

2006 Seminary Essay Contest: Ecumenism for the 21st Century

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Essay Title: *Sitting at the Table Together: Ecumenism and the Future of Christian
Togetherness*

Centuries ago, the Apostle Paul wrote that in Christ, there is no longer Jew or Greek, male or female (Galatians 3:28). Being Christian implied a sort of unity. Human boundaries no longer matter. Differences in gender, class, and ethnicity come together in a shared religious identity. Paul wrote about early followers of Christ living in *koinonia*. However, Christian unity is not always self-evident. Over the course of two millennia, in spite of efforts to live in Christian community, religious identity has led to divisiveness, name-calling, and separation. Followers of Christ have been less than Christlike to other followers of Christ. It is so easy to call a heretic anyone with a differing viewpoint. The Augsburg Confession, a document that has shaped the ecclesial heritage of my Lutheran tradition, is liberally seasoned with condemnations and anathemas against Arians, Pelagians, Anabaptists, and other Christian groups with differing beliefs. All of these condemnations limit God's power to love who God pleases, and they demonstrate our human attempts to mold and construct the Body of Christ in our image, rather than allowing God to guide us. Judgment, stereotyping, and mean-spirited derision toward

Christians of other theological persuasions are unfortunate elements in all of our Christian traditions.

On the other hand, the ecumenical movement is also a part of the legacy of our Christian traditions. In the past century dialogue between leaders of Christian groups has made great strides in the area of building opportunities for unity among Christians. Several recent documents have been a welcome way to bridge divisions. The tenth round of Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogue has produced a document, "The Church as *Koinonia* of Salvation: Its Structures and Ministries." This document follows in the footsteps of the 1999 Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, which affirmed a shared understanding of the importance of grace in the theologies of both churches. This 2005 document explores unity between Lutherans and Roman Catholics using the biblical image of *koinonia*. Both churches share in their identity of being centers of Christ's love. The document recognizes the complex differences between Roman Catholics and Lutherans in ecclesiastical hierarchy, local church organization, and sacramental theology. Nevertheless, it acknowledges that the other church is part of the one Church of Jesus Christ, "perhaps imperfectly" (96). While cognizant of potential imperfection in the other church body, the document asserts that both traditions are "wounded by their lack of the full catholicity" (103). This document and the series of dialogues from which it proceeds are indeed are much-needed steps on the journey of Christians living out their faith together.

Another document, "Called to Common Mission," has paved the way for full communion between the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) and the Episcopal Church. Previous full communion agreements of the ELCA have been with other Protestant bodies of reformed traditions. These arrangements are not mergers, but recognition of the mutuality we share by confessing belief in Christ. Full communion allows shared exchangeability of sacraments and can facilitate cooperation for other inter-church endeavors. Full communion is a humble recognition that our true identity is found in Christ, not simply in our own tradition. The possibility of sharing table celebration with other Christians is but a foretaste of the unity that we

have in Christ. What makes documents like “Called to Common Mission” controversial is that full communion is about more than setting the table and inviting the neighbors. It implies answers to even bigger questions. Full communion addresses issues like ecclesiology, ministry, and prior relationships with other church bodies. It is not an endeavor to take lightly.

As I prepare for ordained ministry in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, I offer two pieces of constructive advice about unity as Christians: (1) Know your own tradition. (2) Talk with other Christians about their experience. First, I was amused by a line from “Called to Common Mission.” It states that each church “promises to encourage its people to study each other’s basic documents” (4). That is certainly a necessary and vital step if we want authentic ecumenical dialogue. However, I wonder if we need to be more familiar with our own documents first. I have been an active member of a Lutheran congregation all my life, but never cracked open the *Book of Concord* until starting seminary.

My second piece of advice is having conversation with others. Living over a year with a roommate who is Muslim has taught me that interfaith dialogue is much more than panel discussions and official handouts. I hear him pray in the wee hours of the morning, and he shares a kitchen with someone who eats pork. Living in community with people of other religious belief is about getting to know people as people first. In both interfaith and ecumenical relationships, I feel it is more fruitful to have a conversation than to sit in ignorance. So often ecumenical dialogue comes in the form of ecclesial bureaucrats having esoteric meetings about rules and doctrine. While this is important for the future of church bodies working together, I urge leaders and members of my denomination to worship, fellowship, and converse with people outside of their “Lutheran bubble.”

Several brief vignettes from my personal experience demonstrate the multivalent and complex nature of communion and Christian togetherness. Several summers ago, I was leading a group of Lutheran youth on a servant trip. We decided to worship at a Roman Catholic parish because of its unique architecture, and its strong ties to social justice concerns in the community.

We were denied communion, but later in the week the Lutheran pastor in our group presided at communion in the Episcopal parish at which we were staying. The contrasts of exclusion and hospitality are but snapshots of the confusing and frustrating approaches to unity.

The following spring, I attended Mass at a local Roman Catholic parish. It was the first Sunday after the death of John Paul II, and I thought attending mass would be an appropriate act of solidarity. However, I still remembered being turned away from Eucharist a few months earlier, and was voicing my apprehension. A Lutheran classmate, who had served in the Jesuit Volunteer Corps, told me, “Just don’t say anything, and they won’t know you are Lutheran.” I did not say anything, and was given bread and wine. Looking back, I realize that furtive secrecy and surreptitious blending-in are not true steps toward unity. Ecumenism and full communion need to be both a communal effort of church bodies and the daily task of committed individuals. When we deny table fellowship with other Christians, we limit God’s love. We appoint ourselves judge as to who is worthy to participate in God’s banquet. Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners. Shouldn’t we be able to eat with Anglicans and Roman Catholics?

In the coming century, the biggest schisms and divisions hindering Christian unity are not going to be between Roman Catholics and Lutherans or Lutherans and Anglicans. Rather, they will be between members of the same denomination. As much as I despise the terms *conservative* and *liberal*, these ways of thinking dangerously fragment our shared identity as Christians. For example, controversies surrounding the election of Bishop Gene Robinson as a Bishop in the Episcopal Church and the close vote on sexuality guidelines at the 2005 ELCA Churchwide Assembly indicate that sexuality is just one issue that can divide people of faith. Debates surrounding sexuality, abortion, war, evolution, poverty, and global climate change will continue to fester in our religious discussions. However, the biggest overarching challenge for Christian unity in the 21st century is the question of interpretation of scripture. Discerning which passages we interpret literally and which metaphorically will be a watershed moment for piecing together our fragmented Christian household.

As Christians, we affirm our faith in the Nicene Creed and profess belief in “one holy catholic and apostolic church.” It is part of our ecclesial heritage to hope for oneness. As a future Lutheran pastor, I see myself as a Christian first. Lutheranism is the lens through which I focus my faith. As the 21st century sees living a life shaped by the gospel to be an increasingly counter-cultural affair, my hope is that we can embrace the aspects of our traditions that celebrate unity as Christians. Recent strides in ecumenism seem to bring us closer to that welcome table of unity we hope for in Christ.

Paul Bailie