

# An Evaluation of “The Nature and Implications of the Concept of Fellowship”

*By the Commission on Inter-Church Relations*

## Introduction

In 1977 the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod in convention requested its Commission on Theology and Church Relations to “prepare a comprehensive report on the nature and implications of the concept of fellowship.” The CTCR attempted to involve the whole Synod in the preparation of this report through a series of “Formula for Concord” conferences and a “Bible Study on Fellowship” which included a response questionnaire that was distributed to each congregation of the Synod.

Under date of April 1981 the CTCR submitted to the Missouri Synod a document entitled “The Nature and Implications of the Concept of Fellowship.” The document is divided into two major sections. Section I, “The Nature of Fellowship,” seeks to present an “overview of what God’s Word teaches about the nature of fellowship, together with a listing of the basic Scriptural principles which should guide Christians in their relationships with one another.” Section II is entitled “The Implications of the Nature of Fellowship for Church Body-level Relationships.” In its concluding comments the CTCR adds the proposal that further work needs to be directed toward “the application of the principles of fellowship...at the congregational, pastoral, and individual levels.”

## I. The Nature of Fellowship\*

### A. *The Scriptural Concept of Fellowship*

#### 1. *Fellowship: Having Part in a Common Thing*

Introductory in nature, this part consists of a word study of *κοινωνία* and its cognates which concludes that *κοινωνία* has as its root meaning “having part in a common thing.” We agree with the CTCR’s observation that there will “have to be more than a mere word study on the meaning and usages of *κοινωνία* in the New Testament,” since the Scriptures often speak of the subject of fellowship without making specific use of the term *κοινωνία*.

#### 2. *Fellowship: A Spiritual Relationship Which is Given*

This part adequately presents the spiritual fellowship that is ours with Christ and with Christ’s Body, the Church, as it is effected by the Holy Spirit through the Means of Grace. As stated here, “Fellowship with Christ is therefore given with faith in Him. Through the Means of Grace God offers and conveys to us forgiveness of sins...This vertical relationship of spiritual unity with Christ is not something we can achieve. It is a gift from God to all believers in Jesus Christ...Faith not only places believers in Christ into a spiritual fellowship with their Lord, but it also unites them with each other...Like the vertical fellowship of the believer with Christ, this spiritual unity which binds all true Christians together in a horizontal relationship in the body of Christ is a gift from God and not the product of human efforts.”

#### 3. *Fellowship: An External Relationship to Be Manifested and Maintained*

This final part under section A speaks of “forbearing one another in love,” but without compromising the truth: “Since teachings contrary to God’s Word lead away from Christ and not to Him, it is necessary that the Gospel be preached *purely* and the sacraments

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\* Editor’s note: It should be understood that all outline headings (I, A, 1 etc.) are quotations from the LC-MS document and are supplied for location purposes. The actual CICR evaluations appear under these headings.

administered rightly. Love for Him who is the Truth and for the saints for whom He died will have nothing to do with subverting or compromising in any way the only means through which Christians are made one with Christ and with one another.”

B. *Scriptural Principles of Fellowship*

1. *Spiritual fellowship with Christ and with all believers is given with faith in the heart (fides qua)...*
2. *Faith in the heart (fides qua) comes into being through the power of the Holy Spirit working through the Gospel ...*

We agree with the substance or content of these two theses. The last sentence, however, under thesis 2 could be understood as falsely setting up an antithesis between saving faith and unreserved acceptance of God’s Word as being altogether inerrant. The sentence reads: “Faith in the heart (*fides qua*) is produced not by the teaching that the Bible is a holy book, not by the acceptance of the inerrancy of Scripture, and not by concern for pure doctrine, but only by the Holy Spirit working through the means of grace, i.e. Word and sacrament.”

3. *For the church today Holy Scripture is the only judge, rule and norm of the Gospel...*
4. *Good works flow out of faith and are responses to the Gospel...*

We agree with thesis 3 and particularly appreciate its last sentence that “any qualification of the divine authority of Scripture...endangers the Gospel...” In thesis 4, which we accept, we also appreciate the priority which is given the “truth of the Gospel over love,” as indicated in the sentence: “In the same way that faith precedes good works, it is proper and necessary to speak of the priority of the truth of the Gospel over love.”

5. *Love, which heads the list of “the fruit of the Spirit,” always seeks the edification of the members of the body of Christ...*

In this thesis, with which we find ourselves in agreement, we value particularly the statement that love always seeks the edification of the members of the body of Christ, “but never by compromising the means by which the spiritual unity of the church comes into being.” We would, however, have preferred a clearer reference to God’s entire Word which dare not be compromised. Somewhat similar is the ambiguity we detect in the use of the term “Gospel” throughout these theses, where it isn’t always clear in what sense the term “Gospel” is being used.

6. *The confession of the apostolic faith (fides quae) as it is taught in the Scriptures is mandated by God for the sake of the edification and extension of Christ’s body, the church...*
7. *Church fellowship (in the sense of external unity in the church) is constituted by agreement in the faith which is confessed (fides quae) and not by faith in the heart (fides qua)...*
8. *The refusal to affirm church fellowship (in the sense of external unity in the church) with those who do not confess faith (fides quae) as it is taught in the Scriptures is not an optional matter but a Scriptural mandate...*
9. *The quest for church fellowship (in the sense of external unity in the church), as well as its acknowledgement when agreement in the confession of the faith has been achieved, are not optional matters but Scriptural mandates...*

We accept theses 6, 7, and 8 as written, but do note several rather serious weaknesses in 7 and 8, especially with respect to things that are not stated here. We note for one thing the repeated reference in theses 7, 8, and 9 to church fellowship as “external unity in the church.” We understand this to be a reference to church fellowship as an existing status. And yet the Scriptural references to church fellowship as outward manifestations of a common faith deal mainly with activities, not with an existing status (e.g., fraternal kiss, right hand of fellowship, bidding Godspeed, the joint collection or offering for the saints in Jerusalem). Special examination or consideration of such varying activities, all expressions of church fellowship, might have led the CTCR to a “unit concept” treatment of church fellowship,

rather than approaching its “assignment from the doctrine of the means by which the church is created, nurtured, and preserved (the marks of the church)...” (page 6, footnote 3), and thereupon restricting its approach to “altar and pulpit fellowship.”

Again, we regard it as a serious weakness of this entire presentation on church fellowship that no recognition is given to the relevant Scriptural concepts of “weak brethren” and “persistent errorist.” Only careful and due attention to the concept “weak brethren” will remind us that false doctrine in itself need not require a termination of church fellowship unless such false doctrine is persistently adhered to in spite of patient admonition. It is true, as is stated under thesis 8, that “the Scriptures do not present a timetable or the specific procedures to be followed in delineating external relationships with those who do not correctly confess the faith...” But it is also true that the Scriptures do bid us to note whether we are dealing with weak brethren (e.g., I Cor. 15; I Thess. 4:10–12,14; II Thess. 3:6,14,15; Acts 15:5,6,22,25) or with persistent errorists (e.g., Gal. 1:8,9; 5:9; Matt. 7:15–19; 16:6; II Tim. 2:17–19; II John 9–11; Rom. 16:17,18).

This serious omission in the “Scriptural Principles of Fellowship” also seems to be reflected in the final thesis, thesis 9, where it is stated: “The Scriptures command those who are one in Christ both to seek agreement in the confession of the faith (*fides quae*) with all those who profess faith in Christ and to acknowledge the existence of church fellowship once this agreement has been reached.” The latter statement seems to overlook or ignore entirely the fact that God also commands an avoiding where persistent errorists are involved. An avoiding or termination of fellowship which at the same time is accompanied by the seeking of agreement through continued doctrinal discussions is contradictory by its very nature and can only confuse or undermine the clear testimony which God would have us give to the truth of His holy Word. It is another matter, of course, when changes take place in a situation that originally called for a termination of church fellowship, changes which of themselves might warrant the resumption of doctrinal discussions.

## II. The Implications of the Nature of Fellowship fo Church Body-level Relationships

### A. *Principles—Not Specific Procedures for Individual Cases*

We agree with the emphasis of this section, namely, that the Scriptures have much to say regarding the principles of church fellowship, but that the Scriptures do not provide us with the specific procedures to be observed in all the individual cases which arise. As indicated before, however, it is unfortunate that no mention is made here or elsewhere in this document concerning the necessary distinction which must always be observed between persistent errorists and weak brethren in matters of church fellowship.

### B. *A Brief Review of the Church’s Application of the Scriptural Principles of Fellowship*

In this section reference is made to the “first four centuries of the church,” followed by the statement: “for the early church, church fellowship was altar fellowship...” Altar fellowship would of course have been one obvious expression of church fellowship for the early Christians, but the New Testament record of the early church does not warrant equating church fellowship with altar fellowship or restricting the concept “church fellowship” to “altar fellowship.” As has been indicated earlier, fellowship references in the New Testament are of the following nature: the fraternal kiss, the right hand of fellowship, bidding Godspeed, the joint collection or offering for the saints in Jerusalem, as well as joint participation in the Lord’s Supper. And the historical record for the period immediately following the New Testament record likewise gives no warrant for such restriction of the concept “church fellowship” to “altar fellowship.”

### C. *Models for External Unity in the Church*

We are happy to note that the document rejects three recently advocated “models for achieving external unity in an increasingly splintered Christendom,” namely, “conciliarity,” “reconciled

diversity,” and “selective fellowship.” None of these models would be acceptable unless one were ready to disregard both the Scriptural principles of church fellowship as well as the confessional implications of church membership.

The fourth model, “Ecclesiastical Declaration of Altar and Pulpit Fellowship,” is the one which is designated by the document as the only one which “does not in and of itself stand in conflict with any of the Scriptural principles of church fellowship.” We concur in this judgment. Such a declaration, however, should not limit itself to altar and pulpit fellowship. No Scriptural reason for constantly limiting fellowship to altar and pulpit fellowship is adduced. We believe that no Scriptural basis for such distinction between altar and pulpit fellowship and other kinds of fellowship can be found.

In place of Scriptural evidence an attempt is made to base such a distinction on historical precedent. The evidence adduced, however (cf. page 33, footnotes 60 and 61), does not in any way limit fellowship to altar and pulpit fellowship. It is true that church fellowship discussions of the previous century were often limited to altar and pulpit fellowship references, since it was in this area that the most frequent problems were occurring at the time. But the historical evidence demonstrates that Lutherans of earlier times also treated joint prayer, for example, as a part of church fellowship.

Attention might be called to the meeting of theologians which the king of Poland called together at Thorn, Poland, in 1645, a meeting which was aimed at restoring harmony among the Roman Catholic, Lutheran and Reformed factions of that period. Concerning this particular meeting of representatives, our Commission on Doctrinal Matters made the following comments in its “Fellowship Then and Now” brochure that was issued in the 1960’s:

Each group first conducted a worship service by itself, after which they assembled for the meeting. At the beginning of the first session, the question of having opening and closing prayers at the meetings arose. The Roman Catholics and the Reformed favored opening with a prayer that was suggested by the Roman Catholic bishop. Although Huelsemann (a leading theologian) found no fault with the content of the prayer suggested, the Lutherans declined to practice prayer fellowship with the Roman Catholics and the Reformed. In an adjoining room Huelsemann led the Lutherans in prayer, after which they entered the meeting... We might add that the Missouri Synod “Lutheraner” commented favorably upon this action of the Lutherans of Poland as follows: “From this we can see 1, that we are following the same practice as the faithful Lutherans of Poland in the year 1645; 2, that this demand for public prayer with errorists and heretics is a characteristic of the Reformed, but is foreign to the true Lutheran Church” (1908, p. 111).

Again, when free conferences were held between 1903 and 1906 at which members of the Ohio and Iowa Synods met with men from the synods of the Synodical Conference, our fathers (especially also those of the Missouri Synod) objected to joint prayers at these meetings. And this reflected the official position of the Missouri Synod on the subject of church fellowship throughout its history, at least into the 1940’s. For evidence thereof and numerous quotations by Missouri Synod theologians, reference is made to the previously mentioned “Fellowship Then and Now.”

### **Conclusion**

We find ourselves in agreement with many statements that the CTCR of the LC-MS makes in its conclusion to “The Nature and Implications of the Concept of Fellowship.” We agree that the spiritual fellowship of the Christian with his Lord and his fellow believers is God-given, and that the external fellowship of the believers is not a matter “about which people are free to make their own arrangements.” We also agree

that Christians must “seek to be faithful to what the Scriptures teach about manifesting...unity in Christ externally.” We agree that “God has commanded the church to preserve the truth of His Word” and that “error in doctrine threatens unity in the body of Christ.” We agree that Christian love (as well as the Scriptures) requires the members of Christ’s body to “separate themselves from those who compromise or distort the Scriptural Gospel.” We believe, however, that the use of the expression “Scriptural Gospel” instead of “Scriptures” in this document can dangerously limit the extent of the agreement that God’s Word requires.

We agree with the CTCR that the first three of the four contemporary proposals for seeking to manifest external unity in the church reported by the CTCR in this document “all violate at least some of the principles of fellowship” taught in Scripture. They are therefore not viable for those who would remain true to the Scriptural principles of fellowship.

As we have indicated earlier, however, we regret that the CTCR in its recommendation to the Missouri Synod speaks only of an “Ecclesiastical Declaration of Altar and Pulpit Fellowship.” While other forms of fellowship are not excluded, *expressis verbis*, yet it is evident from the entire document that the limitation to altar and pulpit fellowship is intentional. The other major shortcoming in the CTCR document is the absence of any reference to “weak brethren” and “persistent errorists,” a Scriptural distinction which is critical for any Scripturally-correct practice in the area of church fellowship. Such shortcomings in any consideration or study of church fellowship can easily lead to the untenable concept recommending degrees of fellowship based on levels of doctrinal agreement. This is particularly the case when a study on church fellowship is restricted to church-body-level relationships while leaving unanswered what the implications might be on the congregational, pastoral, and individual level.

Since the document presented to the Missouri Synod by its Commission on Theology and Church Relations does not fully and clearly reflect what the Scriptures teach on church fellowship, it is not surprising that the document in a postscript feels constrained to appeal to “mutually agreed-upon decisions” for support rather than to the clear words of Scripture. This, in our opinion, reveals the basic weakness of the document.