

Church Fellowship

How can a member of the CLC talk about the CLC's practice on fellowship with non-CLC people?

World's perception

In the world today, it is a prevailing practice among religious circles to accept and relate to groups with other beliefs. It is common for Christians of non-CLC churches to emphasize agreement with other people rather than differences. Many churches and synods subscribe to unionism, the joining together of church bodies in spite of differences in beliefs, and are willing to join in church work and worship. This kind of practice is contrary to that of the CLC and what God demands in His Word.

Review of CLC Doctrine

As a church body that confesses a shared set of beliefs, members of CLC congregations join in fellowship (e.g. worshiping, communing, praying, studying God's Word, Christian education, and mission work).ⁱ If we recognize people with beliefs contrary to God's Word, we are not to be in fellowship with them 1) for the preservation of God's Word, 2) for the protection of our faith, and 3) as a loving warning of the danger to their soul.ⁱⁱ Romans 16:17-18 - **"I urge you, brothers and sisters, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them. For such men are slaves, not of our Lord Christ but of their own appetites; and by their smooth and flattering speech they deceive the hearts of the unsuspecting."** Therefore the CLC's doctrinal platform is to not join in activities considered as fellowship with other religious organizations if they preach and teach doctrines contrary to scripture.

Resources

For review of fellowship, Luther's Small Catechism simply explains what fellowship includes and why we do participate in it. Relevant scriptural support is included with the explanation. Fellowship is covered by questions 197 through 199 in the Sydow catechism.

1. "Concerning Church fellowship" is the official statement of the CLC's doctrine concerning Church fellowship. It explains the fellowship practice of the CLC, providing Biblical support and background of the practice.
2. "A Closer Look for Those who are Concerned" is a chronological history of statements of union among various synods in church matters. It also includes several major events and meetings. Synods mentioned in the article include LC-MS, WELS, ALC, and ELS. The document was compiled by Arvid Gullerud and updated by Rev. Daniel Fleischer.
3. "A History of the CLC and Differences Between CLC and Other Synods" by Prof. EM. John Lau narrates a history that required formation of the CLC. The article explains both doctrinal disagreements between church bodies and also deviation from God's Word, which often concerned church fellowship. The article shows how these disagreements resulted in the different synods that exist.
4. Both of the articles by Professor Lau and Rev. Gullerud as well as "Concerning Church Fellowship" are available at the online library of the CLC websiteⁱⁱⁱ, which includes several other relevant documents.

How do we approach discussion of the question?

1. Remember and Remind that the Bible is our foundation

We know that the Bible is the inerrant word of God, thus the Bible is the foundation for our fellowship practice. We are to obey God rather than men. (Acts 5:29) Obeying men is obeying the reason of man, a gift of God, but one that is corrupted by sin. Application of human reason has brought confusion and false teaching concerning fellowship. God's will is master, not our logic.^{iv} A key point to remember and emphasize is the Biblical basis of our fellowship practice. Furthermore the references provide specific Biblical support of our practice.

2. Fellowship practice of other synods

It is good to know and recognize the differences between the CLC's doctrine and that of other congregations. Differences in beliefs, including fellowship, are the reason we do not fellowship with them. Synods may be in agreement in many areas, but we differ in the doctrine of church fellowship. A key difference is that certain synods have reasoned that it is best to emphasize the common beliefs shared by synods in order to encourage one another and worship together. The CLC recognizes the risk this ignorance imposes on our faith. The Bible stresses the danger associated with it. We are to avoid error to

both sustain our faith and also adhere to God's Word and will. This means separating ourselves from error. The danger to our faith is that tolerance of false beliefs is contrary to God's Word and invariably leads to acceptance and finally promotion of them.

3. Recognizing a possible CLC stereotype

A predictable reaction of non-CLC people to our view on church fellowship is to see our practice as extremely selective and even haughty. In response, we can humbly and carefully explain that our practice serves at least two purposes. First, our avoidance of fellowship with other churches highlights the false doctrine those churches promote. We do this out of love, praying that non-CLC members recognize, by our non-fellowship, the false doctrine of their church. The avoidance also emphasizes the severity of holding to a false teaching. Second, we practice our practice of fellowship to sustain the faith of CLC members. According to the Bible, fellowshiping with other church bodies is contrary to God's will. Most importantly avoiding false teaching and teachers is what our Lord teaches in His Word.

In discussing the fellowship issue, Philippians 2:3, 4 expresses how we should approach this topic. "In humility value others above yourself, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of others." Paul here is talking about the relationship between members in a Christian church, but the idea can be related to speaking with non-CLC people as well. We are to value the spiritual well-being of whoever we talk to, and express our faith-stance, not with a pretentious attitude, but with compassion, love, care, and concern for the spiritual well-being of those to whom we speak. In all things we have confidence in the power of God's Word.

ⁱQuestion 246 in Luther's Small Catechism

ⁱⁱQuestion 249 in Luther's Small Catechism

ⁱⁱⁱclclutheran.org/online-library

^{iv} See the article by Rev. Fleischer