

# THESES ON THE CHURCH AND MINISTRY

The Theses on the Church and Ministry which are herewith being presented to our readers were originally drawn up by the Commission on Doctrinal Matters of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod for the final doctrinal discussions within the Synodical Conference. These discussions were carried on from January 1957 to May 1960 by the joint doctrinal committees of the four synods of the Synodical Conference. The Church and Ministry was only one of a considerable number of doctrinal subjects on which theses were prepared for these discussions.

Subsequently these Theses on the Church and Ministry have been used quite extensively by our Commission on Doctrinal Matters in doctrinal discussions with other Lutheran church bodies in our own country as well as overseas. As a result of these discussions the Commission on Doctrinal Matters considered it wise to expand and reword some of the sentences of the theses in the interest of even greater clarity. These revisions did not change or modify the original substance of the theses. The Theses on the Church and Ministry were printed with these expansions and elaborations in the Proceedings of the Thirty-Ninth Convention of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, August 9-16, 1967, pages 284-290.

In its report to the Fortieth Convention of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, August 6-13, 1969, our Commission on Doctrinal Matters once more devoted attention to the text of the Theses on the Church and Ministry. It recommended that the second sentence of the opening paragraph (A) of the theses on the Church be transposed in a somewhat expanded form to become the final paragraph under I-D, 3, and that for greater clarity the adjective “public” precede the term “ministry of the keys” in the antithesis on the Church. At the same time attention was called to the fact that the second last full line of II-D of the theses on the Ministry had been inadvertently omitted in the text as printed in the Proceedings of the Thirty-Ninth Convention. The original substance of the theses was again not affected by these recommendations; it is merely brought out with greater clarity.

The Fortieth Convention of our Synod adopted these recommendations as well as a resolution that the full text of the Theses on the Church and Ministry with the adopted clarifications be printed in the 1969 Synodical Proceedings. The latter resolution was somehow overlooked, however, in the printing of the Proceedings. In the conviction that many of our readers may desire to have the present text of the Wisconsin Synod’s Theses on the Church and Ministry available for ready reference, it is being offered in the Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly.

## I. THE CHURCH

- A. The Church is the communion of saints, the entire number of those whom the Holy Spirit has brought to faith in Christ as their Savior and whom through this gracious gift of a common faith He has most intimately joined together to form one “congregation” (A. C. VII, VIII), one body, one blessed fellowship.

As long as we keep the truth that the Church is the communion of saints in mind, everything that Scripture tells us about the Church will fall into its proper place and can be readily understood. At the same time all the false notions which men have entertained and still entertain concerning the Church are readily exposed.

Matt. 16:16-18: Through his God-given faith in Jesus as his divine Redeemer Simon had become Peter, a building block laid on Christ the foundation rock to form a part of the growing edifice of Christ’s Church.

Eph. 2:19-22; John 10:16; I Cor. 1:2; II Cor. 1:1; I Thess. 1:1; Acts 2:47

- B. The Church, just because it is the communion of saints, the congregation of all true believers, is of necessity invisible, that is, it can be apprehended only by faith.

Rom. 10:10; I Sam. 16:7; II Tim. 2:19; Since faith in Christ, which alone makes sinful human being members of the Church, is a matter of the heart, God alone can discern all those who are really His.

We can judge others only on the basis of the profession of faith that they make in word and deed. Such a profession may be false and hypocritical. Hence the Church cannot be equated with any individual church organization whose members can be determined and tabulated by men on the basis of their outward profession. Just as little is it to be equated with the sum total of all such outward churches.

- C. The Church of believers, though invisible, is a blessed reality.  
It is not a mere platonic idea.

1. It is the object of God's gracious thoughts from all eternity. John 17:2, 6, 9, 11, 12; John 13:18; Eph. 1:4.
2. Everything that happens and that will happen is bound up with the gathering and completion of the Church. Eph. 1:20-23.
3. It is a reality that is to be of great comfort and concern for us. Eph. 2:18-22; Eph. 4:1-16; I Cor. 12.

- D. The Church, the communion of saints, is present there where the means of grace are in use, where the Gospel is rightly taught and the Sacraments are rightly administered. (Marks of the church.)

1. It is through the Gospel (in Word or Sacrament) that the Church has received its life. All of its members have been born again by the incorruptible seed of the Word of God. Through the Gospel the spiritual life of all its members is sustained. Through the Gospel the Holy Spirit calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith. John 6:63; John 3:5, 6; I Peter 1:23-25; Rom. 1:16; Titus 3:5; I Cor. 10:17; John 17:17, 20.
2. Not all, of course, who hear the Gospel believe. Matt. 23:37; Acts 7:51, Heb. 4:2; A. C. Art. V. Yet the promise of the Lord stands that His word will not return to Him void, without accomplishing that which He pleases. Isa. 55:10, 11; Matt. 28:18-20; II Cor. 2:14-16.
3. Hence Scripture bids us to look for the Church there where the Gospel is in use, where people are gathered together both to receive its blessings and to bring them to others. Matt. 18:20. Scripture designates such gatherings of people who profess faith in Christ and manifest it in the use of Word and Sacrament as churches. It does so, however, because of the believers found in their midst. Acts 4:32; 8:1; 5:1-11. Hypocrites are like chaff among the wheat, outwardly adhering to the company of believers but not a part of them. Until God exposes them, they, too, will be the outward recipients of the expressions of fellowship of the believers. I Cor. 5:13 Hence, when the New Testament speaks of the Church or of churches, the reference is either to such as are known to God as believers (ecclesia stricte dicta, the

Communion of Saints or a part of it present at any locality) or to such as are to be acknowledged as believers by us on the basis of their confession (ecclesia late dicta, the empirical church as we encounter it).

4. The specific forms in which believers group themselves together for the fellowship and work of the Church, the specific forms in which they arrange for the use of the means of grace in public worship, the specific forms in which they establish the public ministry, have not been prescribed by the Lord to His New Testament Church.
  - a. It is the Holy Spirit who through the gift of their common faith leads the believers to establish the adequate and wholesome forms which fit every circumstance, situation, and need. I Cor. 3:21; I Cor. 14:33, 40. God in His word merely bids them to gather together, Heb. 10:25, and through their faith prompts them to do so. Since believers ordinarily live at some local place, where they will desire to nourish their faith regularly through the means of grace, the local congregation will usually be the primary grouping of Christians.
  - b. It is likewise the Holy Spirit who through the same bond of a common faith draws Christians together in Jesus' name in other groupings, and draws Christian congregations together in larger groupings, such as a synod, that they may share their mutual gifts and gain strength for certain phases of the great task of the Church, such as the training of pastors and teachers, the establishment and maintenance of mission fields. Acts 15; I Thess. 4: 9-10; Acts 9:31 (the Greek text: the church in Judaea, Galilee, and Samaria); I Cor. 16:1 (the churches of Galatia); II Cor. 9:2 (Macedonia and Achaia); II Cor. 8:18-19 (Macedonian churches had a common worker and jointly elected a traveling companion for Paul); Acts 16:1-2 (Timothy's work praised by Derbe, Lystra, and Iconium).
  - c. In essence the various groupings in Jesus' name for the proclamation of His Gospel all lie on the same plane. They are all church in one and the same sense, namely in this sense that on the basis of the marks of the Church the Lord lets us apprehend the presence of the una sancta (the Holy Christian Church) in each such grouping of people, and thus enables us to acknowledge them as gatherings of believers possessing the ministry of the keys with the right of exercising this ministry in accordance with the considerations of love and order. Here we need to distinguish between the possession of a right and the God pleasing exercise of that right.

As the Holy Spirit leads Christians to group themselves together in Jesus' name (Jesus' name is His Gospel revelation) He always constrains them to do so in an orderly manner (I Cor. 14:33, 40) and in the spirit of love (I. Cor. 16:14). The Holy Spirit never leads Christians to group themselves together in Jesus' name for a competitive purpose so as to duplicate, hinder, or disturb that scope of the ministry of the keys which is already effectively provided for by a previously established grouping of Christians. Every added grouping of Christians in Jesus' name, as effected by the Holy Spirit, will be for the purpose of assisting the primary groupings in exercising certain phases of the ministry of the keys more fully and more efficiently in keeping with the great commission of the Lord (e.g. in mission work, in Christian education, in the training of public servants of the Word, in Christian charity, in the supervision of doctrine and practice) or for the purpose of providing needed strengthening through Word and Sacrament which, because of special circumstances, is not adequately offered or cannot well be offered through

already existing groupings (e.g. worship services at conferences and synodical conventions, ministry to students, to the handicapped, to the institutionalized, etc.).

The more fully also the secondary groupings of Christians remain conscious of their essential character as Church, the more keenly will they feel their responsibility of functioning in accordance with love and good order and thus carefully restrict themselves to those phases of the ministry of the keys which would otherwise fail to receive the attention that they deserve.

5. The right use of Word and Sacrament are the true marks of the Church, the marks by which the Lord points us to those with whom He would have us express the fellowship that we have in the communion of saints. John 8:31, 32.
  - a. The Lord in His Word admonishes us to withdraw our church fellowship from those who persistently teach, spread, condone error and demand recognition for it. Rom. 16:17, 18; II Tim. 2:17-19; II John 9-11; Gal. 1:8, 9.
  - b. Yet we rejoice in the fact that God in His grace and mercy can and does awaken, sustain, and preserve believers also in the midst of erring congregations and church bodies. I Kings 19:18. We remember, however, that He does so not through the errors that are taught and condoned there, but only through the true Gospel message that is still heard in these erring churches. We are therefore incited to proclaim the pure Word of God with great zeal and faithfulness and also with meekness and love at every God-given opportunity, so that our testimony may perchance be heard also by those who are God's children in erring churches and help them in overcoming the errors with which they are surrounded.

Antithesis: We hold it to be untenable to say that the local congregation is specifically instituted by God in contrast to other groupings of believers in Jesus' name; that the public ministry of the keys has been given exclusively to the local congregations.

## II. THE MINISTRY

### A. Christ instituted one office in His Church, the ministry of the Gospel.

It is the task of proclaiming the Gospel in Word and Sacrament. Matt. 28:18-20; Mark 16:15; John 20:21-23; Acts 1:8; I Pet. 2:9; Luke 22:19, 20. This office or service, the ministry of the keys, has been given to the Church, i. e., to the believers individually and collectively. Matt. 16:19; Matt. 10:32; Matt. 18:18; I Pet. 2:9.

A. C. (p. 44). "That we may obtain this faith, the ministry of teaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments was instituted. For through the Word and Sacraments, as through instruments, the Holy Spirit is given, who works faith, where and when it pleases God, in them that hear the Gospel ..."

F. C. (1100, 20) "That the ministry of the Church, the Word preached and heard..."

- B. The purpose of this ministry is the edification of the Church, by winning ever further sinners for Christ, and by building up those who are already members in Christian faith and life. Matt. 28:18-20; Eph. 4:11-14; I Cor. 12:7.
- C. From the beginning of the Church there were men especially appointed to discharge publicly (in behalf of a group of Christians) the duties of this one ministry. Acts 13:1-3; Acts 6:1-6.
- D. This public ministry is not generically different from that of the common priesthood of all Christians. It constitutes a special God-ordained way of practicing the one ministry of the Gospel.
1. All Christians are equal before God, neither superior nor inferior to one another, and all are equally entrusted with the same ministry of the Gospel. I Pet. 2:9. Hence no one may assume the functions of the public ministry except through a legitimate call. Art. Smalc. p. 522:67-69: The authority to call (ius vocandi) is implied in the authority to administer the Gospel (ius ministrandi evangelii) given to the Church. Hence it is proper to speak of the derived right of local congregations to call.
  2. God is a God of order; He wants us to conduct all of our affairs orderly, I Cor. 14:33, 40, and in the spirit of love, I Cor. 16:14.
  3. Christians are not all equally qualified to perform publicly the functions of the ministry. The Lord sets forth the needed qualifications of those who are to perform publicly the functions of the ministry. I Tim. 3:1-13; Titus 1:5-11. God gives to the Church men qualified for the various forms of the work required. Eph. 4:7-16; Rom. 12:6-8; I Cor. 12:4-11, 28-31.
  4. These gifts should be gratefully received and developed. I Cor. 12:31; 1 Thess. 5:19, 20; 1 Tim. 4:14; II Tim. 1:6-9.
  5. Thus these public ministers are appointed by God. Acts 20:28; Eph. 4:11; I Cor. 12:28. It would be wrong to trace the origin of this public ministry to mere expediency. (Hoefling)
  6. There is, however, no direct word of institution for any particular form of the public ministry. The one public ministry of the Gospel may assume various forms, as circumstances demand. Acts 6:1-6. The specific forms in which Christians establish the public ministry have not been prescribed by the Lord to His New Testament Church. It is the Holy Spirit who through the gift of their common faith leads the believers to establish the adequate and wholesome forms which fit every circumstance, situation, and need. Various functions are mentioned in Scripture: I Tim, 4:13; Eph. 4:11; I Cor. 12:28; Rom. 12:6-8; II Tim. 2:2; John 21:15-17 (feeding); Acts 20:28 (watching); I Tim. 3:2; 4:11; 6:2 (teaching); I Tim. 3:5; 5:17 (ruling). In spite of the great diversity in the external form of the ministerial work, the ministry is essentially one. The various offices for the public preaching of the Gospel, not only those enumerated above, e. g., in Eph. 4:11 and I Cor. 12:28, but also those developed in our day, are all gifts of the exalted Christ to His Church which the Church receives gratefully and with due regard for love and order employs under the guidance and direction of the Holy Spirit for the upbuilding of the spiritual body of Christ; and all of them are comprehended under the general commission to preach the Gospel given to all believers.

Antithesis: We hold it to be untenable to say that the pastorate of the local congregation (Pfarramt) as a specific form of the public ministry is specifically instituted by the Lord in contrast to other forms of the public ministry.

## ESSAY ON CHURCH FELLOWSHIP

In an ever-increasing measure the subject of church, fellowship has been in the foreground in our midst during recent years. To an unusual degree matters pertaining to church fellowship have become the subject of discussion in our synodical conventions, conferences, and congregations. There is nothing mysterious about this situation. It is simply the inevitable result of the intensified efforts which are currently being made to unite the various Lutheran church bodies of our land, which heretofore have differed in doctrine and practice. In the recent formation of TALC about one-third of the Lutherans in our country have been merged into a single Lutheran church body. Plans are well under way whereby more than another third of U. S. Lutherans are to be merged into another church body within several years. Besides these merger movements among Lutherans there are also intense efforts made to establish church fellowship between all Lutherans, or at least to bring about a greater measure of collaboration and cooperation between them. We must likewise realize that what is going on among Lutheran bodies in our country and what is going on among Lutherans throughout the world in the activities of the Lutheran World Federation, is but in line with a larger trend, the so-called Ecumenical Movement which is taking on accelerated momentum. This Ecumenical Movement is making its impact upon Christian denominations throughout the world and aims to unite them all in a common fellowship of worship and work, though without any serious thought of reaching doctrinal agreement on the basis of God's Word. Not only the vast majority of Protestant Churches but also most of the Orthodox Catholic groups are involved. Even dialogues with representatives of the Roman Catholic Church for the purpose of reevaluating their differences and establishing greater mutual understanding have been enthusiastically advocated, and that with a prominent member of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod taking the lead in the matter.

As far as our own Synod is concerned, our convictions won from God's Word have kept us from participating directly in these union endeavors. We have found even the efforts in this direction which are currently being undertaken among Lutherans to fall short of what God in His Word requires for the establishment and exercise of church fellowship. This does not mean, however, that we have thereby been placed into the happy position where we could simply ignore these movements and endeavors. They affect us very deeply nevertheless. They are disturbing the fellowship in our own midst, and they threaten to disrupt and terminate the precious fellowship which for so many years we have enjoyed with sister synods in the Synodical Conference.

Our Synod has frequently expressed the conviction that a unionistic trend, a weakening on the Scriptural principles of church fellowship, is really at the bottom of all the vexing issues which have arisen between our Synod and The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. Only amidst a weakening of fellowship principles and a unionistic trend could an inadequate treatment of controversial doctrines as we find it in the CC have been undertaken. A unionistic trend is certainly behind the issue of the Chaplaincy, of joint prayer with those who are not in doctrinal agreement, and of the communion agreement and other cooperative endeavors with the NLC. A blind spot concerning Scriptural principles of fellowship is ultimately also behind the issue of Scouting. For when we point out Scouting's false premises as to original sin and as to justification and sanctification, the Missouri Synod defenders will invariably assure us that they, of course, correct these things in their Lutheran handling of the Scouting program. What they fail to grasp and appreciate is their full responsibility concerning the whole Scouting organization by holding membership in it, namely, responsibility for all the Scouting programs in which the pernicious errors of Scouting are left uncorrected and unchided.

Because of this situation our own Synod's members at the Joint Synodical Conference Doctrinal Unity Committee meetings felt that the Scriptural principles on church fellowship should be given priority at these discussions. Gradually the entire group not only consented to this but also asked that the discussion should begin with a thorough study of the Wisconsin Synod presentation on church fellowship. During the past two

years a great part of our Joint Doctrinal Unity Committee meetings was devoted to the study, re-study, and detailed discussion of our Wisconsin Synod presentation on fellowship. The members of the Missouri Synod Doctrinal Unity Committee took great pains to understand and to think through our view of the Scriptural principles of fellowship on which we find so many of the practices of the Missouri Synod objectionable. They asked endless questions at every point. They brought up all kinds of practical cases to find out how we would apply our principles to them. Thus we had rich opportunity to amplify and elucidate our statements and to remove all kinds of misunderstandings by which the validity of individual points might be easily brushed aside. When the study of our Wisconsin Synod presentation was finished in the April 1959 meeting of the Joint Doctrinal Unity Committees, members of the Missouri Synod committee admitted that if all the points of our presentation stood as being fully Scriptural, they would have to change their practice on various points. We therefore asked the Missouri Synod Doctrinal Unity Committee to give us the points, if any, in writing on which they disagreed with our presentation and the Scriptural basis for such disagreement. In the May 1960 meeting of the Joint Doctrinal Unity Committees such a Missouri Synod presentation, setting forth the points on which the convictions of its Doctrinal Unity Committee are at variance with those set forth in our own Synod's presentation, was at hand and could be discussed. As a result of this discussion our Commission on Doctrinal Matters felt constrained to declare that an impasse exists between the two synods in the matter of fellowship principles.

It is our Wisconsin Synod Committee's presentation on church fellowship that your District President has asked me to elucidate and unfold at this District Convention in the interest of full understanding in our own midst.

Let me say, first of all, that this presentation aimed at setting forth, as much as possible, the entire scope of what God in His Word has to say on the subject of Christian fellowship. The practical issues facing us in our Synod all tend to focus our attention on one phase of the subject of Christian fellowship or church fellowship, namely upon the limitations and restrictions which God in His Word has placed upon the outward exercise of Christian fellowship. But it would not be wholesome to think of Christian fellowship, or church fellowship, too exclusively in terms of what we might call its negative side. In carrying out our assignment we have, therefore, treated it in its wide scope that we may again be reminded what a glorious blessing is involved in Christian fellowship, that we may be deeply constrained by the abundant encouragements of Holy Writ to manifest it in all of its God-pleasing manifestations, to exercise it as long as we can possibly do this with the Lord's approval, that we may pay richly the great debt of love to all who are still weak in faith and Christian understanding. Then we will also gain new strength to observe the limitations which our Lord has placed upon the exercise of Christian fellowship in a faithful yet evangelical manner.

Right at the beginning of our presentation we sum up in a somewhat concise definition what we consider to be the Scriptural concept of church fellowship: As printed in the Proceedings of the 35th Convention of our Synod on page 205-208, it reads as follows: "Church fellowship is every joint expression, manifestation, and demonstration of the common faith in which Christians are united with one another." To remove all misunderstanding we later expanded this definition in our discussions at the Joint Committee meetings. In its expanded form it reads as follows: "Church fellowship is every joint expression, manifestation, and demonstration of the common faith in which Christians on the basis of their confession find themselves to be united with one another." In other words, the "are united" in the earlier definition has been expanded to read "on the basis of their confession find themselves to be united." By this expansion we did not change the meaning of the original definition; we merely spelled out how alone for the practical exercise of church fellowship we can recognize a common faith.

After having stated from the outset what we hold the Scriptural concept of church fellowship to be, our presentation now proceeds to show under A. How Scripture leads us to this concept of church fellowship. This is done by six points; numbered Arabic 1-6 under A. It needs to be borne in mind that the first two points, and to a certain extent also 3 and 4, do not yet treat of church fellowship as defined in the opening statement. They treat of the fellowship in the una sancta, even though the reality of this spiritual fellowship cannot be established by us concerning any specific individuals in an absolute way. Church fellowship, as we shall also be

reminded in later points of this presentation, must content itself with assuming the reality of the spiritual fellowship on the basis of the confession of the individuals or groups involved. Yet to lose sight of the spiritual fellowship, which is assumed to be present on the basis of an acceptable confession, would mean to externalize the whole concept of church fellowship.

With this preliminary clarification let us therefore take up point for point the steps by which Scripture leads us to its concept of church fellowship.

A, 1 Point A, 1 reads: “Through faith in Christ the Holy Spirit unites us with our God and Savior. Yes, through a God-given, Spirit-wrought faith in Christ our Savior God has become our dear Father and we lost and condemned sinners His dear children. For St. Paul says very clearly in Gal. 3:26: Ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus.” St. Paul unfolds this precious truth in the fourth chapter, saying: “When the fullness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons.” And then he states in the 6th verse of that chapter, as listed under this point: “And because ye are sons, God hath sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying, Abba, Father.” Through the Gospel message of Christ’s finished redemption, the Holy Spirit continually gives us the assurance of faith that our sins are all blotted out and that God is thus our dear Father. Thereby He enables us to look to God in confidence, trust, and hope as His dear children and constrains us to speak to Him as our dear Father in supplication, praise, and thanksgiving.

The unmerited blessing of this fellowship with God through Christ Jesus ought to thrill our hearts as it thrilled the heart of St. John when he wrote in Chapter 3, verse 1, of his first epistle: “Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God.” In his joy over his station as God’s son through faith he is also conscious of its glorious future implications, for he writes: “Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be; but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is.”

A, 2 In Point A, 2, our presentation now goes on to say: “This Spirit wrought faith at the same time unites us in an intimate bond with all other believers.” Yes, from the very moment that we sinners were received into this blessed fellowship with our God through faith in Christ our Savior, we also entered upon another fellowship that should likewise thrill our hearts. We were intimately united with one another, with every other believer in Christ. This is intimated by St. John even when he speaks of his blessed fellowship with God, for he glories in it as something which he has in common with all of his Christian readers. Throughout he speaks in terms of “we” and “us.” But the Apostle also speaks of it very explicitly. He does so when at the very beginning of his epistle he sets forth the purpose of his testimony as an eye and ear witness of the Savior and His works, saying: I John 1:3: “That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ.” And after having sounded the warning that this blessed fellowship with the Father and the Son will be lost by those who again choose to walk in the darkness of sin, he says once more: “But if ye walk in the light as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another” (1:7). Faith in the Savior, which unites us individually with God, and makes us His children, at the same time unites us with one another, makes us spiritual brothers and sisters.

All believers the world over, regardless of race, nationality, age, sex, and station in life, together with those who have already departed out of this life in faith, constitute one spiritual family with Christ as its Head. Its members may differ ever so much as to ancestry, education, habits, pursuits, and political convictions, yet a living faith in Christ binds them closely together. This glorious unity of the invisible Church, and that which all of its members have in common to unite them, is set forth with great fullness in Ephesians 4:4-6. Here St. Paul says: “There is one body, and one Spirit even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.” The invisible Church of believers constitutes the mystical body of Christ. One and the same Spirit dwells in the hearts of all its members, the Holy Spirit who through a common call has given them the same identical hope of salvation. The Lord and Savior of all is the same, not only in His wonderful person as true God and true man, but also in His



work. He did not prepare a complete salvation for some and a salvation that must be supplemented by works for others. The faith by which Christ's merits are appropriated is the same in every case. It is not that some trust in Christ completely while others rely to some extent on their own honor and merits. This faith is produced in every member completely by the Holy Ghost. All ordinarily share in one baptism of regeneration. Through their common faith in the one Lord and Savior, wrought in their hearts by the same Spirit through the same means of grace, they have one God and Father who is above all as the Creator and Master of all, who is through all using them to carry out His plans, who is living and dwelling in them through his Spirit.

This glorious reality of the unity of the Church is also emphasized by many other striking metaphors of Holy Writ. Christ's believers are called the temple of God in which the individual Christians are living stones fitly framed together; a city of the living God, a commonwealth, in which the believers are fellow citizens; a family, in which we are sons and daughters of our Father in heaven; a royal priesthood, in which all those who are washed from their sins are kings and priests together; branches of the one Vine, from whom they all draw strength and sustenance; one fold, in which all believers are sheep of the one Good Shepherd.

This glorious unity and invisible fellowship of believers, like the fellowship with God out of which it flows, is not man-made, but a gift and creation of God. Faith which unites us with Christ and with one another is wholly the work of the Holy Spirit. He creates and preserves this unity. This blessed fellowship is rooted in the eternal counsel of God, who predestinated us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be His children and therefore brothers in one holy family, and who purposed to gather us together in time. This fellowship of believers is made possible by Christ and His atoning work. On the night before the completion of His redemptive work, He prayed for the consummation of this Christian fellowship (John 17:20, 21): "That they all may be one: as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me." This prayer is fulfilled in the growth, expansion, and preservation of the invisible Church of believers. The blessed work of leading men into this fellowship with Christ and with one another and of preserving them in this unity is effected through His Word, through the Gospel of reconciliation. Jesus prayed for the twelve: "Sanctify them through thy truth; thy word is truth"; and He added: "Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word; that they all may be one." As the exalted Lord, Christ gives pastors and teachers to His Church that through their ministration of the Gospel His body of believers may be built up, that ever more may be added to it by faith, and that they together with those who have already come to faith may be strengthened, nourished, and preserved in this fellowship.

This truth needs to be emphasized in our day when union of all Christians is sought by means other than God's Word and Spirit, when cooperative endeavors without doctrinal unity, when representative gatherings with social problems on the agenda are envisioned as effective means for bringing about Christian unity. The truth that God's Word and Spirit unites Christians needs to be emphasized when the fulfillment of Christ's prayer for the unity of His Church is so frequently misunderstood, when it is thought of as being fulfilled by men through the effecting of an outward organizational unity among Christian denominations. The blessed fellowship of believers is and remains an invisible one, which is not to be equated with any outward church organization.

A, 3 But church fellowship as we use the term is something outwardly visible and manifest. Hence the next points of our presentation, A, 3-5, remind us what Scripture has to say about the expression and manifestation of faith. The point A, 3 reads as follows: "Faith as spiritual life invariably expresses itself in activity which is spiritual in nature, yet outwardly manifest, e. g. , in the use of the means of grace (John 8:47), in prayer (Gal. 4:6), in praise and worship, in appreciative use of the 'gifts' of the Lord to the Church (Eph. 4:11-14), in Christian testimony (Acts 4: 20) (II Cor. 4:13), in furthering the cause of the Gospel (I Pet. 2:9) (Gal. 2:9), in deeds of Christian love (Gal. 5:6)."

A, 4 Point A, 4 stands in the closest relation to the previous point. It states: "It is God the Holy Ghost who leads us to express and manifest in activity the faith which He works and sustains in our hearts through the Gospel" (Gal. 4:6; John 15:26, 27; John 7:38, 39; Acts 1:8; Eph. 2:10).

Faith which unites believers with their God and Savior and with one another is spiritual life, wrought, nourished, and sustained by the Holy Spirit. Because faith is spiritual life it will like all life manifest itself in activity. We know that to be true of physical life. Also physical life itself we cannot see. But the life which throbs in a human body and which pervades all its members manifests itself through heart and pulse beat, through growth and change, through movement and activity. It is also thus with faith, spiritual life. It manifests itself through activity. We shall presently have something more to say about this activity.

When we think of the fellowship of faith, the specific subject matter that we are discussing, we can, however, carry the above comparison a step further. In our physical bodies heart, lungs, hands, feet, eyes, ears do not merely show themselves as living members by their individual activity. Since all these individual members are closely fused together in one body, with one life throbbing through all of them, these members in their activity function jointly and harmoniously, each integrating its activity with that of all the other members, each with its own activity serving all the other members. That, too, is true of the Church of believers as the mystical body of Christ. The spiritual life of faith which dwells in each believer does not merely manifest itself by individual activity. Since one and the same God-wrought faith in the Savior dwells in the hearts of all believers, uniting them most intimately as the body of Christ, the common spiritual life will also manifest itself in joint activity. Together believers will express their faith, each integrating the activity of his faith with that of other believers, each serving the other in faith with his particular gifts. It is such joint expressions of faith which come into consideration when we speak of Christian fellowship or church fellowship.

This is not a comparison of our own devising. It is one which God Himself makes in His Word, one which the Holy Spirit employs in great detail through the Apostle Paul in the 12th chapter both of Romans and I Corinthians. It will not do, of course, to press the comparison beyond the points which it is to clarify in a vivid manner. In all comparisons the analogy is never complete in every point. The fact that the spiritual life of faith manifests itself in activity and that as spiritual life common to all believers it manifests itself in joint activity does not mean that through such activity the invisible Church of believers now actually becomes visible. In the sphere of physical life a doctor, by taking note of pulse and heartbeat, may detect and determine quite conclusively whether there is still life present or not in a body even though life may be at a very low ebb. It is not so with spiritual life. The activity by which faith indeed expresses itself can as far as its outward manifestations are concerned—and that is all we mortals can observe—still be feigned and imitated by those in whose heart no faith is throbbing. Thus the presence of these outward manifestations of Christian life is not yet an absolute indication that those from whom they originate are truly believers. We may actually be dealing with an activity of hypocrites like the worship and the charity of Ananias and Sapphira, which, until exposed by God, however, passed for expressions of Christian faith. But this is a matter which we will have reason to take up more fully a little later.

In the last two paragraphs we have already touched upon the truths which our presentation of church fellowship takes up in A, 5. It states:

A, 5 “Through the bond of faith in which He unites us with all Christians the Holy Spirit also leads us to express and manifest our faith jointly with fellow Christians according to opportunity: as smaller and larger groups, Acts 1:14, 15; 2:41-47; Gal. 2:9; as congregations with other congregations, Acts 15; I Thess. 4:9, 10; II Cor. 8:1, 2, 18, 19; II Cor. 9:2.”

Let us now consider with greater detail what some of these activities, mentioned in Points A, 3-5 are, by which believers manifest and express their faith individually and jointly with others. It is through the Word of God that faith has been engendered in our hearts, it is through the Word and only through the Word that the Holy Spirit nourishes and sustains this spiritual life of faith in our hearts. St. James says: “Of his own will begat he us with the word of truth.” Paul asserts: “Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God.” We already heard how on the night of His betrayal Jesus spoke of those who would believe through the Apostles’ word. We also heard how in His ardent concern for the continued faith of His disciples the Savior prayed: “Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth.” Believers, therefore, long for this indispensable food of the

Word of God and cherish it for the nourishment and preservation of their spiritual life. Thus their faith will manifest itself, first of all, in hearing and pondering God's Word. Jesus says, (John 8:47): "He that is of God heareth God's word." In the Christian's bitter struggle with his Old Adam this longing may not always win out and be able to assert itself fully, but it is there as long as there is faith in his heart. Holy Writ abounds with exhortations to encourage and build up our faith also in its longing and appreciation of God's Word. Inasmuch as the Holy Spirit has united all believers in this faith-born longing for the spiritual food of His Word, He also leads Christians to gather jointly about this Word. That they do so is an outward expression of Christian fellowship. We see it in the first Christian congregation upon the Pentecost outpouring of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:11-47). Of this entire company of believers we are told that they gladly received the Word of the Apostle. They saw their supreme treasure in the pure Gospel of Jesus Christ. Neither openly nor secretly did they find fault with any part of it. With their whole heart they clung to it, truly believed it, and earnestly shaped their lives according to it. Because they deeply appreciated the treasure of the Gospel they made diligent use of it. We hear: "They continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship . . ."; and again we're told that they continued with one accord in the temple and broke bread from house to house. Ever anew they assembled together to hear God's Word that their faith might be strengthened. It was a true expression of Christian fellowship. God has given His saving Word to His Church and to each individual member that His believers may nourish their souls with it. With this Word they are exhorted to minister to one another for their mutual edification. When they do so, this is an expression of Christian fellowship, church fellowship.

In entrusting His Gospel to His Church the Lord has also given it to them in the special form of the two Sacraments, Baptism and the Lord's Supper. It is the same Gospel message, yet with the seal of a visible token attached to it. In His great commission to His Church the Lord has bidden them to make disciples of all nations through Baptism as the washing of regeneration. When Christians jointly carry out this commission, this is an expression of Christian fellowship. On the evening before His death, Jesus ordained His Holy Supper for all of His present and future disciples with the precious promise that in, with, and under the bread and wine they would at every celebration receive His true body and blood. At this holy eating and drinking each of them would individually be assured in his faith: Jesus has willingly given His body into death for my salvation; He has shed His blood for the remission of my sins. Now I need not fear my sin and guilt and the wrath of God which I have deserved with them. I can be certain of my salvation, certain of God's grace and favor forever. But though this precious means of grace was meant for the believer's individual assurance of salvation, it was at the same time also to be an expression of the fellowship of faith. It was that when Jesus celebrated it with His disciples at its institution. He intended that it should continue to be that when it would be celebrated in the future, saying, "This do ye, as oft as ye drink it, in remembrance of me." When we are told of the Pentecost congregation that they continued steadfastly in the breaking of bread and that they broke bread from house to house, this has been commonly interpreted as referring to joint celebration of the Lord's Supper. Though this cannot be established with full certainty, we do know from I Corinthians 11 how the first Christians at Corinth jointly communed at the Lord's table in connection with their Agape feasts, which were in themselves an expression of Christian fellowship. The Apostle reminds the Corinthians, I Cor. 10:17: "We, being many, are one bread, one body: for we are all partakers of that one bread." Most appropriately; therefore, do we also for this reason call this sacred meal "Communion" and the guests at the Lord's table "communicants." When we approach the Lord's table, we bear testimony that we are of one faith with those who commune with us. We commonly refer to it as altar fellowship.

The Lord has also bidden His believers to proclaim His saving Word, entrusted to them, to those who have not yet heard it that such souls may be won to faith and become united with the body of Christ, His Church. He tells us: "Go ye into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature." It is the Holy Spirit who constrains us to carry out this privileged commission. On the evening before His death, Jesus told His disciples (John 15:26, 27): "But when the Comforter is come, whom I will send unto you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, which proceedeth from the Father, he shall testify of me: and ye also shall bear witness, because ye have been with me from the beginning." Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would testify of Him in and through His disciples. The Holy Spirit would bring to their remembrance all that their Savior had said and done

before their eyes and ears. He would guide them so see it all in its true saving meaning. Thereupon the disciples would testify in the strength and power of the Holy Spirit and as His instruments. Witnessing for Christ is an expression of faith. It is still the Holy Spirit who constrains the believers to bear witness of the Lord. We, indeed, have not been with Jesus from the beginning; but the Apostles were with Him for us. Through their inspired Word we have heard His gracious message and seen the mighty deeds with which He wrought our salvation. Through the Word of the Apostles the Holy Spirit has guided us into all saving truth and led us to embrace it with believing hearts. He has glorified Jesus before our souls as the perfect Redeemer. Through this gracious work the Holy Spirit now constrains us to bear witness of Jesus in word and deed. Like Peter and John, we cannot but speak to others of the great things that cheer our hearts (Acts 4:20). St. Paul expresses the same truth in II Cor. 4:13, saying: "We having the same spirit of faith, according as it is written, I believed, and therefore have I spoken; we also believe, and therefore speak." When Christians are conscious of the high position to which they have been raised by faith they will also be constrained to perform the task for which they have been raised to this position, even as we are told in I Pet. 2:9: "But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should show forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness, into his marvelous light." The more fully we live in the Gospel, the more richly does the Holy Spirit prompt us to glorify our Savior before others with the testimony of our lips and our lives. When we do this jointly with others, this is an expression of Christian fellowship, church fellowship. It is fellowship in Church work.

Not only has the Lord given His Gospel in Word and Sacrament to His Church of believers and to each and every individual member, but He has also established the public ministry. As the ascended and exalted Lord, He gives gifts to His Church for the public ministration of these means of grace. Speaking of this in Ephesians 4:11-14, St. Paul says: "And gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ...." In their God-given faith believers cherish and appreciate these gifts of the Lord. They long for the blessings that come to them through Christ's servants in their public ministration of the means of grace. Wherever, therefore, believers are found in the same locality, they will gather together in smaller and larger groups. We see it already in Acts 1:14, 15 where we find a hundred and twenty disciples gathered together in prayer and supplication and listening to Peter's exposition of the Word of God. We see it again after Pentecost in the birth of the first congregation which continued steadfastly in the Apostles' doctrine and fellowship (Acts 2:41-47). Christians do not need to be commanded to form a congregation. Through their common faith the Holy Spirit gathers them together and moves them to establish the public ministry in their midst and to call public servants, such as pastors and teachers, to serve them with the means of grace. This is richly illustrated in the Book of Acts in the act of the founding of the first Christian congregations. When these public servants of the Word then minister to believers, and they on their part receive these ministrations, this is an expression of Christian fellowship, church fellowship. We commonly speak of it as pulpit fellowship.

Yet, even as the bond of faith which the Holy Spirit creates and sustains does not let individual believers stay aloof from one another but gathers them together in Christian congregations, so this same bond of a common faith also draws congregations together, so that they seek contact with each other and share with each other any special gifts which God may have given to one or the other congregation. We see this already in the first Christian congregations. Timothy of Derbe had a good report from the churches at Lystra and Iconium, having worked and done creditable work in all of them. St. Paul had founded three congregations in Macedonia, some distance from one another. In his First Epistle to the Thessalonians, (4:9, 10), Paul commends them for having practiced brotherly love "toward all the brethren which are in all Macedonia." There was at least one man who served all the congregations of Macedonia (II Cor. 8:1, 2, 18) 19). They had enough of an organization to carry out a joint election, in which this particular man was chosen as a traveling companion of Paul, to represent these churches in delivering the collection which they had gathered for the needy in Jerusalem. In connection with this collection Paul also says in II Cor. 9:2: "Achaia was ready a year ago." Thus

we see that he thought of the three congregations of Athens, Corinth, and Cenchraea as a closely knit fellowship in a common area. When Paul organized this great collection among the Greek churches for the church in Jerusalem, the chief purpose was thereby to cement two parts of the Church together which stood in danger of drifting apart. All these joint expressions of faith on the intercongregational level were an exercise of Christian fellowship. St. Paul stressed the divinely created bonds which united the Corinthians with the rest of the Church. When they were inclined to hide behind congregational independence, he rebuked them, saying: "What? came the Word of God out from you? or came it unto you only?" When Christian congregations outwardly accept one another as fellow believers, when they join hands in doing the work of the Lord, when they share servants of the Word, this is an expression of Christian fellowship. The association of congregations in the work of the Lord as we have it in our Synod, in our Districts, in our Conferences, their joint mission endeavors, their joint training of Christian workers, their joint supervision of Christian education—all these things are an expression of Christian fellowship. We need to remember that the specific forms in which believers group themselves together for the work of the Church, the specific forms in which they arrange for the use of the means of grace in public worship, the particular forms in which they establish the public ministry have not been prescribed by the Lord to His New Testament Church. The minute regulations of the Old Covenant have fallen away with the full revelation of God's salvation. The Lord treats His New Testament children as His adult children. In and through their common faith the Holy Spirit leads them to create the adequate and wholesome forms which fit every circumstance, situation and need.

Though our survey of the outward expressions of church fellowship cannot possibly be exhaustive, we do want to touch upon one further manifestation, namely, the vital manifestation of prayer.

Only a Christian can pray. The unbeliever, and that means every man as he is by nature, attempts to pray. Thus it need not surprise us that we find almost all people speaking about praying, that we find them engaged in what they consider to be prayer. This is due to the fact that every man has a natural knowledge of God, a consciousness of his accountability to God and of his dependence on God's supreme wisdom and power. Yet in his sin-laden conscience man, as he is by nature, cannot approach God in true prayer. The very spirit in which he prays is an abomination in God's sight. He vainly looks upon his prayer as a meritorious work or he thinks of prayer as a charm whereby he may gain some of the things he would like to have though his heart is estranged from God and he is otherwise little concerned about honoring and worshiping God. Of such prayers Jesus says that they are vain repetitions.

Through the Gospel message the Holy Spirit has, however, entered our hearts and led us to embrace the Savior's pardon and with it the full gift of His salvation. Through this Gospel message the Holy Spirit gives us the assurance that God is our dear Father and now prompts us to speak to God as our dear Father. Paul says, Gal. 4:6: "Because ye are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying Abba, Father." This is Christian prayer, this alone is true prayer. In prayer the Christian speaks to his heavenly Father on the basis of the precious promises of His Word. All this communing, this talking with God, is done in Jesus' name, in the faith that through Jesus, and through Jesus alone, God is our dear Father and we unworthy sinners His dear children. True prayer is an expression of Christian faith. When Christians, therefore, join in prayer, when they pray together, they express their common faith. Joint prayer is an expression of fellowship in faith. It is difficult to understand how with a Scriptural view of prayer anyone could think of making a distinction between joint prayers which are prayer fellowship and other joint prayers which are supposed to be something less than prayer fellowship. God would have His children come to Him together in prayer. Jesus Himself taught us this when He encouraged us to pray not "My Father, who are in heaven," but "our Father, who are in heaven." He wants us to remember that we are addressing the Father of a large family. God is our Father through Christ, but He is also the Father of many more children, who are our spiritual brothers and sisters. In our prayers God wants us to keep in mind that we stand before Him not merely as individual believers but as believers who are intimately joined together with all other believers here on earth and in heaven above as His dear family. In this sense all of our prayers are really joint prayers. It is a blessed article of our faith that we know that all the children of God, though individually known to God alone, are constantly praying with and for us, that there is a blessed invisible fellowship of prayer going on constantly, in which the hearts of all believers are jointly raised

to the throne of God's grace in supplication and thanksgiving. In this sense we are engaged in joint prayer also with every child of God whom the Lord is preserving for Himself in the midst of errorist church bodies, even in the church of the Pope, the very Antichrist. Yet in this sense also every other expression of faith on the part of a Christian is at the same time an activity that he does together with all the other Christians as they are known to God alone, serving and benefiting them with his activity of faith, even as they also serve him with their expressions of faith. Thus our presentation on fellowship in a parenthetical remark under Point A, 5 states, "Before God every activity of our faith is at the same time fellowship activity in the Communion of Saints." In support of this statement the following Bible passages are adduced: "I Cor, 12; Eph. 4:1-16; Rom. 12:1-8; II Tim. 2:19." Yet this is not the activity of faith that we have in mind when we speak of church fellowship or Christian fellowship in our presentation. This pertains to the conscious selection of specific individuals for the joint expression and manifestation of a common faith. So, besides the invisible joint prayer which includes every Christian prayer, the Savior also urges joint prayer in which we select specific individuals for the purpose of addressing a common plea to the heavenly Father with them. This is prayer fellowship in the sense of church fellowship. In Matthew 18:19-21, Jesus says: "If two of you shall agree on earth as touching anything that ye shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them." We see such prayer fellowship in the mother Church in Jerusalem, of whom we are told that "they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in the breaking of bread, and in prayers." When Peter and John were released from prison, the believers at Jerusalem lifted up their voices to God with one accord, Acts 4:24. St. Paul's Epistles are full of such joint prayers, prayers in which Paul and his associates pray for and with the Christians in the various congregations which he had gathered together through the Gospel, and prayers which these Christians on their part raised for and with the Apostle and his coworkers.

Now what is it that we especially want to note after having made this survey of the outward expressions of Christian faith? It is this that they are all manifestations of one and the same faith, and that as conscious and deliberate joint expressions they are all manifestations of fellowship in this common faith. We may classify these expressions of Christian fellowship according to the realm of activity in which they occur. Yet thereby they do not become so many different kinds of fellowship each quite different from the other. It is not that pulpit fellowship involves something quite different from altar fellowship, and these again quite different from prayer fellowship. It is not that individuals may undertake to exercise fellowship in joint church work but that they are not yet sufficiently united to practice fellowship in worship. It is not that pulpit and altar fellowship require a certain high measure of unity, while prayer fellowship is quite possible among those who are less united. If these consciously undertaken joint manifestations of Christian faith are not a mere outward sham, then they are all expressions of one and the same fellowship of faith. This, however, is not a fellowship of man's own making, but a gift and creation of the Holy Spirit.

A, 6 All this is expressed in Point A, 6 of our presentation of church fellowship. It states: "We may classify these joint expressions of faith in various ways according to the particular realm of activity in which they occur, e.g., pulpit fellowship, altar fellowship, prayer fellowship, fellowship in worship, fellowship in church work, in missions, in Christian education, in Christian charity. Yet insofar as they are joint expressions of faith they are all essentially one and the same thing, and are all properly covered by a common designation, namely, church fellowship.\* Church fellowship should therefore be treated as a unit concept, covering every joint expression, manifestation, and demonstration of a common faith. Hence Scripture can give the general admonition "avoid them" when church fellowship is to cease, Rom. 16:17. Hence Scripture sees an

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\*Church fellowship in itself is not a Biblical term. That, however, which we label as church fellowship is Biblical; it is set forth by Scripture. In the past not only church fellowship but various other expressions have been used to designate it. Our interest in this first part of the essay is not the term church fellowship but the Scriptural truths which we cover with this term, namely the joint manifestations, expressions, and demonstrations of the common faith in which Christians on the basis of their confession find themselves to be united. We are interested especially also in the truth that Scripture handles all these expressions as being essentially the same and then bids us also to handle them in this way, no matter what we may call them.

expression of church fellowship also in giving the right hand of fellowship, Gal. 2:9, and in greeting one another with the fraternal kiss, Rom. 16:16; on the other hand, it points out that a withholding of church fellowship may also be indicated by not extending a fraternal welcome to errorists and by not bidding them Godspeak, II John 10, 11. Cf. III John 5-8.”

## II

This takes us to the second part of our Synod’s presentation of the Scriptural principles of church fellowship. It is marked as B and reads: “What principles Scripture teaches for the exercise of such church fellowship.” This part is subdivided in Arabic points 1 to 5.

B, 1 B, 1 states: “In selecting specific individuals or groups for a joint expression of faith we can do this only on the basis of their confession. It would be presumptuous on our part to attempt to recognize Christians on the basis of the personal faith in their hearts. II Tim. 2:19; Rom. 10:10; I John 4:1-3; I Sam. 16:7.”

Who are those with whom God would have us jointly express our faith? With whom would He have us engage in a joint prayer? With whom are we to join in worship? With whom will we commune at the Lord’s Table? With whom will we join hands to spread the Gospel among men? The foregoing discussion under Point A did give us one obvious answer to all these questions, namely the answer: With Christians. All these activities are expressions of Christian faith, and only with Christians are we united in a common faith. Yet this answer does not settle our question. It only raises a new one. Whom can we select and acknowledge as Christian brethren? Faith is a matter of the heart and as such recognizable only by God. “The Lord knoweth them that are his” (II Tim. 2:19). Since it is the Lord who has set His heart upon His believers and hence made them His own, and since it is He who also keeps them as His own, He really alone knows who His own, the members of His Church, are. It would be presumptuous on our part to try to recognize Christians on the basis of the personal faith in their hearts. “Man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart” (I Sam. 16:7). Since we cannot probe the heart, God would have us deal with men on the basis of the confession that they make concerning the attitude of their heart. Paul says: Rom. 10:10: “For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.” We are to accept every confession of faith as a sincere expression of the real attitude of the heart. In case a clash appears between the confession by mouth and the confession by deed, we accept the confession by deed in preference to the confession by mouth, since deeds speak louder than words.

St. John writes (I John 4:1-3): “Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world. Hereby know ye the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God.” Here the Apostle bids his Christian readers, and that includes us, to discern and recognize the spirit that is in a man on the basis of his confession. Scripture, of course, tells us that there will be hypocrites, that the true attitude of the heart will not always correspond with the confession which men make. Yet that is beyond our responsibility. God will at His own time deal with hypocrites.

Yet what kind of confession are we to look for in order to recognize and acknowledge anyone as a Christian brother for a joint expression of faith, for a practice of church fellowship? Our presentation answers this question under

B, 2 stating: “A Christian confession of faith is in principle always a confession to the entire Word of God. The denial, adulteration, or suppression of any word of God does not stem from faith but from unbelief.” In John 8:31 Jesus says, “If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed; and ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.” Also in His great commission to make disciples of all nations He bids us to teach them to observe all things whatsoever He has commanded us. On the other hand, He earnestly

forbids His disciples to add to or subtract from His Word, Matt. 5:19: “Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.” I Peter 4:11: Christians are told: “If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God.” In Jeremiah 23:28, 31 we hear: “The prophet that hath a dream, let him tell a dream; and he that hath my word, let him speak my word faithfully.... Behold, I am against the prophets, saith the Lord, that use their tongues, and say, He saith.” In Deut. 4:2 we hear very clearly: “Ye shall not add unto the word which I command you, neither shall ye diminish ought from it, that ye may keep the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you.” We also have a similar statement in the final book of the New Testament, Rev. 22:18, 19: “For I testify unto every man that heareth the words of the prophecy of this book, If any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book: and if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and from the things which are written in his book.” Hence B, 2 of our presentation goes on to say: “We recognize and acknowledge as Christian brethren those who profess faith in Christ as their Savior and with this profession embrace and accept His entire Word.” This is not a new thought in the Synodical Conference. It was very clearly expressed in the Theses on Open Questions by Dr. Walther, on the basis of which the Wisconsin and Missouri Synods established fellowship in 1869. To remind us of this, B, 2 of our presentation refers to Thesis 7 and quotes it in full: “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.”

Yet in order to understand properly what we have just said concerning a truly Christian confession of faith as the basis and prerequisite for Christian fellowship we need to distinguish with Scripture between an adherent of false doctrine or practice and a weak brother. Hence B, 3 of our presentation goes on to say:

B, 3 “Actually, 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. We are all weak in one way or another.” Weakness of one kind or another is nothing unusual among Christians. Also St. Paul says of himself: “Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect: but I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus” (Phil. 3:12). Weakness in understanding God’s truths and in turning these truths to full account in their Christian lives is presupposed by Paul’s prayer for the Ephesians in chapter 3:16-18 where he prays that they may grow in Christian wisdom and understanding and become more fully rooted and grounded in love. The same presupposition of weakness among Christians underlies the apostolic admonition in I Thess. 5:14: “Warn them that are unruly, comfort the feebleminded, support the weak, be patient toward all men.” Paul points out that it is the very purpose of the gifts which the Lord gives to His Church that through their ministration of the Word the many weaknesses may be overcome which seek to undermine the blessed unity of the Church. Eph. 4:1-16. Through the Word the Church is to be edified “that we henceforth be no more children tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive.” Heb. 5:12 speaks of Christians who first have to be instructed in the milk of God’s Word and who are not even ready as yet for the strong meat of God’s truth. All this presupposes that there will be much weakness of faith and Christian understanding in the Church. Through the imputed righteousness of Christ His believers are indeed all perfect in God’s sight. Yet in its life Christ’s Church here on earth is at the same time a congregation of spiritual convalescents, under the constant care of their heavenly physician. Compare Walther’s Thesis 5: “The Church militant must indeed aim at and strive for absolute unity of faith and doctrine, but it never will attain a higher degree of unity than a fundamental one.” Any false conclusion from this Thesis is, however, immediately corrected by a consideration of Thesis 10, which says: “From the fact that the Church militant cannot attain a higher degree of unity than a fundamental one, it does not follow that any error against the Word of God may be granted equal rights in the Church with the truth, nor that it may be tolerated.” Yet in,



view of what Scripture does say about weakness of faith in all the members of the Church our presentation very correctly says in B, 4:

B, 4    “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.” This is then unfolded under four subpoints, a through d. A calls our attention to the general exhortations such as Gal. 6:1-3: “Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted. Bear ye one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. For if a man think himself to be something, when he is nothing, he deceiveth himself.” The other general exhortations are the familiar ones in Eph. 4:1-16, and Matt. 18:15-17.

4, b    4, b lists “weakness in laying hold of God’s promises in a firm trust ” and then specially quotes Matt. 6:25-34: in the Gospels we frequently hear Jesus warning, rebuking, chiding His disciples for being of “little faith.” They gave way to anxious worries and cares about their earthly needs. In the midst of a storm at sea they were on the verge of giving way to despair. Their weakness of faith consisted in this that they showed a lack of trust in God’s gracious and provident care. It was not, however, that in principle they denied God’s fatherly care. It was not that they rejected the Savior’s testimony that through Him they had full access to God’s fatherly love. Their weakness rather consisted in this that they were not yet quite able to live up to these truths. The hand of faith with which they embraced and held them was still feeble. We all understand this weakness, for if we were wholly free from it we would not be troubled with any worries and cares. Such weakness of faith does not prevent expressions of Christian fellowship. It rather calls for them. Consider how Jesus dealt with His disciples when symptoms of little faith showed themselves. He rebuked them sharply, blamed them for having a Gentile mind. But He also instructed them with all patience and tenderness. In their worries and cares He lifted up their hearts by calling their attention to God’s providence in nature and then reminding them that they were more than the birds of the air and the lilies of the field in God’s eyes. In their fearfulness during the storm at sea, He with a searching question called to their remembrance the rich experience of His Savior’s love and power which they had been enjoying, which left no room for fear. Then He granted them a new manifestation of His grace and power in rebuking wind and sea before their eyes. The Lord is not pleased to see our faith weak. For a weak faith is in constant danger of dying out altogether and thus of losing the rich blessing which it still enjoys. Yet the Lord recognized also those of weak faith as His believers; and we will want to do likewise. With Him we are not to break the bruised reed or quench the smoking flax but lovingly to make every effort to restore them to healthy vigor. Weak brethren distinguish themselves from scoffers and unbelievers in their willingness to receive spiritual help and instruction. Their attitude will be that of the father of the lunatic in the Gospel who prayed, Mark 9:24: “Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief.”

4, c    4, c points to another type of weakness in Christians which need not be a reason for terminating fellowship: “Weakness with reference to adiaphora in enjoying fully the liberty wherewith Christ has made us free.” Rom. 14 and I Cor. 8 and 9 treat of this type of weakness which pertained to the use of adiaphora, things neither commanded nor forbidden in God’s Word. Also here as in all points of Christian life, doctrine was involved, but not in the sense that the weak brother did not know or understand the pertinent truths. The problem rather lay in this that the conscience of the weak brother had not yet risen to the level of his understanding. This prevented him from enjoying to the fullest extent the liberty wherewith Christ has made us free.

At Rome it was particularly the matter of eating meat. Both those who had no scruples about eating meat and those who were still inwardly disturbed about it were sincerely devoted in faith to their Savior. Likewise did they have this in common that they realized that as far as their relation to Christ and the enjoyment of His salvation was concerned all foods were alike. Yet pagan Rome was notorious for its gluttony, and the newly converted Christians very properly had an abhorrence for such excesses. As a result some of the Christians still

felt inwardly disturbed when they partook of the same food with which these gluttonous excesses were practiced. Paul warns such a weak brother not to judge those who ate meat without any scruples. For if he imposed his mode of living on others, demanding and requiring it, he would cease to be a weak brother; he would be on the way of becoming a schismatic and a heretic. At the same time the Apostle exhorted the brethren whose conscience was freed from such needless scruples: "Him that is weak in the faith receive ye, but not to doubtful disputations." Any unwillingness to treat him still as a brother would be tantamount to despising him, it would mean refusing to receive him and to help him in love. In true brotherly love toward the weak brother they were to realize that they could not serve him with doubtful disputations, with overbearing argument, with condescending instruction. What he needed was to be cheered anew with the glorious liberty wherewith Christ has made us free that he might grasp its full implications and overcome his inner uneasiness. In the meantime they were to be very careful in their own use of this liberty that through their actions the weak brother would not be shaken in his faith or be tempted to do something concerning which his conscience was still not free.

It is particularly this last point which St. Paul felt a need of stressing in a similar situation at Corinth. Here spiritual weakness cropped up in connection with eating the leftovers from idol sacrifices which were consumed at public feasts and sold on the market. Through the Gospel all the Corinthian Christians had been brought to a blessed faith in the one true God and His grace in Christ Jesus. In this faith they all knew that the pagan idols did not really exist and wanted to have no further part in the worship accorded to these vanities. Yet in spite of this knowledge some were still weak in this respect that when it came to eating the leftovers from such idol sacrifices they could not rid themselves of the feeling that this meat was somehow contaminated through its connection with the parts actually sacrificed in the worship of idols. They again needed understanding love until the Gospel had dissolved this uneasiness for them. St. Paul earnestly warned their brethren not to hinder this by an inconsiderate use of their liberty. It would be a shameful unbrotherly abuse of their Christian liberty, if by eating such meat, though untroubled in their own conscience, they would induce the weak brother to eat of it with a troubled conscience, whereby his bond with his Savior would be disturbed. That they might learn true brotherly love through his own example, Paul then showed how he, being free from all men, made himself a servant unto all that he might win the more. He says, for example: "To the weak became I as weak, that I might gain the weak: I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some." These words have been grossly misunderstood and abused. Becoming all things to all does not mean taking liberties with the Word of God, adapting it to what men may be willing and ready to hear, taking off some of the sharp edges of the Law, making the Gospel less of an offense to them, or in general making some compromises and concessions on individual points of God's message. It is not for us to streamline God's Word into an effective message for our day. Paul does not mean that he pretended to be weak or acted as one who was weak, but that he placed himself into the position of the weak; he actually made their problems his own and fought their battles in his own heart. In this way he cultivated the ability to deal with the weak on their own level and thus to win them. In Gal. 1:6 he uses the figure of placing one's self under the other man's burden, exhorting: "Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ." It is in this way that we are to become all things to all men in order that by all means some might be saved. It is in this way that the Lord would have all of us pay our debt of love to the weak.

Before we close our consideration of this type of weakness which need not terminate fellowship, we still want to note a very important point. Both at Rome and at Corinth St. Paul clearly established which Christians were in the strong and which in the weak position. We see this from Rom. 14:17-23; and I Cor. 6:12; 10:23, 25. Only thus could St. Paul pay his debt of love to those involved in this particular weakness within the Christian fellowship. If we are to pay our debt of love to those who are weak with reference to adiaphora within our Christian fellowship, it also must be clearly established who holds the position of the weak and who holds the position of the strong. It would be an impossible situation if each party considered itself the strong in faith and the other the weak. That would lead to confusion. Hence 4, c of our presentation includes the significant statement: "The public confession of any church must on the basis of Scripture establish, however, which things are adiaphora so that it may be evident who are the weak and who are the strong."

4, d 4, d lists a final type of weakness in fellow Christians which fraternal love will first of all seek to overcome. The point reads: Weakness in understanding God's truth, and involvement in error. Acts 1:6; Galatians (Judaizing error); Colossians (Jewish-Gnostic error); I Cor. 15; I Thess. 4:10-12, 14; II Thess. 3:6, 14, 15; Acts 15:5, 6, 22, 25. Note how in all these cases Paul patiently built up the weak faith of these Christians with the Gospel to give them strength to overcome the error that had affected them.

Acts 1:6. Even on the day that Jesus ascended into heaven the Apostles still showed a woeful ignorance as to the nature of Christ's kingdom, when they asked: "Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom of Israel?" In patient love Jesus corrected, instructed, and strengthened them as weak disciples. In His name we are to deal in a similar manner with all whom in their willingness to receive correction and instruction we may still regard as weak brethren. It is particularly through the Apostle Paul that the Lord gives us rich guidance in doing this.

Galatians (Judaizing error). The Galatian congregations which Paul had founded were troubled by Judaizers, who taught that in order to enjoy the salvation won for them by Christ, they as believers still needed to submit to circumcision and observe the Mosaic festivals. The very heart of the Gospel was at stake. The error was not met properly by the Galatian Christians. Many were misled and confused by the enticing words of these Judaizers. Yet we note that Paul did not immediately sever fraternal relations with them. He indeed used very strong language against the seducers, a matter which we will have reason to consider later. The Galatians, however, who had shown themselves weak, he still treated as brethren, as weak brethren to be sure, but nevertheless as brethren. He repeatedly addresses them with this name of endearment in the course of his epistle. He still addressed this group of congregations as churches and thereby assured them that all the glorious things which lie in that name still applied also to them.

Colossians (Jewish-Gnostic error). Paul dealt similarly with the Christians at Colossae, who had been troubled by a peculiar error, partly Jewish, partly Gnostic. As he came to their assistance by writing an epistle to them, he still addressed them as saints and faithful brethren in Christ. In both cases he wrote an entire epistle to these brethren who were weak in doctrine. Instead of isolating their error and refuting it directly with a number of arguments, which might have involved him in doubtful disputations, Paul at great length built up the weak faith of these Christians in Christ, their only and all-sufficient Savior, showing them that their error conflicted with the place of Christ in God's plan of salvation, and thus giving them strength and understanding to overcome the error that had affected them.

In two other cases the Apostle Paul devoted an individual chapter to an error that was troubling weak brethren. I Cor. 15: At Corinth current Epicurean philosophy had troubled some of the Corinthians, rousing doubts concerning the resurrection of the dead. Paul showed them the importance of the resurrection, showed them that denying a resurrection of the believers would be tantamount to denying Christ's resurrection. He explained what may be known about the resurrection, yet he instructed them as brethren, calling them that three times in the chapter. When those who have been our brethren show a lack of Christian understanding or become enmeshed in error, we, too, are to treat them as weak brethren as long as we still have reason to assume that they are ready to receive correction and instruction. We shall make every effort to build them up in their faith that they may overcome their error. In much the same way the Lord would also have us deal with brethren who have deviated from Christian life. We are first of all to deal with them as weak brethren. Jesus says: "Moreover, if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone; if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother." The Apostle Paul writes: "Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness, considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted."

I Thess. 4, especially 10 to 12, 14. At Thessalonica many were not clear on the doctrine concerning Christ's return for judgment, His glorious appearance, which they assumed to be close at hand. The Apostle strengthened them by exhorting them, that instead of getting excited about the nearness of Christ's return, "they should rather be on guard against the terrible apostasy which Satan would cause through the advent of Antichrist," who would be God's judgment upon the Christians in their apathy toward the saving truth of the Gospel.

Then he comforted them and strengthened them by pointing to their election. He still prayed for them and asks them to pray for him and his coworkers.

II Thess. 3:6, 14, 15. From II Thess. we see how far Paul was willing to go in his patient efforts of overcoming an involvement in error and false practice. In spite of Paul's instruction and admonition some of the members of this church would not drop their false opinions concerning the nearness of Christ's return for judgment and began to act on their false assumptions in that they ceased to work. Note that Paul does not consider it a minor point of doctrine and life. When Paul sent his first epistle to the Thessalonians this orderliness had already begun so that he wrote: "We beseech you, brethren...that ye study to be quiet and to do your own business, and to work with your own hands, as we commanded you; that ye may walk honestly toward them that are without, and that ye may have lack of nothing." He likewise urged: "We beseech you, brethren, warn them that are unruly..." Yet these busybodies had not taken Paul's instruction and admonition to heart, and the disorderly conduct had seemingly spread. In his second epistle Paul was therefore constrained to write: "Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourself from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the tradition which he received of us," and furthermore: "And if any man obey not our word by this epistle, note that man, and have no company with him, that he may be ashamed. Yet count him not as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother." Even now Paul does not recommend a complete break of fellowship relations. He is still ready to believe that the offenders are not hardened in their course, for he entertains the hope that they may still be brought to blush in penitent shame when they are given to realize how serious their brethren consider their disorderly conduct. Yet their fellowship is to be restricted now: final brotherly admonition is to be administered through the act of withdrawing from these offenders, through the act of no longer being utterly identified with them in the sight of others. Such withdrawal is to call his brotherly standing into question, so that he may realize that if he persists the congregation will be compelled to separate itself completely and conclusively from him, no longer considering him a Christian brother. It should be borne in mind that in these Thessalonian passages we do not have a general exhortation but counsel, practical counsel for handling a very specific disciplinary case. Naturally, it gives guidance for the handling of similar cases; yet not all cases can be handled in quite the same way.

Before closing Point B, 4 on weakness of faith, our presentation bids us to compare Walther's theses 2, 3, 4, and 8. The first three theses remind us that our Synodical fathers were mindful of the truths set forth under B, 4. Thesis 8 again guards against their abuse.

THESIS II. The error of an individual member of the Church even against a clear Word of God does not involve immediately his actual forfeiture of church fellowship, nor of the association of brethren and colleagues.

THESIS III. Even if an open error against the Word of God has infected a whole church body, this does not in itself make that church body a false church, a body with which an orthodox Christian or the orthodox church would abruptly have to sever relations.

THESIS IV. A Christian may be so weak in understanding that he cannot grasp, even in a case of a fundamental article of the second order, that an error which he holds is contrary to the Scriptures. Because of his ignorance he may also continue in his error, without thereby making it necessary for the orthodox church to exclude him.

THESIS VIII. The Church must take steps against any deviation from the doctrine of the Word of God, whether this be done by teachers or by so-called laymen, by individuals or by entire church bodies.

In the efforts of which Walther speaks in Thesis 8 we may also come to a point when we must realize that we are no longer dealing with weak brethren. This leads us to our final consideration in setting forth the Scriptural principles concerning church fellowship, namely, Point B, 5.

B, 5 Persistent adherence to false doctrine and practice calls for termination of church fellowship. This Point B, 5 is subdivided a, b, and c.

Point 5, a reads: We cannot continue to, recognize and treat anyone as a Christian brother who in spite of all brotherly admonition impenitently clings to a sin. His and our own spiritual welfare calls for termination of church fellowship. Matt. 18:17; I Cor. 5:1-6. (Excommunication)

In Matt. 18 the Lord Jesus very clearly teaches us that we cannot continue to treat anyone as a brother who in spite of earnest brotherly admonition clings to a sin. We have already heard what the Lord would have us do when a brother falls into sin. He who is a witness of his sin shall want to swing into action at once to save him. If his brotherly admonition remains unsuccessful, the Lord would have him call in the help of one or two brethren. Even if they are unable to win the brother they will not yet despair in their brotherly concern and effort. The Lord bids them to tell the Church, the entire company of believers with whom the erring brother has been associated, doing so in the hope that through the unanimous testimony of his fellow Christians his heart may be won to repentance. Yet if he rejects also the Word of God which they have brought to him, he has with his action placed himself outside of Christ's Church. He is to be told that he has manifested himself as a heathen man and a publican, that he has broken the bond which united him with Christ and His spiritual body of believers. No further expression of fellowship is possible. This pronouncement of judgment is in itself an action born out of love, the only action of love still possible under the circumstances. It is meant to shock the sinner into a realization of what his impenitence really involves.

I Cor 5:1-6. Paul's epistles to the Corinthians give us an illustration of such an effect. A member in this congregation was living in a sin of incest, offensive even to heathen. The sad thing here was that the members of the congregation were tolerant and indifferent about it. They had failed to function as true brethren. Since this fornicator now clung to his sin, abetted by their neglect, to deliver him unto Satan was all that was left for the Corinthians to do. Paul urged it, practically formulating the resolution of excommunication for them, in order that this man's Old Adam might be crucified and his spirit be saved, if possible, in the day of the Lord Jesus. Also their own spiritual welfare demanded such action. Paul warned: "Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump?" In his second epistle Paul is able to allude to the happy outcome. The congregation had taken the Apostle's rebuke to heart and had dealt according to his instruction. As a result, the sinner had repented, and Paul could now urge the Corinthians to receive him anew as their brother.

With equal clarity the Lord tells us likewise in His Word that we can no longer recognize and treat those as brethren who in spite of earnest admonition persistently cling to an error in doctrine, who demand recognition and toleration for their error and make propaganda for it. Any expression of Christian fellowship with them is impossible.

5, b We can no longer recognize and treat as Christian brethren those who in spite of patient admonition persistently adhere to an error in doctrine or practice, demand recognition for their error, and make propaganda for it. 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, If the error does not overthrow the foundation of saving faith, the termination of fellowship is not to be construed as an excommunication. Moreover an excommunication can only apply to an individual, not to a congregation or larger church group.

The "avoid them" of Rom. 16:17, 18 excludes any contact that would be an acknowledgment and manifestation of church fellowship; it calls for a cessation of every further joint expression of faith. Cf. I Cor. 5:9-11. Compare Walther's Theses 9 and 10.

Gal. 1:8, 9: What is required over against persistent errorists is shown to us very clearly, at the hand of Paul's treatment of the Judaizers who had come to the congregations in Galatia. It has already been pointed out that these men taught that in order to enjoy the salvation won by Christ believers still needed to be circumcised and observe the Mosaic festivals.

In Acts 15 we hear how Paul already had to face this error and oppose it when certain men of Judea came to Antioch in Syria and troubled the church with it there. As a result the Antioch congregation sent Paul and Barnabas to discuss this error with the Apostles and elders at Jerusalem. We are told that when this council was held in the midst of the congregation at Jerusalem, certain of the sect of Pharisees which believed openly voiced the opinion concerning Gentile Christians "that it was needful to circumcise them and to command them

to keep the Law of Moses.” Note that St. Luke speaks of these people as standing in faith. Did the Apostles and the rest of the church immediately withdraw from them when they voiced this error? No, we are told that the Apostles and elders came together for to consider the matter. The result was that after a frank discussion on the basis of God’s Word this erroneous idea was unanimously rejected by all present, including those who had previously held to it because they had not yet thrown off all of their former Pharisaic notions. Yet they did not persist in their error when corrected by God’s Word, and thus the fellowship was not broken.

It was different with the persistent errorists who came to the Galatian congregations. The Apostles still treated the Galatians, who were troubled and misled by their false teachings, as weak brethren, seeking to build them up anew in their faith that they might overcome the error which had affected them. But to the Judaizers who deliberately opposed his Gospel Paul accorded quite a different treatment. In strong terms he rejected any connection with them, saying: Gal. 1:8, 9: “If any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed.” And again, Gal. 5:9: “I would they were even cut off which trouble you.” The thought of practicing Christian fellowship with them was out of the question. In this Paul was merely following in the footsteps of Christ his Lord.

Matt. 7:15-19: Jesus openly opposed and denounced the Pharisees who taught men to seek God’s favor by trusting in their own works. He likewise testified against the Sadducees, who denied a resurrection and the existence of angels. Very earnestly the Lord warned His disciples: “Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.” Also in a very general way Jesus urged: “Beware of false prophets which come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves.” False prophets are those who in their teaching deviate from God’s Word, demand recognition for their errors, seek to spread them, and win adherents for them. False prophets come to us; they are not sent by God, for it is His desire that nothing but His pure Word be proclaimed to us. Often enough they are themselves deceived by their own sheep’s clothing. Yet they are in reality “ravening wolves.” They are that whether they are conscious of their false teaching or not. They threaten Christ’s flock, His believers, with harm and destruction. Jesus would have us know that it is not a light and harmless thing to deviate from His Word. False doctrine undermines, breaks down, and destroys spiritual life. That the Lord in His grace often prevents it from becoming fatal, even in the false prophets themselves, is quite beside the point. In His Savior’s love the Lord is seeking to preserve His precious Word for us and others, His Word which He has given to us as the bread of life, whereby alone faith is created, nourished, and preserved unto eternal life. Adulterate the Word by omitting something, changing something, adding something, or compromising any part of it, and faith is endangered. Hence, the Savior bids us to beware of false prophets, bids us to detect them, to recognize them for what they are, to be on guard against them, to have no fellowship with them, lest we suffer spiritual harm through their destructive activity. Whether their erroneous message is original with them, or whether they are peddling someone else’s error, makes very little difference as long as they hold to it and persist in spreading it.

Rom. 16:17, 18: We are all very familiar with the general exhortation which the Apostle Paul voices in the final chapter of Romans: “Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them.” Note the solemn preface “Now I beseech you, brethren,” with which Paul introduces the plea that the Roman Christians should take note of those who are causing divisions and offenses in opposition to the doctrine which had been taught to them. They had been properly instructed in Christian truth. They had again been taught by Paul in this very epistle addressed to them, in which he had veritably presented a thorough and connected discussion of the entire Christian doctrine. Thus they were well able to keep a watchful eye on anyone who deviated from the doctrine which they had learned. Paul earnestly urged them to do so. Also here Paul is not thinking of anyone who might casually make an erroneous doctrinal statement. No, he had such in mind as cling to their error and with it create divisions. He uses a present participle to bring out the fact that it is something which those against whom he is warning practice habitually. These they are to avoid, and that means cease all Christian fellowship with them. That he does not mean social contact or any of the other ordinary contacts of life, should be evident from what he told the Corinthians when they misunderstood his exhortation that they should have no company with fornicators. In I Cor. 5:9-11 Paul wrote: “Yet not altogether with fornicators of this world, or with the covetous, or

extortioners, or with idolaters; for then must ye needs go out of this world. No, Paul, when speaking of avoiding errorists, means any contact which would be an acknowledgement and expression of fellowship.

Those who question our application of this inspired exhortation to all who persistently deviate from any teaching of God's Word are apt to complain that we stress this seventeenth verse of Romans 16 but fail to do justice to the following verse, which goes on to say: "For they that are such serve not our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly; and by good words and fair speeches deceive the hearts of the simple." In applying verse 17 to all persistent errorists we have no thought of slighting this following verse. We will say, however, that it does not give a description by which Paul's bidding to mark and to avoid is restricted only to a certain class of those who cause divisions and offense contrary to true doctrine. It doesn't serve the purpose of telling us whom we are to mark and avoid. It sets before us God's own appraisal and judgment upon all those whom He would have us avoid, namely upon all persistent errorists. God would have us know that in the matter of clinging to error and disseminating it they are taking orders from their own heart, from their own desires—that is what belly means here—instead of serving the Lord Jesus, whether they are fully conscious of it or not. We cannot fellowship with them as though ours and theirs were a common cause. All who follow such an errorist and make his confession their own help to spread it. They, too, make it impossible for us to recognize them as Christian brethren.

II John 9-11: St. John, the apostle of brotherly love, gives the same counsel and instruction in his inspired epistle. John says: "Whosoever transgresseth, and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God. He that abideth in the doctrine of Christ, he hath both the Father and the Son. If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house, neither bid him Godspeed: for he that biddeth him Godspeed is partaker of his evil deeds."

This exhortation of St. John, rather than being a general exhortation, was called forth by a rather specific class of errorists. They were seemingly the same errorists mentioned in St. John's first epistle, 4:1-3, followers of Cerinthus, who taught that Jesus was the natural Son of Joseph and Mary, and that the Christ eon had descended on Jesus at His baptism but left Him before His great passion. Yet this denial of Christ's incarnation involved also the gracious purpose, the blessed fruit, the glorious outcome of Christ's entrance into the flesh. The specific errorists involved therefore overthrew the foundation of Christian faith. Thus John says of such an errorist that he "hath not God."

Yet there is nothing to indicate that the withholding of fellowship to which St. John exhorts is to be restricted to the type of errorist of whom he happened to have a special occasion to speak. The reason adduced for withholding such fellowship, "For he that biddeth him Godspeed is partaker of his evil deeds," would apply equally well to any persistent errorist. Cf. I Tim. 5:22.

When St. John warns against receiving such a man into one's house and of bidding him Godspeed, he does not have an ordinary reception and a civil greeting in mind, such as we properly accord to all men, but a reception and greeting which would be understood as an acknowledgment of him as a Christian brother, in other words, as an expression of church fellowship. We are again reminded that church fellowship is a unit concept. Its full implications are involved even when it is being expressed with a greeting and with a reception into one's house.

II Tim. 2:17, 19: "And their word will eat as doth a canker: of whom is Hymenaeus and Philetus; who concerning the truth have erred, saying that the resurrection is past already; and overthrow the faith of some. Nevertheless the foundation of God standeth sure, having this seal, The Lord knoweth them that are his. And, Let every one that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity."

Paul says of the false teaching of Hymenaeus and Philetus, "Their word will eat as doth a canker." Tolerating errorists involves us in the danger of losing the Word of God entirely. By bidding us to withhold fellowship from the adherents of false doctrine, the Lord is seeking to preserve His precious Word for us and others, His Word which He has given to us as the Bread of Life, whereby alone faith is created, nourished, and preserved unto eternal life.

That also our Synodical fathers saw clearly what God asks of us with respect to persistent errorists is evident from Walther's theses 9 and 10.

THESIS IX. Such members as wilfully persist in deviating from the Word of God, no matter what question it may concern, must be excluded.

THESIS X. From the fact that the Church militant cannot attain a higher degree of unity than a fundamental one it does not follow that any error against the Word of God may be granted equal rights in the Church with the truth, nor that it may be tolerated.

5, c Point 5, c reads: “Those who practice church fellowship with persistent errorists are partakers of their evil deeds. II John 11.” John says, “For he that biddeth him Godspeer is partaker of his evil deeds.” In more than one way will he who fellowships with an adherent of false doctrine be sharing in his evil deeds. He sins against the Lord, being indifferent to His Word. He sins against the church, for he gives offense to its members by leading them to believe that one doctrine is as good as another, thus making them indifferent. He sins against the false teachers by strengthening them in their convictions that they possess the truth, instead of helping them by testifying against their error in all meekness. He sins against his own soul, because he exposes himself to the corrupting influence of error, which is never static but spreads. (Cf. C. A. Hardt, Christian Fellowship, C.T.M., XVI, p. 520).

On the basis of all these points our Wisconsin Synod presentation of the principles of church fellowship closes with the following statements:

From all of this we see that in the matter of the outward expression of Christian fellowship, the exercise of church fellowship, particularly two Christian principles need to direct us, the great debt of love which the Lord would have us pay to the weak brother, and His clear injunction (also flowing out of love) to avoid those who adhere to false doctrine and practice, and all who make themselves partakers of their evil deeds. Conscientious recognition of both principles will lead to an evangelical practice also in facing many difficult situations that confront us, situations which properly lie in the field of casuistry.

On the basis of the foregoing we find it to be an untenable position

- A. To distinguish between joint prayer which is acknowledged to be an expression of church fellowship and an occasional joint prayer which purports to be something short of church fellowship;
- B. To designate certain nonfundamental doctrines as not being divisive of church fellowship in their very nature;
- C. To envision fellowship relations (in a congregation, in a church body, in a church federation, in a church agency, in a cooperative church activity) like so many steps of a ladder, each requiring a gradually increasing or decreasing measure of unity in doctrine and practice.

## **CHURCH FELLOWSHIP**

(This is the presentation of our Wisconsin Synod Commission on Doctrinal Matters, discussed by the Joint Doctrinal Committees of the Synodical Conference)

### Preamble

Church Fellowship is a term that has been used to designate both a status and an activity. Both usages lie very close together and one flows out of the other. The two usages follow the general dogmatic distinction of in acta primo et actu secundo.



Church Fellowship can be defined as the status in which individuals or groups on the basis of a common confession of faith have mutually recognized one another as Christian brethren and now consider it God-pleasing to express, manifest, and demonstrate their common faith jointly.

Church Fellowship can also be defined as the activity which includes every joint expression, manifestation, and demonstration of the common faith in which Christians (individuals or groups) on the basis of their confession find themselves to be united with one another. (Mutual recognition of one another as Christian brethren is itself one such “joint expression” of common faith in which Christians on the basis of their confession find themselves to be united with one another.)

For very practical reasons we have preferred to treat Church Fellowship in our Theses as a term designating an activity since the inter-synodical tensions have to do more with Church Fellowship as an activity than as a status. Both as a status and as an activity Church Fellowship needs to be distinguished from the spiritual fellowship of faith in the Holy Christian Church (Una Sancta) which it is meant to reflect but with which it cannot simply be identified. For in the case of hypocrites, who have not yet been revealed, Church Fellowship is still called for, though the fellowship in the Holy Christian Church (Una Sancta fellowship) is actually not existing. On the other hand, people may in God’s sight be united in the fellowship in the Holy Christian Church (Una Sancta fellowship) and yet not have warrant to practice Church Fellowship here on earth.

We also felt that our definition of Church Fellowship was general enough to include both proper and improper practice of Church Fellowship, for the definition itself does not specify what constitutes an adequate confession on the basis of which individuals or groups may properly find themselves united in a common faith. For is there not in all Church Fellowship the assumption present that an adequate confession exists? Our presentation under the points of B sets forth what constitutes a proper confession, the marks of the Church (notae purae), on the basis of which Christians may properly find themselves united in a common faith.

## The Theses

Church fellowship is every joint expression, manifestation, and demonstration of the common faith in which Christians on the basis of their confession find themselves to be united with one another.

- A. How Scripture leads us to this concept of church fellowship.
1. Through faith in Christ the Holy Spirit unites us with our God and Savior. Gal. 3:26; 4:6; I John 3:1.
  2. This Spirit-wrought faith at the same time unites us in an intimate bond with all other believers. I John 1:3; Eph. 4:4-6; John 17:20, 21. Compare also the many striking metaphors emphasizing the unity of the Church, e.g., the body of Christ, the temple of God.
  3. Faith as spiritual life invariably expresses itself in activity which is spiritual in nature, yet outwardly manifest, e.g., in the use of the means of grace, in prayer, in praise and worship, in appreciative use of the “gifts” of the Lord to the Church, in Christian testimony, in furthering the cause of the Gospel, in deeds of Christian love. John 8:47; Gal. 4:6; Eph. 4:11-14; Acts 4:20; II Cor. 4:13; I Pet. 2:9; Gal. 2:9; 5:6.
  4. It is God the Holy Ghost who leads us to express and manifest in activity the faith which He works and sustains in our hearts through the Gospel. Gal. 4:6; John 15:26, 27; John 7:38, 39; Acts 1:8; Eph. 2:10.

5. Through the bond of faith in which He unites us with all Christians the Holy Spirit also leads us to express and manifest our faith jointly with fellow Christians according to opportunity: as smaller and larger groups, Acts 1:14, 15; 2:41-47; Gal. 2:9; as congregations with other congregations, Acts 15; I Thess. 4:9, 10; II Cor. 8:1, 2, 18, 19; II Cor. 9:2. (Before God every activity of our faith is at the same time fellowship activity in the communion of saints. I Cor. 12; Eph. 4:1-16; Rom. 12:1-8; II Tim. 2:19.)
6. We may classify these joint expressions of faith in various ways according to the particular realm of activity in which they occur, e.g., pulpit fellowship, altar fellowship, prayer fellowship, fellowship in worship, fellowship in church work, in missions, in Christian education, in Christian charity. Yet insofar as they are joint expressions of faith they are all essentially one and the same thing, and are all properly covered by a common designation, namely, church fellowship.\* Church fellowship should therefore be treated as a unit concept, covering every joint expression, manifestation, and demonstration of a common faith. Hence Scripture can give the general admonition “avoid them” when church fellowship is to cease, Rom. 16:17. Hence Scripture sees an expression of church fellowship also in giving the right hand of fellowship, Gal. 2:9, and in greeting one another with the fraternal kiss, Rom. 16:16; on the other hand, it points out that a withholding of church fellowship may also be indicated by not extending a fraternal welcome to errorists and by not bidding them Godspeed, II John 10, 11. Cf. III John 5-8.

B. What principles Scripture teaches for the exercise of such church fellowship.

1. In selecting specific individuals or groups for a joint expression of faith, we can do this only on the basis of their confession. It would be presumptuous on our part to attempt to recognize Christians on the basis of the personal faith in their hearts. II Tim. 2:19; Rom. 10:10; I John 4:1-3; I Sam. 16:7.
2. A Christian confession of faith is in principle always a confession to the entire Word of God. The denial, adulteration, or suppression of any word of God does not stem from faith but from unbelief. John 8:31; Matt. 5:19; I Pet. 4:11; Jer. 23:28, 31; Deut. 4:2; Rev. 22:18, 19. We recognize and acknowledge as Christian brethren those who profess faith in Christ as their Savior and with this profession embrace and accept His entire Word. Compare Walther’s “Theses on Open Questions,” Thesis 7: “No man has the privilege, and to no man

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\*Full attention needs to be given in this statement to the limiting terms: “insofar” and “joint.” The “insofar” is to point out that it is indeed only in their function as joint expressions of faith that the use of the Means of Grace and such other things mentioned as Christian prayer, Christian education, and Christian charity all lie on the same plane. In other respects the Means of Grace and their use are indeed unique. Only through the Means of Grace, the Gospel in Word and Sacrament, does the Holy Spirit awaken, nourish, and sustain faith. Again, only the right use of Word and Sacrament are the true marks of the Church, the marks by which the Lord points us to those with whom He would have us express our faith jointly.

For anything to be a “joint” expression of faith presupposes that those involved are really expressing their faith together. This distinguishes a joint expression of faith from individual expressions of faith which happen to be made at the same time and at the same place. Certain things like the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, the proclamation of the Gospel, and also prayer are by their very nature expressions of faith and are an abomination in God’s sight when not intended to be that. When done together they are therefore invariably joint expressions of faith. Other things like giving a greeting, a kiss, a handshake, extending hospitality, or physical help to others are in themselves not of necessity expressions of Christian faith. Hence doing these things together with others does not necessarily make them joint expressions of faith, even though a Christian will for his own person also thereby be expressing his faith (cf. I Cor. 10:31). 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.

- 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.”
3. Actually, 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. We are all weak in one way or another. Phil. 3-12; Eph. 4:14; 3:16-18; I Thess. 5:14; Heb. 5:12; I Pet. 2:2. Compare Walther’s Thesis 5: “The Church militant must indeed aim at and strive for absolute unity of faith and doctrine, but it never will attain a higher degree of unity than a fundamental one.” Cf. Thesis 10.
  4. 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.
    - a. General exhortations. Gal. 6:1-3; Eph. 4:1-16; Matt. 18:15-17.
    - b. Weakness in laying hold of God’s promises in a firm trust. Matt. 6:25-34.
    - c. Weakness with reference to adiaphora in enjoying fully the liberty wherewith Christ has made us free. Rom. 14; I Cor. 8 and 9. The public confession of any church must establish, however, which things are adiaphora so that it may be evident who are the weak and who are the strong. Rom. 14:17-23; I Cor. 6:12; 10:23, 24.
    - d. Weakness in understanding God’s truth, and involvement in error. Acts 1:6; Galatians (Judaizing error); Colossians (Jewish-Gnostic error): I Cor. 15; I Thess. 4:10-12, 14; II Thess. 3:6, 14, 15; Acts 15:5, 6, 22, 25. Note how in all these cases Paul patiently built up the weak faith of these Christians with the Gospel to give them strength to overcome the error that had affected them. Compare Walther’s Theses 2, 3, 4, and 8.
  5. Persistent adherence to false doctrine and practice calls for termination of church fellowship.
    - a. We cannot continue to recognize and treat anyone as a Christian brother who in spite of all brotherly admonition impenitently clings to a sin. His and our own spiritual welfare calls for termination of church fellowship. Matt. 18:17; I Cor. 5:1-6. (Excommunication.)
    - b. We can no longer recognize and treat as Christian brethren those who in spite of patient admonition persistently adhere to an error in doctrine or practice, demand recognition for their error, and make propaganda for it. 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. If the error does not overthrow the foundation of saving faith, the termination of fellowship is not to be construed as an excommunication. Moreover an excommunication can only apply to an individual, not to a congregation or larger church group. The “avoid them” of Rom. 16:17, 18 excludes any contact that would be an acknowledgment and manifestation of church fellowship; it calls for a cessation of every further joint expression of faith. Cf. I Cor. 5:9-11. Compare Walther’s Theses 9 and 10.

- c. Those who practice church fellowship with persistent errorists are partakers of their evil deeds. II John 11.

From all of this we see that in the matter of the outward expression of Christian fellowship, the exercise of church fellowship, particularly two Christian principles need to direct us, the great debt of love which the Lord would have us pay to the weak brother, and His clear injunction (also flowing out of love) to avoid those who adhere to false doctrine and practice and all who make themselves partakers of their evil deeds. Conscientious recognition of both principles will lead to an evangelical practice also in facing many difficult situations that confront us, situations which properly lie in the field of casuistry.

On the basis of the foregoing, we find it to be an untenable position.

- I. To distinguish between, joint prayer which is acknowledged to be an expression of church fellowship and an occasional joint prayer which purports to be something short of church fellowship;
- II. To designate certain nonfundamental doctrines as not being divisive of church fellowship in their very nature;
- III. To envision fellowship relations (in a congregation, in a church body, in a church federation, in a church agency, in a cooperative church activity) like so many steps of a ladder, each requiring a gradually increasing or decreasing measure of unity in doctrine and practice.

## **STATEMENT ON SCRIPTURE**

### **I. Introduction**

God reveals Himself to men primarily through His incarnate Son, whom He attests and presents to His Church through Scripture. The purpose of Scripture is to proclaim Christ as the Savior of sinners (John 5:39, 46; Acts 10:43). All Scripture is written because of Christ and has a connection with the revelation of God in Christ, some passages directly, some more remotely. Every word of Scripture is therefore an organic part of the Scripture's witness to Christ. And Scripture is the complete message of God to sinners. By it man is freed from carnal security and self-righteousness, is delivered from despair, and regains by faith the lost image of God. (Gal. 3:26; cf. 4:31; Jas. 1:18; I Pet. 1:23; John 8:31, 32.)

We reject the idea that the natural knowledge of God is sufficient to salvation or useful beyond the use made of it in Scripture (Rom. 1:20; 2:1; 2:14-16; Acts 17:22,23). The revelation of God in nature and conscience is insufficient for salvation because man by reason of his fall is so constituted that he persistently perverts and distorts the revelation given to him by God and refuses to acknowledge or to submit to the God who thus reveals Himself. And man pursuing this perverted course is either led to feel secure in his self-righteousness or is driven to despair.

We reject the idea that tradition is a source of revelation. (Cf. Matt. 15:3-6; Col. 2:8.)

We reject the idea that other new sources or norms of divine revelation besides Scripture are to be expected. (Heb. 1:1, 2; Matt. 28:19, 20; Gal. 1:8, 9.)

### **II. The Inspiration of Scripture**

We believe and teach that all Scripture (that is, all the canonical books of the Old and New Testaments) is given by inspiration of God and is in its entirety, in its parts, and in its very words inspired by the Holy Spirit. God revealed Himself personally and directly to such men as Adam, Abraham, Moses, and the prophets. Some

of these He called to transmit His message to men orally or in writing. Their message was thus not their own, but God's Word. They were moved by the Holy Spirit, so that He is the true Author of their every word. Inspiration means, then, that mighty act of God whereby He spoke His Word in the words of men and made them the effective and final vehicle of His revelation. Hence these words do not merely inform us concerning God's past action; they also convey God's action now. (I Thess. 2:13; II Pet. 1:19-21; II Tim. 3:15-17; I Cor. 2:13; Jer. 23:29; Rom. 1:16, 17.)

In giving men His message by inspiration, God had men express His Word in their own language (Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek), and in their own style (personal, historical, poetic, oratorical). (Cf. the superscription on the cross, Matt. 27:37; Mark 15:26; Luke 23:38; John 19:19, 20.) Thus the holy writers felt personally responsible for every word they wrote (cf. II Cor. 7:8), while they at the same time knew that their words were given by the Holy Spirit. (I Cor. 2:12, 13.)

We reject as a distortion of the true conception of verbal inspiration any idea which makes the act of inspiration a mere mechanical dictation.

We condemn and reject any and all teachings and statements that would limit the inerrancy and sufficiency of Scripture; or that deny the divine authorship of certain portions of Scripture. Inspiration applies not only to such statements as speak directly of Christ, but also to such as may seem very remote (e.g., in the field of history, geography, and nature). For since God is the Lord of history and has revealed Himself by acts in history and has in the Person of His Son actually entered into man's history, the historical framework in which the Gospel message is set in Scripture is an essential part of the inspired Word just as much as the spiritual truths revealed in it.

We reject the idea that verbal inspiration is called into question by accidents in the transmission of the text and the resultant variants in the manuscripts. Inspiration pertains in the first instance to the original autographs of Scripture. But by His gracious providence God has given us such a fullness and variety of witnesses to the original text that Christian scholarship reproduces it with great fidelity. God has so watched over the transmission of the text that the variant readings nowhere affect the doctrines of Scripture. We gratefully acknowledge also that translations of Scripture, though not under particular inspiration, are by God's providential care adequate vehicles of His revelation in the inspired Word. (Heb. 2:3; I Pet. 1:25; Mark 13:31; John 17:20; Matt. 28:19, 20.)

### **III. The Authority of Scripture**

We believe and teach that God has given us His Holy Scripture to make us wise unto salvation through faith in Christ Jesus (II Tim. 3:13-17). We therefore confess Scripture to be the only, but all-sufficient foundation of our faith, the source of all our teachings, the norm of our conduct in life, and the infallible authority in all matters with which it deals. (Luke 16:29-31; Deut. 4:2; 13:1-5; Isa. 8:20; Acts 26:22; John 10:35.)

We believe and teach that where Scripture has not spoken decisively or is silent, differences of opinion may be held without violating Scripture or breaking the bonds of fellowship. Such matters fall into the area called "open questions." Scripture itself must determine which questions are to be considered as open. The term "open questions" may legitimately be used where the Scripture language leaves open the precise scope of a passage, or where linguistic, textual, or historical problems make the perception of the intended sense difficult. But where Scripture has spoken, there God has spoken, whether it be on a central dogma or on a peripheral point; where Scripture has not spoken, the matter must forever remain open. (I Pet. 4:11; Jer. 23:22, 23.)

Scripture being the Word of God, it carries its own authority in itself and does not receive it by the approbation of the Church. The Canon, that is, that collection of books which is the authority for the Church, is not the creation of the Church. Rather, the Canon has, by a quiet historical process which took place in the worship life of the Church, imposed itself upon the Church by virtue of its own divine authority.

## IV. The Interpretation of Scripture

Since Scripture is God's Word, the interpretation of Scripture should not be regarded as merely or primarily an intellectual task. The true meaning of Scripture becomes clear for man in a given situation, not merely by a scrupulous study of Scripture and a careful analysis of the facts at issue, but rather by approaching Scripture in a spirit of repentance and faith which makes men obedient sons of God, who hear Scripture when it speaks as Law in all the rigidity of the Law, and when it speaks as Gospel in all the unconditional grace of the Gospel. (II Cor. 4:3, 4; II Tim. 3:16, 17; Gal. 2:5; 5:3, 6.)

Scripture alone is to interpret Scripture. The hermeneutical rule that Scripture must be interpreted according to the rule, or the analogy, of faith means that the clear passages of Scripture, not any theological system or dogmatical summary of Bible doctrine, are to determine the interpretation. Seemingly obscure passages must not be interpreted so as to pervert or contradict clear passages. This means that every statement of Scripture must be understood in its native sense, according to grammar, context, and linguistic usage of the time. Where Scripture speaks historically, as for example in Gen. 1-3, it must be understood as speaking of literal, historical facts. Where Scripture speaks symbolically, metaphorically or metonymically, as for example in Rev. 20, it must be interpreted on these its own terms. Furthermore, since God spoke in the common language of men, expressions such as sunrise and sunset, the corners of the earth, etc., must not be viewed as intending to convey scientific information. (Ps. 119:105; II Pet. 1:19; II Tim. 3:15.)

Since the same God speaks by the same creative energy of the same Holy Spirit throughout Scripture, the Old Testament and the New Testament are to be viewed as constituting an organic unity. This unity is to be understood, not as a simple equation of the two Testaments with each other, but in the sense of Heb. 1:1, 2: "God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son." Since the New Testament is the culminating revelation of God, it is decisive in determining the relation between the two Testaments and the meaning of the Old Testament prophecies in particular; the meaning of a prophecy becomes known in full only from its fulfillment.

Since Scripture is in all its parts and in all its words the inspired Word of God, we reject and condemn any use of the phrase "totality of Scripture" which tends to abridge or annul the force of any clear passage of Scripture. Similarly we reject the use of any phrase which makes room for the idea that the Scripture as a whole may be regarded as the Word of God, though it in many details is regarded as only the words of men.

We reject and condemn "demythologizing" as a denial of the Word of God. Where Scripture records as historical facts those events and deeds which far surpass the ordinary experience of men, that record must be understood literally, as a record of facts; the miraculous and mysterious may not be dismissed as intended to have only a metaphorical or symbolical meaning.

### STATEMENT ON THE ANTICHRIST

I. Scripture speaks of many forces and powers which are actively hostile to Christ and His Church, and uses the term "antichrist" with reference to some of them.

Dan. 11:36-38; Matt. 24:22-25; I Tim. 4:1-3; II Tim. 3:1-9; I John 2:18-22—compare the whole passage, 18-23; I John 4:1-6; II John 7; II Thess. 2:1-12, compare also 13-17.

These and similar passages reveal to the Church that antichristian forces will appear in various recurrent forms until the end of time.

II. Scripture, however, speaks also of a particular personal embodiment of the antichristian power in which the iniquity of false teaching finds its climax, II Thess. 2:1-12.

1. Now be beseech you, brethren, by the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and by our gathering together unto him, 2. that ye be not soon shaken in mind, or be troubled, neither by spirit, nor by word, nor by letter as from us, as that the day of Christ is at hand. 3. Let no man deceive you by any means: for that day shall not

come, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition; 4. who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped; so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God, shewing himself that he is God. 5. Remember ye not, that when I was yet with you, I told you these things? 6. And now ye know what withholdeth that he might be revealed in his time. 7. For the mystery of iniquity doth already work: only he who now letteth will let, until he be taken out of the way. 8. And then shall that Wicked be revealed, whom the Lord shall consume with the spirit of his mouth, and shall destroy with the brightness of his coming: 9. even him, whose coming is after the working of Satan with all power and signs and lying wonders, 10. and with all deceivableness of unrighteousness in them that perish: because they received not the love of the truth that they might be saved. 11. And for this cause God shall send them strong delusion that they should believe a lie: 12. that they all might be damned who believed not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness.

It is with this aspect of the antichristian power that the Lutheran Confessions deal under the term “antichrist,” and we in a reaffirmation of the Lutheran faith are so using the term.

Passages from the Lutheran Confessions dealing with the subject of the Antichrist:

Apology XV; 18-19

And what need is there of words on a subject so manifest? If the adversaries defend these human services as meriting justification, grace, and the remission of sins, they simply establish the kingdom of Antichrist. For the kingdom of Antichrist is a new service of God, devised by human authority rejecting Christ, just as the kingdom of Mahomet has services and works through which it wishes to be justified before God; nor does it hold that men are gratuitously justified before God by faith, for Christ’s sake. Thus the Papacy also will be a part of the kingdom of Antichrist if it thus defends human services as justifying. For the honor is taken away from Christ when they teach that we are not justified gratuitously by faith, for Christ’s sake, but by such services; especially when they teach that such services are not only useful for justification, but are also necessary, as they hold above in Art. VII, where they condemn us for saying that unto true unity of the Church it is not necessary that rites instituted by men should everywhere be alike. Daniel 11:38 indicates that new human services will be the very form and constitution of the kingdom of Antichrist. For he says thus: BUT IN HIS ESTATE SHALL HE HONOR THE GOD OF FORCES; AND A GOD WHOM HIS FATHERS KNEW NOT SHALL HE HONOR WITH GOLD AND SILVER AND PRECIOUS STONES.

Apology XXIV; 97-98

Carnal men cannot endure that alone to the sacrifice of Christ the honor is ascribed that it is a propitiation, because they do not understand the righteousness of faith, but ascribe equal honor to the rest of the services and sacrifices. Just as, therefore, in Judah among the godless priests a false opinion concerning sacrifices inhered; just as in Israel, Baalitic services continued, and, nevertheless, a Church of God was there which disapproved of godless services, so Baalitic worship inheres in the domain of the Pope, namely, the abuse of the Mass, which they apply, that by it they may merit for the unrighteous the remission of guilt and punishment. (And yet, as God still kept His Church, i.e., some saints, in Israel and Judah, so God still preserved His Church, i.e., some saints, under the Papacy, so that the Christian Church has not entirely perished.) And it seems that this Baalitic worship will endure as long as the reign of the Pope, until Christ will come to judge, and by the glory of His advent destroy the reign of Antichrist.

Smalcald Articles II, ii, 25

The invocation of saints is also one of the abuses of Antichrist conflicting with the chief article, and destroys the knowledge of Christ. Neither is it commanded nor counseled, nor has it any example (or testimony)

in Scripture, and even though it were a precious thing, as it is not (while, on the contrary, it is a most harmful thing), in Christ we have everything a thousandfold better (and surer, so that we are not in need of calling upon the saints).

Smalcald Articles II, iv, 10-14

This teaching shows forcefully that the pope is the very Antichrist, who has exalted himself above, and opposed himself against Christ, because he will not permit Christians to be saved without his power, which, nevertheless, is nothing, and is neither ordained nor commanded by God. This is, properly speaking, to exalt himself above all that is called God, as Paul says, II Thess. 2:4. Even the Turks or the Tartars, great enemies of Christians as they are, do not do this, but they allow whoever wishes to believe in Christ, and take bodily tribute and obedience from Christians.

The Pope, however, prohibits this faith, saying that to be saved a person must obey him. This we are unwilling to do, even though on this account we must die in God's name. This all proceeds from the fact that the Pope has wished to be called the supreme head of the Christian Church by divine right. Accordingly he had to make himself equal and superior to Christ, and had to cause himself to be proclaimed the head and then the lord of the Church, and finally of the whole world and simply God on earth until he has dared to issue commands even to the angels in heaven. And when we distinguish the Pope's teaching from, or measure and hold it against Holy Scripture it is found (it appears plainly) that the Pope's teaching, where it is best, has been taken from the imperial and heathen law, and treats of political matters and decisions or rights as the Decretals show; furthermore, it teaches of ceremonies concerning churches, garments, food, persons and (similar) puerile, theatrical and comical things without measure, but in all these things nothing at all of Christ, faith, and the commandments of God. Lastly, it is nothing else than the devil himself, because above and against God he urges (and disseminates) his (papal) falsehoods concerning masses, purgatory, the monastic life, one's own works and fictitious divine worship (for this is the very Papacy) upon each of which the Papacy is altogether founded and is standing, and condemns, murders, and tortures all Christians who do not exalt and honor these abominations (of the Pope) above all things. Therefore, just as little as we can worship the devil himself as Lord and God, we can endure his apostle, the Pope, or Antichrist, in his role as head or lord. For to lie and to kill, and to destroy body and soul eternally, that is wherein his papal government really consists, as I have very clearly shown in many books. Cf. also Formula of Concord, Solida Declaration, X 20.

Tractate 39-41

Now, it is manifest that the Roman pontiffs, with their adherents, defend (and practice) godless doctrines and godless services. And the marks (all the vices) of Antichrist plainly agree with the kingdom of the Pope and his adherents. For Paul, II Thess. 2:3, in describing to the Thessalonians Antichrist, calls him AN ADVERSARY OF CHRIST, WHO OPPOSETH AND EXALTETH HIMSELF ABOVE ALL THAT IS CALLED GOD OR THAT IS WORSHIPED, SO THAT HE AS GOD SITTETH IN THE TEMPLE OF GOD. He speaks therefore of one ruling in the Church, not of heathen kings, and he calls this one the adversary of Christ, because he will devise doctrine conflicting with the Gospel, and will assume to himself divine authority.

Moreover, it is manifest, in the first place, that the Pope rules in the Church, and by the pretext of ecclesiastical authority and of the ministry has established for himself this kingdom. For he assigns as a pretext these words: I WILL GIVE TO THEE THE KEYS. Secondly, the doctrine of the Pope conflicts in many ways with the Gospel, and (thirdly) the Pope assumes to himself divine authority in a threefold manner. First, because he takes to himself the right to change the doctrine of Christ and services instituted by God, and wants his own doctrine and his own services to be observed as divine; secondly, because he takes to himself the power not only of binding and loosing in this life, but also the jurisdiction over souls after this life; thirdly, because the



Pope does not want to be judged by the Church or by anyone, and puts his own authority ahead of the decision of Councils and the entire Church. But to be unwilling to be judged by the Church or by anyone is to make oneself God. Lastly, these errors so horrible, and this impiety, he defends with the greatest cruelty, and puts to death those dissenting.

This being the case, all Christians ought to beware of becoming partakers of the godless doctrine, blasphemies, and unjust cruelty of the Pope. On this account they ought to desert and execrate the Pope with his adherents as the kingdom of Antichrist; just as Christ has commanded, Matt. 7:15: BEWARE OF FALSE PROPHETS. And Paul commands that godless teachers should be avoided and execrated as cursed, Gal. 1:8; Titus 3:10; and II Cor. 6:14 he says: BE YE NOT UNEQUALLY YOKED TOGETHER WITH UNBELIEVERS: FOR WHAT COMMUNION HATH LIGHT WITH DARKNESS?

#### Tractate 57

Therefore, even though the bishop of Rome had the primacy by divine right, yet since he defends godless services and doctrines conflicting with the Gospel, obedience is not due him; yea, it is necessary to resist him as Antichrist. The errors of the Pope are manifest and not trifling.

III. The passage (II Thess. 2:1-12) promises that God will reveal the “Man of sin” and states the tokens, or marks, by means of which God will reveal him to the eyes of faith.

Among these marks are:

1. He “as God sitteth in the temple of God, shewing himself that he is God” (II Thess. 2:4). He is a religious power demanding religious allegiance, usurping authority in the Church and tyrannizing Christian consciences. Cf. Smalcald Articles II, iv, 10-14.
2. He is an embodiment of Satanic power. This is manifested
  - a. in the fact that he appears as the one “who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God” (II Thess. 2:4). He is God’s Adversary;
  - b. and in the fact that his opposition to God is an opposition of disguise and deceit. He opposes God by usurping the place and name of God (II Thess. 2:4). The Satanic appears, characteristically, in religious form: the “coming” of Antichrist is pitted against the “coming” of Christ, his signs and lying wonders against the miracles of Christ, faith in his lie against faith in the truth of Christ (II Thess. 2:10, 11).

IV. Therefore on the basis of a renewed study of the pertinent Scriptures we reaffirm the statement of the Lutheran Confessions, that “the Pope is the very Antichrist” (cf. Section II), especially since he anathematizes the doctrine of the justification by faith alone and sets himself up as the infallible head of the Church.

We thereby affirm that we identify this “Antichrist” with the Papacy as it is known to us today, which shall, as II Thess. 2:8 states, continue to the end of time, whatever form or guise it may take. This neither means nor implies a blanket condemnation of all members of the Roman Catholic Church, for despite all the errors taught in that church the Word of God is still heard there, and that Word is an effectual Word. Isa. 55:10, 11; cf. Apology XXIV, 98, cited above under II.

We make this confession in the confidence of faith. The Antichrist cannot deceive us if we remain under the revelation given us in the Apostolic Word (II Thess. 2:13-17), for in God’s gracious governance of history the Antichrist can deceive only those who “receive not the love of the truth” (II Thess. 2:10-12).

And we make this confession in the confidence of hope. The Antichrist shall not destroy us but shall himself be destroyed—“Whom the Lord shall consume with the spirit of his mouth, and shall destroy with the brightness of his coming” (II Thess. 2:8).

We reject the idea that the fulfillment of this prophecy is to be sought in the workings of any merely secular political power (II Thess. 2:4; cf. Tractate 39).

We reject the idea that the teaching that the Papacy is the Antichrist rests on a merely human interpretation of history or is an open question. We hold rather that this teaching rests on the revelation of God in Scripture which finds its fulfillment in history. The Holy Spirit reveals this fulfillment to the eyes of faith (cf. The Abiding Word, II, 764). Since Scripture teaches that the Antichrist would be revealed and gives the marks by which the Antichrist is to be recognized (II Thess. 2:6, 8), and since this prophecy has been clearly fulfilled in the history and development of the Roman Papacy, it is Scripture which reveals that the Papacy is the Antichrist.