true to say ‘Theology unites-praxis divides.’ Controversy in the ecumenical movement no longer centers on the filioque, but concerns instead the Programme to Combat Racism. The problem now is not the theological understanding of the eucharist and of ministry, but the

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 237. “The Christian doctor in a state-supported hospital, or the Christian teacher in a secular school, is called upon to be a lay evangelist in a more difficult environment than that which lay specialists encountered in the era of protected diakonia. He will escape the prison of loneliness only as he finds strength for his ministry in the fellowship of his brethren in Christ. Thus under the threat of failure to witness at all the connection between diakonia and koinonia will be rediscovered.”

<sup>26</sup> Nikos A. Nissiotis, “The Ecclesiological Significance of Inter-Church Diakonia,” *Ecumenical Review* 13, no. 2 (1961): 195. “Among the main reasons for the church heresies, schisms and divisions is the lack of this inner power of mutual service, of mutual inter-dependent existence.”

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 191. “This diakonia is neither a good moral act springing from the good will of a regenerated Christian nor an expression of compassion for the misery of man outside the church. The care of the churches for the world is not a vehicle for showing compassion for the suffering or the weak or the uneducated man. The help of the churches offered to the world is not of a humanistic nature. The churches are not primarily philanthropic institutions. The act of the diakonia of the churches is *ecclesiale* namely it is the overflowing of the grace which binds and moves their inner life as a total fellowship.”

<sup>29</sup> Richard Dickinson, “Diakonia in the Ecumenical Movement,” In *History of The Ecumenical Movement* vol. 3, 1968-2000 (Geneva: WCC Publications), 413. “This conscious linking of diakonia and koinonia signals a significant evolution in ecumenical thinking.”

<sup>30</sup> Nissiotis, “The Ecclesiological Significance” 197.

practical recognition of ministries and common celebration. After fifty years of concerted theological effort we now have to say quite openly to Christians and church authorities that there are no longer any doctrinal differences which justify the divisions of our churches ...<sup>31</sup> As the ecumenical movement seemingly overcame doctrinal differences,<sup>32</sup> the visible unity still did not appear. As the focus intensified on *diakonia*, controversy actually increased among some churches<sup>33</sup> in part because churches feared cooperation would endanger their own institutional interests.<sup>34</sup> In the course of the ecumenical movement, *diakonia* went from a uniting force devoid of doctrine to a divisive force linked to a *koinonia* doctrine. Therefore, works of service (*diakonia*), in fact, are doctrinal. Works of service both unite and divide.

With Moltmann's statement that "theology unites-praxis divides" and the failure of churches to unite on the basis of service, the ecumenical movement in the late 1970s in some ways was in a period of crisis. Despite the ecumenical movement's reconciled diversity and convergence-statements on creeds, sacraments, and justification, churches remained divided. Carter Lindberg asked the question whether, "there are fundamental differences between the churches that have to do with ethics."<sup>35</sup> Some in the Orthodox Church identified the cause of the crisis in the WCC as a false assumption, "that all its member churches were able to agree together in giving a universal Christian answers to the questions arising at any given time."<sup>36</sup> In order to promote "solidarity in *diakonia*," some in the Orthodox Church proposed that the answer be sought in the liturgy.<sup>37</sup> Orthodox and Roman Catholic authors suggested the eucharist could be the bridge between the liturgy and *diakonia* by suggesting "an interpersonal relationship, not only between the community and God but also between the community and all present or absent members of the church."<sup>38</sup>

In essence, the linking of the liturgy to *diakonia* via the eucharist stated that communion with God produces communion between human beings. From this approach, the WCC concluded, "Service, *diakonia* and the eucharist belong together; by sharing through bread and wine Christ's body, we become his body, we are made into share- people, are empowered to share with others our own lives, our gifts."<sup>39</sup> Whatever inspiration the liturgy and eucharist provided *diakonia* service, within a church body, the eucharistic vision was an empty formula for producing a unity through *diakonic* service "as long as the churches themselves have no real eucharistic community with each other."<sup>40</sup> In other words, the eucharist promotes *diakonic* service but churches need to have communion fellowship with each other. Once again, the lack of common participation in the eucharist prevents church unity and common *diakonia* service.<sup>41</sup>

Ultimately, the lesson the ecumenical movement learned from the Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches about the connection between the eucharist and *diakonia* is that of "sharing." "The language of sharing is even more basic than any of our theological or ecclesiological concepts, for it is the people's language in an elementary sense. All people know what sharing means, whether from experience or longing hope, and they know that fullness of life is only found in sharing life with one another. 'Sharing' is thus a fundamental symbol of life."<sup>42</sup> Thus, God's sharing of himself in Jesus Christ allows the church to share with each other and with the world. The language of sharing is remarkably similar to that used in ecumenical statements about the Lord's Supper in that the gift of the supper is Christ sharing himself.

<sup>31</sup> Michael Kinnamon and Brian Cope, eds., *The Ecumenical Movement: An Anthology of Key Texts and Voices* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 210.

<sup>32</sup> Raymond Hickey, "Ecumenism Beneath the Cross in Africa," *AFER* 26, no. 3 (1984): 155. "The rigid barriers which had been erected — and frequently reinforced! — between Christians for over four hundred years were now seen to be tumbling in a planned and orderly manner."

<sup>33</sup> Dickinson, "Diakonia in the ecumenical movement," 419. "Leslie Cooke's wry warning in 1966 could not have been more apt. He observed that the more involved in real development-as distinguished from relief-the churches were, the more controversial and sometimes unpopular their diaconal witness would become."

<sup>34</sup> Knapp, *Church Cooperation*, 174-175. "Too often local churches and denominations have discovered reasons for only limited cooperation. When their own institutional interests have been endangered, they have tended to draw back. The strength and continued existence of denominational life has been allowed to have primary place."

<sup>35</sup> Lindberg, 680.

<sup>36</sup> Alexandros K. Papaderos, "Liturgical diakonia: Biblical and Theological View of Diakonia," *Mid-Stream* 18, no. 2 (1979): 137.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 138. "But I believe we can use this term 'liturgical' to show why and in what sense every Christian diakonia to the world, to culture, to politics, to human beings must be a liturgical diakonia."

<sup>38</sup> Cesare Girardo, "The Eucharist as Diakonia: From the Service of Cult to the Service of Charity," In *Liturgy in A Postmodern World*, ed. Keith Pecklers (New York: Continuum), 119.

<sup>39</sup> Martin Robra, "Theological and Biblical Reflection on Diakonia: A Survey of Discussion within the World Council of Churches," *Ecumenical Review* 46, no. 3 (1994): 282.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 283.

<sup>41</sup> Good, "Kikuyu 1913," 88. "But there is one major exception, and it remains a stumbling-block: common participation in the eucharist is today, for many Christians, as big a crime as it was in Kikuyu in 1913."

<sup>42</sup> Robra, "Theological and Biblical Reflection" 285.

## A Preliminary Excursus on Cooperatio in Externis (cooperation in externals)

The principle *cooperatio in externis* is most commonly defined as cooperation between or the working together of a church with another church that do not have doctrinal agreement or fellowship in matters not related to the preaching and teaching of the faith or the administration of the sacraments.<sup>43</sup> This principle seems to have developed from the interaction between the ecumenical movement's focus on *diakonia* disconnected from doctrine and the efforts to unite various Lutheran groups in America. While there may not be a direct cause and effect link or proof of direct influence between the efforts of the ecumenical movement to practice *diakonia* apart from doctrine and the union discussions between various Lutheran groups in America, there is a similarity of thought between the two efforts. It also seems the ecumenical movement's conversation about "doctrine divides, but service unites" influenced the further development of the cooperation in externals principle. It seems appropriate to discuss briefly cooperation in externals in light of the discussion on service uniting the church.

Although some have reported discovering *cooperatio in externis* in the Lutheran dogmatications, our preliminary research was unable to locate the term using the index to Baier's Compendium. Nor have we located the term in the Francis Pieper's Christian Dogmatics. Although our research into the origin of the term, *cooperatio in externis* has not been exhaustive, the term, at least as a technical term (and dare we suggest the concept) did not come into widespread usage until the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. The earliest reference we found to the term *cooperatio in externis* was located in a Roman Catholic work on moral theology.<sup>44</sup> In this work, the term *cooperatio in externis* is used to distinguish the cooperation of individuals in a moral transgression from a moral transgression committed by a sole individual.<sup>45</sup> The context of this usage is different from what has become more commonplace among some Lutherans, but it does indicate, that cooperation occurs between individuals in works external to an individual. People are not able to cooperate in a work occurring within the mind of an individual. By extension, one can understand how the term *cooperatio in externis* could be used to describe works external to the *communio in sacris* (communion in sacred things). Our preliminary research has not uncovered evidence that Lutherans were reading this Roman Catholic work on moral theology but it is certainly a possibility.

An early appearance of the concept and words but not the exact phrase "cooperation in externals" among American Lutherans is found in the "Declaration of Principles Concerning the Church and Its External Relationships," adopted at the Second Convention of the United Lutheran Church in America<sup>46</sup> at Washington, D.C., October 26, 1920.<sup>47</sup> The purpose of this document was to "define the attitude of The United Lutheran Church in America toward cooperative movements, both within and without the Lutheran Church, toward organizations, tendencies, and movement, some of them within and some of them without the organized church."<sup>48</sup> The document states that there can be "complete cooperation and organic union" with church bodies calling themselves Evangelical Lutheran and who subscribe to the Confessions.<sup>49</sup> While this may not be the same doctrinal standard used by some confessional Lutheran churches for pulpit and altar fellowship, it is important to note that this document distinguishes those who call themselves Lutheran from general Protestant churches and from non-church groups. Since Protestant church groups are not Lutheran, separate ministers, pulpits, fonts, and altars must be kept and not shared.<sup>50</sup> Thus, The United Lutheran Church in America could not have *communio in sacris* with the Protestant church.

<sup>43</sup> Kurt E. Marquart, "The Issue of Church Fellowship and Unionism in the Missouri Synod and Its Associated Churches," *Logia* XII, no. 1 (2003): 20. "Church fellowship has always been understood as *communio in sacris* (communion in sacred things) as distinct from mere *cooperatio in externis* (cooperation in externals)."

<sup>44</sup> Iosepho D'Annibale, *Summula Theologiae Moralis* (Rome: Ex Typographia Polyglotta, 1896).

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 161. "*Cooperatio in externis dumtaxat transgressionibus locum habet; externa autem legis transgressio constat intentione et opere externo: qui est particeps utriusque, corrus seu cooperator jormalis; qui operis tantum, cooperator materialis dici solet.*" "Cooperation only takes place in external transgressions. An external transgression of the law consists in intention and external work. Whoever [or whatever] is a participant in both [is usually called] co-guilty or a formal cooperator. Whoever [or whatever] [is a participant in] the work alone is usually called a material cooperator." (Translation by the Rev. Benjamin Mayes, Ph.D.)

<sup>46</sup> Erwin L. Lueker, ed., *Christian Cyclopedia* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1975). "The United Lutheran Church in America. Organized in a convention November 14-18, 1918, New York City, by merger of General Council of the Ev. Lutheran Church in North America, The General Synod of the Ev. Lutheran Church in the USA, and The United Synod of the Ev. Lutheran Church in the South; ceased to exist 1962 with the formation of the Lutheran Church in America."

<sup>47</sup> "Declaration of Principles Concerning the Church and Its External Relationships," *Concordia Theological Monthly* VI, no. 1 (1935): 46-53.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 50. "That until a more complete unity of confessions is attained than now exists, The United Lutheran Church in America is bound in duty and in conscience to maintain its separate identity as a witness to the truth which it knows; and its members, its ministers, its pulpits, its fonts, and its altars must testify only to that truth."

“In view of the many proposals for cooperation of the Protestant churches in various departments of practical activity and in view of the many organizations already formed,” the document offers some guidelines for carrying out cooperative work.<sup>51</sup> As long as cooperation in “works of serving love” between The United Lutheran Church in America and various Protestant churches or service organizations did not “involve the surrender of our interpretation of the Gospel, the denial of conviction, or the suppression of our testimony to what we hold to be the truth,” such cooperation was possible.<sup>52</sup> However, The United Lutheran Church in America rejected the possibility of cooperation in external matters if the basic tenets of the Christian faith were rejected, such as a rejection of the Holy Scriptures, the Trinity, the universality of sin, etc. Nor was cooperation in external matters possible if the church’s confession of the truth was limited in any way. Nor could cooperation be possible with movements or organizations whose purposes lie outside the proper sphere of church activity. An example given of an activity outside of the proper sphere of the church was that of law enforcement.<sup>53</sup> For our discussion here, there are two crucial points: 1) cooperation in external matters in this document is defined more narrowly than it is by many who speak of cooperation in externals today, and 2) the seminary journal, *Concordia Theological Monthly*, of the Missouri Synod reprinted without comment this declaration of The United Lutheran Church in America in 1935 “in view of recent developments in the American Lutheran Church.”<sup>54</sup>

Six years after the *Concordia Theological Monthly* published The United Lutheran Church’s *Declaration*, President Behnken of the Missouri Synod issued a statement, “You realize, of course, that Missouri has been cooperating in externals in matters which do not involve pulpit, altar, and prayer fellowship. Such cooperation must not be interpreted as a step towards fellowship or a method of bringing about fellowship among Lutherans.”<sup>55</sup> President Behnken did state that such cooperation in externals did not include “joint work in missions, in Christian education, in student welfare work, or in joint services celebrating great events.”<sup>56</sup> President Behnken’s statement represents the first official statement by the Missouri Synod on cooperation in externals and was one component of Wisconsin Synod’s breaking of fellowship with the Missouri Synod some years later.

Two years after President Behnken’s statement on “cooperation in externals,” Theodore Graebner wrote, “We are living in an age which calls for a re-thinking, a new thinking-through all of our principles of church work, not in order to revise them, but in order to obtain a clear understanding of their application to new issues and new conditions.”<sup>57</sup> Graebner helped bring acceptance to the concept of “cooperation in externals” within the Missouri Synod. The fruit of his work was seen in 1965, when the Missouri Synod in convention adopted the concept of “cooperation in externals.”<sup>58</sup> According to one author on social ministry in the Lutheran tradition, the Missouri Synod church leaders invented “cooperation in externals” to get around the denomination’s conservative theology on church fellowship which prohibited cooperation in inter-Lutheran efforts, in military chaplaincy, and praying with other Christians.<sup>59</sup> This view may represent the position some had in the Missouri Synod. Many in the Missouri Synod

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>55</sup> John Behnken, “Fellowship Among Lutherans: Address to the American Lutheran Conference,” *Quartalschrijt* 44, no. 1 (1941): 68. President Behnken’s entire statement: “Today efforts are being put forth toward fellowship via cooperation. Cooperative efforts have been proclaimed and heralded as harbingers of Lutheran fellowship and Lutheran union. Let me speak very frankly. If such cooperation involves joint work in missions, in Christian education, in student welfare work, in joint services celebrating great events, then cooperation is just another name for pulpit, altar and prayer fellowship. Without doctrinal agreement this spells compromise. It means yielding in doctrinal positions. Such fellowship will not stand in the light of Scripture. You realize, of course, that Missouri has been cooperating in externals in matters which do not involve pulpit, altar and prayer fellowship. Such cooperation must not be interpreted as a step towards fellowship or a method of bringing about fellowship among Lutherans. Fellowship among Lutherans is possible and biblical only where there is agreement in biblical doctrine and scriptural practice. Where such agreement has been reached, pulpit, altar and prayer fellowship will necessarily follow.”

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Theodore Graebner and Paul E. Kretzmann, *Toward Lutheran Union: A Scriptural and Historical Approach* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1943), 231.

<sup>58</sup> Commission on Theology and Church Relations, “Theology of Fellowship,” 1965. See Part III.C.4, Pg 28.

<sup>59</sup> Foster R. McCurley, ed., *Social Ministry in the Lutheran Tradition* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 101–102. “Inter-Lutheran efforts for social ministry work and military chaplaincies were characterized as ‘cooperation in externals’ by the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod leaders as a way of getting around the denomination’s conservative theology and refusal even to pray with other Lutherans. John W. Behnken, the synod’s president, wrote a policy statement in 1941 declaring that his church could not cooperate ‘in any form in the dissemination of the gospel.’ Any cooperation had to be confined to ‘externals,’ such as relief to orphaned missionaries and work among soldiers and sailors. Still others contended that the term suggested that social ministry was an external matter to Christian faith and the life of the church. Not so, Missouri Synod welfare leader Henry F. Wind insisted in 1943. Social ministry is a sign of the presence of the grace of God and a necessary fruit that grows out of faith.”



simply accepted “cooperation in externals” uncritically. The principle of cooperation in externals led to the creation of the Department of Social Welfare in the Missouri Synod.<sup>60</sup>

On the one hand, the Missouri Synod’s position on cooperation in externals provided the church with a freedom in how it interacts with the world. On the other hand, it also allowed some to define “externals” so broadly and “fellowship” so narrowly that nearly any cooperation that did not involve preaching, worship, or prayer was permissible. If the extreme of no cooperation in external matters without full doctrinal agreement was not helpful to the church, neither is the other extreme that all so-called “external matters” are permissible. A more nuanced and critically thoughtful approach is required lest the sacred things are violated.

## Conclusion

“The venerable ecumenical slogan ‘doctrine divides, but service unites’ no longer seems valid.”<sup>61</sup> Even those within the ecumenical movement recognize that *diakonia* without agreement in doctrine, a common philosophy or worldview, or a common ethic is incapable of producing visible unity of the church on earth. Without a common foundation and agreement in doctrine, *diakonia* (works of service and mercy) become nearly indistinguishable from humanitarian aid provided by government or other secular and non-religious organizations. Without agreement on “ethics” or “Christian ethos” (to speak in Lutheran categories), various church bodies are incapable of agreeing on common works of service. For instance, if one church body holds that homosexual unions or marriages are ethically acceptable and another church body does not, how can these two church bodies cooperate in placing children through an adoption agency? Ultimately, a common ethic or Christian ethos comes from theology and doctrine. In a certain sense, the ecumenical movement has done the church a favor by disproving its own mantra that “doctrine divides but service unites” over the past century. Whether or not the ecumenical movement wishes to recognize the fact, it has demonstrated that service without agreement in doctrine will not ultimately provide unity to the church.

It is no accident of history or coincidence that Lutheran churches in America coined the phrase “cooperation in externals” around the same time that the ecumenical movement proclaimed, “doctrine divides, but service unites.”<sup>62</sup> As churches of different confessions and denominations began to cooperate in social and humanitarian projects around the world, Lutherans did not want to be left behind. At the same time, Lutherans, especially Confessional Lutherans, recognized that the lack of doctrinal agreement and fellowship prevented certain types of cooperation. The formulation of “cooperation in externals” was an attempt to delineate a realm where Lutheran churches could cooperate with other Christians and even with non-religious humanitarian organizations. In a certain sense, “cooperation in externals” is an attempt to address what it means for the church to exist in two realms or two kingdoms and to define the role of Christian vocation in the world.<sup>63</sup> “Externals” are matters not connected to the sacred, that is, the pulpit, the altar, and the font. In theory, such a definition of “externals” is rather broad and all encompassing. However, the further removed the parties who wish to cooperate are from a common ethical and philosophical framework, the more likely that the so-called “externals” will touch upon the sacred.<sup>64</sup>

A re-examination of the principle of “cooperation in externals” is in order for the inter-Lutheran community because many Lutheran church bodies have inherited the principle from The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod without critical or thoughtful evaluation. In the current pluralistic age, it is perhaps more important now than previously to consider what “externals” can be cooperated in without compromising confession. As more church bodies within the Lutheran World Federation ordain or consider the ordination of women and homosexuals, confessional Lutheran church bodies need to consider if they can cooperate in so-called externals. Or does such cooperation end up compromising their confession, or even worse, open the door for such practices to enter their church?

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<sup>60</sup> Lueker, *Christian Cyclopedia*. “H.F. Wind was appointed Executive Secretary of the Department of Social Welfare in 1953. ‘Cooperation in externals’ led to establishment of Lutheran welfare councils, federations, and associations in New York City, Chicago, Ohio, Washington state, and elsewhere. The Armed Services Commission (called Armed Forces Commission beginning in 1965) cooperated with the National Lutheran Council in maintaining service centers for military personnel.” The Department of Social Welfare in the Missouri Synod was the forerunner to the “Human Care” component in LCMS World Relief and Human Care.

<sup>61</sup> Lindberg, 680.

<sup>62</sup> Sasse, “The Question of the Church’s Unity,” 180. “It belongs to the unfathomable mysteries of the history of the church that it experiences mighty movements, independent from all national and confessional boundaries, which pass through all of Christianity and transform it both inwardly and outwardly.”

<sup>63</sup> We might have done much better to address these questions in terms of the doctrine of the two kingdoms and the doctrine of Christian vocation rather than in terms of “cooperation in externals.”

<sup>64</sup> For example, if a group of different denominations band together for a legal brief in order to promote religious freedom, the common ethic or philosophical framework is not a union of religious belief but rather the legal principle that religions have the right to practice unencumbered by the State or other hindrances.



As many in the ecumenical movement recognized, large amounts of money are involved in humanitarian work.<sup>65</sup> Confessional church bodies need to question themselves whether the tithes and donations of their church members given to serve the neighbor out of love for Christ, can be given to church bodies and organizations that promote women's ordination, homosexual unions and marriages, homosexual adoption, abortion, euthanasia, and so on. Many inter-Lutheran and inter-denominational organizations intentionally limit or forbid the proclamation of the gospel in proximity to the giving out of humanitarian aid. Careful thought needs to be given to whether cooperation with church bodies, groups, and organizations that promote an "ethos" different from that of historic Christianity can be done without compromising confession. It seems that such cooperation without compromise will become increasingly difficult. Such a reconsideration of cooperation in externals also may alter some arrangements in the mission field. Working alone for the sake of the confession of faith is not something to be criticized and in fact may be very commendable.

Ultimately, Christian works of mercy (*diakonia*) flow out of the gifts that Christ has given his church. Christ's love for humankind expressed in his suffering, death, and resurrection along with his forgiving gifts of absolution, baptism, communion, and preaching give the Christian a heart to love his neighbor, whoever that may be. Ultimately, it is the common confession of faith and the recognition that we are part of Christ's body because he has put his holy name upon us in baptism and has made us a part of his body by giving us his body and blood in Holy Communion. Doctrine and service are connected. Service disconnected from the sacred things does not remain Christian for long. Doctrine without works of service to the neighbor is a dead faith.<sup>66</sup> We need to reclaim the connection between doctrine and service, faith and works, and the connection of *diakonia* in close proximity to the Lord's altar. As Hermann Sasse wrote, "There is no unity of Christianity without deep and serious wrestling over the truth, without the seriousness which, in dialogue of confession with confession, glosses over no difficulty."<sup>67</sup> Without doctrine and truth, works of service cease to be Christian. If such service is not Christian, the church needs to ask why it has engaged in such activity.

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<sup>65</sup> Cranford, "Aid and the Unity of the Church," 156. "It is simply that the major obstacle to church unity in many places in the world is not theological or doctrinal — it's money."

<sup>66</sup> James 2:17

<sup>67</sup> Sasse, "The Question of the Church's Unity," 194.