“That They May Be One”

A Response of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations

Introduction

In a letter dated June 27, 2002, the Secretary of the Council of Presidents forwarded to the Commission on Theology and Church Relations the following request from the Council, adopted at its April 23, 2002 meeting: “That the CTCR study the document “That They May Be One,” and make an evaluation as to whether or not the document ‘adequately and correctly gives expression to the doctrinal position of the Synod.’” The Council of Presidents informed the authors and distributors of “That They May Be One” of its decision to forward its request to the CTCR by stating the following:

In the conclusion of your document you ask that the Council of Presidents—which includes the President of Synod and the Vice-Presidents—examine your document. Since the group within the Synod that is charged with the task of making such evaluations and examinations is the Commission on Theology and Church Relations, we therefore have submitted “That They May be One” to the Commission for an evaluation to determine whether it adequately and correctly gives expression to the doctrinal position of the Synod.

The CTCR placed this request of the Council on its agenda at its September 2002 meeting.

In the evaluation that follows the Commission has focused on whether the statement “adequately and correctly” has reflected the doctrinal position of the Synod. The Commission has not presumed to pass judgment on the appropriateness of participation in the event under discussion in “That They May Be One.”

This response to “That They May Be One” includes reference to the February 2000 study material The Lutheran Understanding of Church Fellowship and to The Lutheran Understanding of Church Fellowship: A Report on Synodical Discussions, two documents prepared by the Office of President and the Commission on Theology and Church Relations with appropriate Scriptural and confessional documentation. (For detailed discussion of points at issue, see these and other pertinent documents at www.lcms.org/ctcr).

Affirmation

The Commission appreciates the desire of the drafters and signers of “That They May Be One” to contribute to the synodical discussion of controverted matters related to the Yankee Stadium event, and to promote clarity of understanding and concord in the Synod (Preface). The document begins with pastoral sensitivity to the “extraordinary
“circumstances” presenting “enormous challenges” to our nation in these “trying times,” pledging its support for efforts to bring “comfort, hope and material assistance to the survivors” of the 9-11 atrocities. It introduces its declarations with the helpful observation that while the purpose of the Yankee Stadium event “was to generate and demonstrate unity in our nation and to secure support from the general population for the survivors of these horrors,” the means to these “worthy goals” have raised questions in our Synod.

In an attempt to bring clarity to these questions the document presents fourteen statements, with accompanying condemnations and/or rejections. The Commission commends the document for its many fine statements regarding the faithful proclamation of the Gospel, purity of doctrine and the necessity of agreement in all the articles of faith for external unity in the church. We note, for example, the following:

- “that the Triune God gives church fellowship to His church for her good and for the good of the world,” and that “the teaching that differences in doctrine are trivial” must be rejected [2].
- that “those who offer prayers outside the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are ‘praying to a god that cannot save’ (Isaiah 45:20),” and that the teaching “that prayers designated to ‘a god’ or ‘any god’ are valid, or that prayers directed to a god other than the Triune God are valid…” must be rejected [3].
- “that on certain occasions Christians may pray with persons of a heterodox confession without injury to their conscience and without compromising the purity of the Gospel. Such prayers must be directed to the One True God and must not give the impression that differences in doctrine which exist are insignificant. Furthermore, no limits may be placed on one’s ability to speak the Word of God” [6].
- “that worthiness to approach God in prayer consists only in the propitiatory sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross, and that there is nothing inherent in us which makes us worthy to approach God” [10].
- “that it is unloving and uncharitable to hide or obscure differences in doctrine for the sake of outward unity” [13].
- “that there are matters of adiaphora for which there can be honest differences of opinion” and that “church fellowship is not one of them” [6].

**Evaluation**

Although “That They May Be One” intends to bring clarity to the subject of “Church Fellowship and Public Prayer” [Title], the document itself, in the Commission’s view, suffers from a lack of clarity at certain critical points. Its adequacy as a lucid and faithful presentation of the Synod’s position regarding church fellowship and public prayer may be questioned in five areas: 1. The Meaning of “Church Fellowship”; 2. Definition of “Civic Events”; 3. The Question of “Joint” Worship; 4. Function of the “Condemnations” and/or “Rejections”; and 5. Scriptural and Confessional Argumentation. Except where noted otherwise below, italics are for the sake of emphasis.
1. The Meaning of “Church Fellowship”.

The statement’s first declaration begins by saying that “church fellowship consists in ‘unity with [one another] in teaching and all the articles of faith and in the proper use of the holy sacraments (Epitome X, paragraph 7).” The rejection that accompanies this first declaration speaks of “fellowship with heterodox church bodies” as an action that “destroys fellowship with Christ, Who insists that we teach all [emphasis original] things He has commanded us.” The second declaration affirms that “the Triune God gives church fellowship to His church” and points to John 17:17, 21 and its reference to the unity of the church in analogy to the unity of the Father and Son as proof for this assertion concerning “church fellowship.” The next sentence then declares that the Gospel of Christ creates true church fellowship.” This true church fellowship is distinguished from “fellowship created solely on the basis of outward structures, without unity in faith given by God…a human invention.” The third declaration begins with a reference to “all church fellowship” as proceeding from the one true God.

On the basis of these and other references to the term “fellowship” in the declarations, it is difficult to know precisely how the document is using the term “church fellowship.” Sometimes the term seems to refer to fellowship with Christ in the one Holy Christian Church (“true church fellowship”), and other times to fellowship in the sense of external unity in the church based on agreement in confession (“outward unity in the church”). In still other instances, it is hard to know exactly what referent the authors have in mind.

In matters so important among us, it is necessary in the Commission’s judgment that clear distinctions be maintained on the basis of scriptural and confessional texts. Particularly crucial is the distinction between the spiritual fellowship that all Christians have in the body of Christ, and external unity based on agreement in confession. So important is this distinction, that The Lutheran Understanding of Church Fellowship calls special attention to it as one of three “basic assumptions” in the Introduction of this document: “The church’s internal unity [“the fellowship of all believers”], known only to God (Eph. 1:4), is expressed by an external or outward fellowship based on Confession” (5). The Commission expands on this assumption by stating:

While the church’s internal unity is perfect and known only to God (Eph. 1:4), the limits of external fellowship are determined by whether the Gospel is preached purely and the sacraments are administered according to Christ’s institution. The Gospel and the sacraments are in themselves always pure. In this way they create and preserve the church in her hidden unity throughout the world. Yet, when church bodies make public confession of the Gospel and the sacraments, tragically some obscure or explicitly contradict the teaching of the Gospel and the proper administration of the sacraments. For this reason the limits or boundaries of the external
fellowship are creeds and confessions. Churches in altar and pulpit fellowship share the same confession, including the rejection of errors that contradict this confession. Where churches cannot agree on a common confession, the basis for church fellowship does not exist. (5)

The fundamental distinction set forth in the above-mentioned assumption is obscured by statements in “That They May Be One.” One might cite, for example, declaration one (1) of the document (noted above) which states that fellowship (altar and pulpit fellowship) with heterodox church bodies “destroys fellowship with Christ [presumably, membership in the una sancta ecclesia], Who insists that we teach all [emphasis original] things that He has commanded us.” This statement is misleading and confusing, for it suggests, without qualification, that church fellowship with heterodox churches destroys the unity of the church, the body of Christ (unitas; cf. A Brief Statement of the Doctrinal Position of the Missouri Synod, paragraphs 26-29). While agreement in doctrine establishes the limits and boundaries of external fellowship (church fellowship), the church’s internal and perfect unity (hidden to us but known to God) is preserved in spite of those who err concerning some aspect of the teaching of the Gospel and the correct administration of the sacraments.

2. **Definition of Civic Events.**

Declaration seven (7) admits “that civic events often present an opportunity to proclaim the Gospel, and that Christians can publicly offer prayers to the Triune God at such events.” Civic events, the declaration continues, are to be distinguished from “Interfaith prayer services,” which “by definition, cannot be considered [such] civic events, but must be considered unionistic and syncretistic services.” Declaration 8 then utilizes a definition of a worship “service” as that which contains elements “used by a regularly designated worship leader of the church” and concludes in a “rejection,” “We reject the teaching that events of the type described here can be considered civic events.” Declaration 9 then begins by affirming the following: “We are to make a clear confession of the Gospel at every opportunity presented to us. Further, one can pray in the presence of those who are non-Christian, if all the prayers are offered only to the One true God, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, and only by those confessing faith in the Triune God. In this regard we do not speak of prayer services, as elsewhere described, but strictly of prayer itself.”

We appreciate the attempt here to say what a “civic event” is not, but it is not at all clear how the document, exactly, defines a “civic event.” Evidently, it is not an event where proclamation of the Gospel and prayers in the presence of non-Christians are necessarily absent, though one reading of Declaration 9 might suggest that all prayers offered must be Trinitarian and spoken only by those confessing faith in the Triune God. If this is the case, does the document then
mean to say that civic events are actually occasions at which prayers are spoken only by Christians?

Whatever the document means in its references to “civic events,” it is certain that further reflection and discussion needs to be given to this topic in the Synod. The Commission itself has on its agenda an assignment to provide further clarity and guidelines on this matter.

3. The Question of Joint Prayer.

Related to the previous point is the question of joint prayer. The “rejection” paragraph of declaration 9 condemns “the teaching that those who confess the name of Christ can join in prayer with those who are part of non-Christian faiths.” The Commission wholeheartedly agrees that such teaching is contrary to the scriptural and confessional principles of fellowship. Christians cannot pray with non-Christians without compromising their witness to the biblical faith.

But this leaves unanswered the question as to whether “prayers” offered by both Christians and non-Christians at public events must necessarily be regarded, and in all circumstances, as joint prayers (leaders of a public event could make clear, for example, that they are not to be regarded as such).

4. Function of the “Condemnations” and/or “Rejections.”

“That They May Be One,” as we have noted earlier, begins by observing that “some [in our Synod] have contended that this [Yankee Stadium event] was merely a civic event,” while “others have maintained that the event’s agenda calls into question this contention.” The document presents its strong argument that participation in the Yankee Stadium event was syncretistic. However, the document repeatedly “condemns” the view opposing its own in such a way as to imply that those who hold to this opposing view also are guilty of positions that few if any in our Synod have accepted or would ever accept.

Charitably, we surely may assume, not every person who regards the Yankee Stadium event as a civic affair would accept views such as the following singled out in the condemnations: “that differences in doctrine are trivial” [2]; “differences of doctrine are in some way a blessing from God rather than a curse of Satan” [5]; “that one can…pray with non-Christians” [6]; “that every prayer which uses the name ‘Jesus’ is automatically prayed to the Triune God and thereby an expression of the Gospel” [6]; that we may “present the Gospel as one option among many” [9]; “that prayers are made worthy because of human actions” [10]; “that charity and license are the same thing” [13].

A “if the shoe fits, wear it” response will not be sufficient here, when fellow-members of the Synod are being publicly targeted for condemnation and rejection.
5. **Scriptural and Confessional Argumentation.**

“That They May Be One” promises to be “a scriptural and confessional statement concerning church fellowship and public prayer,” and in reference to Article VI of the Synod’s Constitution declares, “God’s Word is clear on this issue” [unionism and syncretism].

However, the document presents little by way of specific and sustained argumentation based on scriptural and confessional texts. There is, in fact, a paucity of scriptural texts cited that actually deal with the subject of church fellowship and public prayer (See *The Lutheran Understanding of Church Fellowship*, esp. pp. 6-9, for more extended discussion of pertinent texts.). Moreover, aside from three initial references in paragraph one to the Epitome of the Formula of Concord, the Small Catechism and the Augsburg Confession (and one later citation from the Athanasian Creed), no focused discussion of confessional principles regarding church fellowship and public prayer is given.

**Conclusion**

The Commission shares the conviction, expressed also by “That They May Be One,” that God-pleasing concord in the church, under His guidance and blessing, is achieved through concerted and sustained efforts to reach agreement in confession. For profitable discussion of matters under dispute in the church it is critically important that points at issue be carefully delineated or defined, and that a focused and reasoned presentation of biblical and confessional evidence pertinent to the question be offered.

In the view of the Commission, “That They May Be One” has failed to achieve the goal that it has set forth for itself, namely, “to bring clarity and concord to this situation” [Preface]. In the Commission’s opinion, the document has not adequately fulfilled its claim, made in the language of confessional subscription, to be a “common confession of the one Holy, Christian and Apostolic faith, as set forth in the Holy Scriptures, as taught in the Book of Concord, and as presented above” [Conclusion]. While there is much in the document to commend it, the Commission concludes that because the document in numerous instances and at critical points fails to make clear distinctions, provide basic definitions, and supply sufficient biblical and confessional evidence for its claims it does not “adequately and correctly give[s] expression to the doctrinal position of the Synod.”

The Commission commends pastors and others in the Synod who have offered written contributions to the ongoing conversation concerning these controverted issues. In forwarding the foregoing evaluation of this particular contribution to the Council of Presidents, the Commission encourages the Council to facilitate responsible public discussion of such matters in a spirit of collegiality and charity, and under the Scriptures and Lutheran Confessions.

Adopted February 17, 2004