

When You Should Not Pray With Others

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I have heard several times in my life the following phrase concerning marriage: "Opposites attract." Being a single, young man myself, I wonder how much truth that phrase contains. This may influence the choice I make. For a man and woman, whose personalities have conflicting tastes, to remain side by side throughout their lives, something must happen. The married persons accept their differences, whether greater or smaller.

Some people look at this situation with delight. Each partner receives opportunity to expand his or her way of thinking. While the one notices immediately the forest green of the painted grass, the other points out the overall calmness of the setting in the persons, sky, and landscape. In the marriage relationship two persons have a lifetime to learn and to mature from one another.

However, can we view God's Word in this way? Does God allow conflicting opinions concerning his clear directions for life to stand side by side with the Word? In each person's relationship to God, does anyone have the right to agree to disagree with the Almighty? Does Christ tolerate such thoughts about what he, the prophets, and apostles taught in his name?

Sadly, many would answer the above questions with "yes" or "in a way." These people wish to break down the wall, which separates the denominations of Christianity. People shout "Tolerance for unity" by their words and behavior. God's Word has a place in ecumenical theology, but love supercedes strict adherence to God's teaching. Didn't Christ himself strongly rebuke the Pharisees for obeying the Law of Moses too strictly, instead of showing mercy and love: "Haven't you read what David did when he and his companions were hungry? He entered the house of God, and he and his companions ate the consecrated bread—which was not lawful for them to do, but only for the priests" (Mt 12:4)?

Against this background of thinking, this paper will tackle the topic of joint prayers with other church bodies. What does God say in his Word concerning prayer with other people? The answers cannot be found in human feelings or argument, but in the revealed Word. There the Lord teaches his will for all people.

Now, consider the following situation. After reading it, think how you would react and why.

On Wednesday nights men from the Lutheran church go to the baseball park and play softball. They participate in a league, in which other church bodies are included, such as the Baptist denomination. On the first night you are ready to play, you are excited. Playing some softball not only gives you a chance to exercise your body, but it also allows time to get to know better your fellow members at church in a different setting. You strap on some cleats. You're out the door and into the car.

By the time you arrive, most of the players on both teams are present. You join everyone else in stretching out those stiff muscles and tight back. You want to suffer the least amount of minutes as possible after the game. Your older friend, Dan, tells you that the team is playing against the Christ the Lord Baptist church tonight. So far so good, because the groups of men seem well behaved and the muscles are loosening.

The captains of the two teams meet at the plate. They decide who bats first in a few, short moments. Then, everyone gathers around the pitcher's mound. Those who have baseball hats on take them off. You're asked to lead the group in a short prayer. Both teams are present.

What happens next? You see all the men before you as Christians, though separated by denominational lines. Though you do not agree with the Baptist's view on faith, infant baptism and other doctrines, all these men by their membership in Christian churches confess Jesus as their Lord and Savior. Do you lead the group of men in prayer? While you hesitate because of your conscience, heads begin to rise and look at you strangely, wondering why you are silent.

Some have no problem in opening the game with a joint prayer between two church bodies. It's a game. Both groups of men worship the same Lord. But this paper sees the situation as an opportunity. At that moment a believer in Jesus has the opportunity to confess the Lord's will with law and gospel.

Before the believer confesses his faith to the others, he will keep in mind several truths. Members of the true Christian church may be present among the men he sees in front of him. The *Nicene Creed* wrote it in this way: "We believe in one holy Christian and apostolic Church." Paul wrote about the *Una Sancta*¹ to the Ephesians with the

following words: "There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called—one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all" (4:4-6). A spiritual relationship exists between the members of the one body.

From the previous passage we see hints of how a person is brought into the body of Christ. God the Father sent his Son, Jesus, into the world to rescue it from spiritual destruction. In chapter 2 of this same epistle Paul explained the history of salvation in ten verses. All people have been born in sin, because Adam chose not to obey the command of God concerning the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. To illustrate the corruption of all people's nature Paul wrote: "you were dead in your transgressions and sins" (Eph 2:1). No one ever in the history of the world has had the ability to save himself from the wrath of God, except one—Jesus Christ.

Out of love the Father sent his Son, who is true God, to be born of a woman, so that the Son might carry the punishment and guilt of the entire world on his cross. After Jesus died, the Father raised his Son from death and exalted him "in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus" (Eph 2:7). Through Jesus all people have forgiveness and eternal life. God restored the relationship between himself and the world, but he desires each individual to enjoy the harmony now between them.

Therefore God sends the Holy Spirit to create faith in a person's heart, so that he or she becomes a child of God. Children are not enemies, but are loved by their parents. So also, in Christ God the Father loves his children. He sends his Spirit through external means, the Word and Sacraments, into people's hearts, so that they trust Christ as their Savior and remain in God's family. The Lord has chosen to use no other means to bring someone into his family: "Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ" (Ro10:17). In this way believers are made sons and daughters of God (Ga 3:26).

Our new relationship with God, also, brings a new relationship with his other children, whom we may have never seen. In Christ all believers are one body, *Una Sancta*, as mentioned above. The night before his crucifixion Jesus prayed to his Father for this blessing: "My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe

in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you" (Jn 17:20,21). As Christians, we have a blessed fellowship. In times of joy and sorrow we have brothers and sisters who want to share the happiness or burden we have. The Lord raises his family in love, so that his children care for each other's needs. Prompted by Jesus' love and guided by his command, God's children discipline each other, so that none stray from the family.

By the testimony of Scripture we confidently believe that the spiritual offspring of Abraham is as numerous as the dust of the earth and as the stars in the sky (Gn 13, 15), but how does one recognize them? Jesus clearly told the Pharisees that his kingdom is invisible to human eyes: "The kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation, nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is within you" (Lk 17:20,21). The communion of saints is marked by the means, with which it was originally created, the Word and Sacraments. The Augsburg Confession stated: "The Church is the congregation of saints, in which the Gospel is rightly taught and the Sacraments are rightly administered."²

Indeed, one can claim the existence of the true church in a place, where a group of people uses the Means of Grace. A little newborn is brought to the baptismal font and into the kingdom of God by the work of the Holy Spirit. To praise God men and women raise their voices in hymns based on truths engraved in Scripture. The Word is taught in sermons and prayers. The use of the external Word and Sacraments guarantees the presence of the *Una Sancta*.

However, outside the walls of a church a person cannot determine who in a crowd of people know Scripture and trust Christ as their substitute. The other way a person recognizes a Christian is by his confession. Humans do not have the ability to examine the heart of a person to see whether one has faith or not (*fides qua*). This belongs to God: "The LORD does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart" (1 Sm 16:7). Yet, someone can judge what one confesses by mouth (*fides quae*). The contents of a person's thoughts, in other words the truths one believes, are revealed by confession.

It is natural for Christians to confess their faith. When Peter and John were brought before the Sanhedrin, because the disciples were teaching the people about Jesus

and his resurrection from the dead, Peter and John answered: “For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard” (Ac 4:20). Paul, also, had such strong conviction and emotion concerning the gospel. Several days after his conversion Saul *at once* began to preach Jesus, the Son of God, in the synagogues. Believers cannot restrain themselves from sharing the gospel, which heals and uplifts the sinner.

Also, the Lord requires his disciples to confess him in word and deed. Jesus said: “Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven” (Mt 10:32; Lk 9:26). The Lord is not motivating us by punishments to confess him as the Christ. When used in such a way, the law works only fear and anger in humans. In the passage Jesus is curbing our sinful natures, which would rather keep silent than face persecution for the Name. The disciples, as well as we, need to be warned, so that we do not fall into spiritual cowardice. No, Christians shout the glories of Christ without fear, because “are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. So don’t be afraid; you are worth more than sparrows” (Mt 10:29,31).

Two qualities mark the Christian confession. First, "a Christian confession of faith is in principle always a confession to the entire Word of God."³ Jesus made us children and fellow heirs of God's riches not so that we continually disobey God and go our own ways. That is foolish and gives evidence of unbelief, which God will punish: "Let the prophet who has a dream tell his dream, but let the one who has my word speak it faithfully. Yes," declares the LORD, "I am against the prophets who wag their own tongues and yet declare, 'The LORD declares'" (Jr 23:28,31).

Christians gladly submit to God's will as recorded in his Word. They do this, because through the Word the Holy Spirit teaches his children the truths about salvation and leads them into a new life in Christ. John recorded in the Gospel: "To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, 'If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free'" (8:31,32). Believers firmly rest on God's Word in all that it states, knowing that God does not lie nor act to harm them, but strengthens and guides his own. C.F.W. Walther wrote in his *Theses on Open Questions*, Thesis 7:

"No man has the privilege, and to no man may the privilege be granted, to believe and to teach otherwise than God has revealed in His Word, no matter whether it pertains to primary or secondary fundamental articles of faith, to fundamental or nonfundamental doctrines, to matters of faith or of practice, to historical items or other matters subject to the light of reason, to important or seemingly unimportant matters."⁴

Secondly, however, "the faith of Christians and its manifestations are marked by many imperfections, either in the grasp and understanding of Scriptural truths, or in the matter of turning these truths to full account in their lives."⁵ Although God looks on his believers as holy and righteous in Christ, they are still corrupted by their sinful nature in this world. A constant struggle to overcome sin does not cease until physical death. Paul described the fierce battle between the renewed image of God and the sinful nature in every Christian in the latter half of Romans 7. Because of this the Christian will not always confess his faith in all godliness and holiness according to God's Word.

God does freely offer forgiveness for sins of weakness. This gospel motivates and empowers the Christian to battle with the Word against sin, as Paul confessed his own imperfections to the Philippians: "Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me" (3:12). Although the life-long war frustrates Christians, they nevertheless strive to please their Lord and Savior for the grace and mercy he showed, which brought peace.

As the Commission on Doctrinal Matters correctly and rightly summarizes, weakness in confession is not reason for the termination of fellowship, but the opposite result (Ro 14:1).

"Weakness of faith is in itself not a reason for terminating church fellowship, but rather an inducement for practicing it vigorously to help one another in overcoming our individual weaknesses. In precept and example Scripture abounds with exhortations to pay our full debt of love toward the weak."⁶

By the grace of God people come to faith in Christ and learn of the one body, of which they are members. The believers naturally want to gather with others, who confess the same Lord of Scripture:

"Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing,

but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching” (He 10:23-25).

They look forward to hearing the Word of God, so that their consciences may be assured of forgiveness. Believers cherish the time together, in which they can build each other up in the Word.

Although the *Una Sancta* exists, yet we cannot declare unity to any and all members of Christian church bodies. Remember that God's kingdom is *invisible*. Believers and unbelievers are within the *visible* church. Jesus described this co-existence in the visible church with a parable:

"Once again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was let down into the lake and caught all kinds of fish. When it was full, the fishermen pulled it up on the shore. Then they sat down and collected the good fish in baskets, but threw the bad away" (Mt 13:47,48).

Because we cannot see the content of the human hearts, Jesus bound his followers to a person's confession in word and action. God himself will deal with the hypocrite and reward such a person justly (Jr 17:10). God gives us directives, as he did the original readers of John's first epistle, concerning someone's words:

"Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God" (4:1-3).

Though the apostle was dealing with a specific error in this portion of Scripture, we read God's command clearly. Listen to what people say and watch what they do, before claiming unity with them. God wants his children to be unanimously one in faith according to his Word: "I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought" (1 Cor 1:10).

Because the mind is clouded by sin, some people distort or reject God's Word entirely. Jesus and the apostles promised that they would be found in our fellowship: "Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves" (Mt 7:15). However, the believers will recognize them by their fruits (7:16; Mt 12:33,37). What course of action does God want us to take with such

persons or church bodies? We cannot have fellowship with such people: “I urge you, brothers, 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” (Ro 16:17). We are to avoid any expression of church fellowship, such as a handshake (2 Jn 9-11).

Again, *Doctrinal Statements* explained this well.

“For anything to be a ‘joint’ expression of faith presupposes that those involved are really expressing their faith together. Other things like giving a greeting, a kiss, a handshake, etc. to others are in themselves not of necessity expressions of Christian faith.”⁷

However,

“These things done together with others become joint expressions of faith only when those involved intend them to be that, understand them in this way, and want them to be understood thus, as in the case of the apostolic collection for the poor Christians at Jerusalem, the fraternal kiss of the apostolic church, our handshake at ordination and confirmation.”⁸

Some church bodies disagree with biblical doctrine and desire to tear down the barriers of denominational differences. The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod has shown its doctrinal laxity by using rationalizations to permit joint prayers with other church bodies, with whom no doctrinal unity exists.

“We have long recognized that there can be various levels of interaction with other Christians, and that the amount or degree of doctrinal agreement is a key factor in determining what we can do together, if indeed we can do anything at all.”⁹

Therefore, prayers with members of other church bodies could be allowed, depending on the content, purpose, or perhaps situation,¹⁰ as long as some agreement was held by all the participants. The Missouri Synod went so far as to point out the necessity of such joint prayers:

“We and our people live and work and play in a world where there are more than 20,000 Christian denominations . . . Membership in a denomination is often rather ambiguous in terms of what that means doctrinally . . . Like it or not, we have to come to terms with the real world. We have to help one another relate to that world with confessional strength and evangelical flexibility.”¹¹

One immediately recognizes how the quotes break the biblical principles of Christian fellowship. For these reasons the WELS does not attempt to revive fellowship with LCMS, nor sees any hope of doing so. In the first quote, though, one can see the

downgrading of prayer, as something "lower on the ladder" than other forms of fellowship. Missouri has failed to remember that prayer is on the same level as all forms of fellowship; no distinction of function exists. Praying the Lord's Prayer or some other one expresses the same fellowship as communicants before the altar.

Why is this so? Prayer is worship. Only those redeemed and sanctified in Christ can approach God: "Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, 'Abba, Father'" (Ga 4:6; Ro 8:15). The apostle Peter stated this truth in this way: "The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer, but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil" (1 Pe 3:12). Prayer worships God by recognizing him as the One from and for whom all things were created (1 Cor 8:6). Prayer is an action of faith, because the believer trusts the promise that God hears him.

However, many abuse this means to communicate and worship God. Matthew recorded Jesus' plain words: "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. They worship me in vain" (15:8,9). These verses first applied to the kingdom of Judah. God was warning them of the coming punishment they would soon experience. Because of their laxity and wantonness in respect to worship of the LORD, which did filter to the people's daily activities, the LORD was about to act. The same situation applied in Jesus' day, when he quoted the prophet Isaiah. The Pharisees gave outward recognition to God's ordinances, but their hearts were far from God's will. With their words and works, the Pharisees claimed to be praising and obeying the Lord, but they were not.

We who share a common faith have the blessing to approach our Father in heaven (Mt 6:9), and he will accomplish whatever is asked in his Name (Mt 18:19,20). He gives us tremendous promises. Believers can share their worries with their Father (1 Pe 5:7). We can bring all kinds of prayers before his throne on the behalf of everyone (1 Tm 2:1,2). The believers of the Jerusalem church recognized this blessing and carried it out immediately. Luke the historian wrote in Acts: "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer" (2:42).

Just as confession is natural and necessary of a Christian, so also is prayer natural and necessary. Paul asked the Thessalonians: "Pray continually" (1 Th 5:17). Prayer is

not an option. We need to pray to our Father in heaven, because we face powerful enemies, Satan, the world, and our own flesh. We daily need to pray that God preserves us in the one, true faith, because sin still plagues us within our bodies. Yet, prayer is a marvelous blessing. In prayer Christians have every opportunity at any time to address, praise, and thank their Creator and Redeemer and Sanctifier. Let us daily use and treasure this duty!

What would you do in the situation of the pre-game prayer? Does the situation necessarily cause anxiety? Isn't this an opportunity to witness to the truth?

Conclusion

Having discussed the various principles involved in fellowship, one concludes from God's Word that love does not mean tolerance or disregard. Love is following the Lord and not compromising the truth in the Word of the Lord, while patiently teaching and encouraging those brothers or sisters who are weak in their understanding.

Though we long for the Day, when all of God's children will be revealed in glory (Ro 8:18,19), the Lord commands us in his Word to associate in Christian fellowship, such as joint prayers, with those who are "one in heart and mind" with us concerning all the teachings of Scripture. God's Word interprets itself and remains the only standard for our lives. Departing from the Word by living or teaching in error can destroy one's own soul and harm others. However, by the power of the Spirit we can aim for perfection in what we say and do and be of one mind in our blessed fellowship (2 Cor 13:11).

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¹ *Una Sancta Ecclesia* (Latin) means One, Holy Church.

² AC, VII, 1 (Concordia Triglotta, 47).

³ *Doctrinal Statements of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod*, Reprinting authorized by the Commission on Doctrinal Matters, 1970, (hereafter cited as Doctrinal Statements), p 52.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p 53.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p 53.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p 53.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p 51,52 (footnote).

⁸ *Ibid.*, p 52 (footnote).

⁹ Wilbert R. Gawrisch, “‘Levels of Fellowship’—Scriptural Principles or Rules of Men?” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol. 88, No.1 (January 1991), p 11.

¹⁰ Armin Schuetze, “Joining Together in Prayer and the Lord’s Supper,” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol. 93, No. 2 (April 1996), p 121.

¹¹ Gawrisch, “Levels of Fellowship,” p 11.