

Christian Fellowship In Principle And Practice: Five Studies in the Teaching and Example of Jesus and His Apostles

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FOREWORD

The departure of a seminary president who was an effective evangelical teacher. The defection of numerous brothers in various directions on conscientious grounds. The termination of fellowship with a sister synod.

These events profoundly affected the life and service of those among us who entered the public ministry before 1961. They did not incapacitate us or rob us of our joy in God's salvation and Christ's service. They were, however, sobering reminders from a gracious Lord that to serve him is to carry the cross; the crown comes later.

Every man here, including the most recent seminary graduate, still struggles with the issues that culminated in the tragic events of the late '50s and early '60s. The evangelical practice of scriptural fellowship principles is not the focal point of our ministry, not the stone which gives all the other stones their direction. But the very phrases "evangelical practice" and "scriptural principles" testify that these concerns are not far removed from the central business of preaching Christ crucified and risen.

To ask what Jesus and his apostles taught and did is to ask what the New Testament teaches. The five studies that follow are the result of searching the New Testament. That does not mean that the history of the church's fellowship practice and the 20th century documents on the subject were ignored. It does not mean that no quotations from our synod's official statements will appear. It simply means that the essayist interpreted the request for a study of the teaching and example of Jesus and his apostles to mean, "Let's not simply review the official documents and then take up cases in casuistry."

Although the assignment as formulated did not specify that applications should be drawn, it seemed wise to work in accord with the norm that all of our presentations of God's Word seek to apply the Word to the lives of believers. The studies are in part exegetical, in part devotional, in (small) part systematic. Whether they are also practical will be for you to judge.

It will not be a new and startling notion to you that the biblical teaching and practice of fellowship is not limited to the use of *κοινωνία* and words derived from the same root. That will be demonstrated anew in the appropriate places. Still, the idea of beginning this study with a brief review of that word family which appears most frequently in the New Testament to express the concept of fellowship surely commends itself.

We begin with the adjective *κοινός*. It means "common." As with the derived forms, we will see its use when we consider a number of passages in which it appears. It is also used in the sense of "profane" as distinguished from what is *ἅγιός* in Old Testament ceremonial law. This use does not enter into consideration in these studies, at least not directly.

The noun *κοινωνός* is "one who has in common," "fellow," "participant," "sharer." The verb *κοινωνέω* naturally takes on the meaning of "share with," "share in," "take part." Less frequently it means, "give a share," "impart." *Κοινωνία* is the abstract term to express "partnership," "sharing," "fellowship." In secular Greek usage this family of words was employed in connection with business relationships, close friendship, even marriage.

Although the *κοιν-* group is used by Paul more than by any other New Testament writer, the most concentrated use of *κοινωνία* occurs in I John 1:3-7. The fourfold use of this vocable in these five verses provides a sort of base camp from which we can set out to explore the subject of fellowship along five routes.

We must make a beginning somewhere and so we begin at 1 John 1:3b with John's statement: "Our *κοινωνία* is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus." Thus, we begin with 1) The Gift of Fellowship with God. The other brief studies will deal with 2) The Fact of Our Fellowship in Christ's Church, 3) The Expression of Christian Fellowship, 4) The Recognition of Fellow Christians, and 5) The Preservation of This Blessed Fellowship.

The Gift of Fellowship with God

John writes, "Our *κοινωνία* is with the Father and with-his Son, Jesus Christ" (1 Jn 1:3b). Sinful, mortal, lost and condemned creatures have a close sustained relationship with the holy, immortal God. They "live in him, and he in them" (3:24a). John does not speak here of fellowship with the Holy Spirit, only with the Father and with his Son. Rather, he says later that it is the Spirit who informs us of this fellowship and who is the assurance that it does exist: "This is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us.... We know that we live in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit" (3:24b; 4:13). Indeed, our very bodies are the inner sanctuary (*ναός*) of the Holy Spirit (1 Co 6:19). Now, where the Holy Immortal dwells, there is life.

This life-giving relationship in which God dwells in us and we in him was established when the Son of God came to share our humanity. He was "not ashamed to call (us) brothers.... Since the children *κεκοινωνήκεν* [have] flesh and blood, he too *μετέσχευ* (shared in) their humanity so that by his death he destroy him who holds the power of death—that is the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death" (He 2:11,14,15). The first verb here reminds us of the root idea of the *κοιν-* word group: sharing, having in common. It refers to our common humanity and mortality. The second verb tells us, what Christ did to establish fellowship with us. He shared in (*μετέσχευ*) our mortal state that we might share in his immortal state.

Death was there waiting for us when we were born. Obviously it did not get us then, but it will, even if it has to wait a hundred years. In sharing our humanity, the Son of God made himself subject to the same mortality. He did it willingly, for a special and glorious purpose: to destroy the devil and "free those who all their lives long were held in slavery by their fear of death."

How did he accomplish that? Use Paul's summary in Romans 4:25. "He was delivered over to death for (because of, *διὰ* with the accusative) our sins and was raised to life for (again because of, *διὰ* with the accusative) our justification." And so death has lost its sting because sin has been removed (I Co 15:55f).

The elephant, even with his huge brain, doesn't ponder his death. The death of a dog does not cause other dogs to write poems about mortality. Whatever their intelligence may be, they do not have the sense of having offended a just and holy God. It is man who has reason to fear death all his life long. In Christ, however, that cringing, hiding guilt is done away with. Death still exists and it is still real, but those who have fellowship with Christ are freed from its real dread—the dread of the law's accusation, of sin's guilt, of a just God's adverse verdict.

"God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them.... God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Co 5:19,21). That word "reconciling" means that a change has taken place. It was not a change in God. Why should the Holy One, whose name is love, change? It is not a change in man, either, but in the way God regards man. It is a change in our status before God, who is "not counting men's sins against them." Instead, "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." God treated his Son like the world's worst sinner, like sin personified, because our sins were on him. He regards us as righteous in Christ. We can confidently say "we" and "us" because this was done for the whole of humanity by him who became our Brother and shares our humanity.

We can confidently say "we" and "us" because we know that God intended from eternity to establish this fellowship with us, call us to it, and keep us in it. "For he chose us in (Christ) before the creation of the

world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his will and pleasure” (Eph 1:4f). Paul speaks of things that happened in eternity, in God’s determination. But he does not require us to read God’s mind. Nor does he separate our election to the status of sons from what occurred in history. Do you want to know that God has included you in this election? Visit Bethlehem and see the Eternal in his mother’s arms. For whom did he come? The person who knows the answer knows he is one of God’s elect in Christ. He knows the answer because he is one of God’s elect in Christ.

“And those he predestined he also called” (Ro 8:30). Election to the family and fellowship of God is in eternity, but calling is in time. It is a calling by the gospel. It is “not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven” (Mt 16:17). “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him” (Jn 6:44). “When the Gentiles heard (that salvation was for them), they were glad and honored the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed” (Ac 13:48). “Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ” (Ro 10:17). “He chose to give us birth through the word of truth” (Ja 1:1e).

Now, birth is something that happens to people not something they make happen. Philosophy, natural religion, the righteousness of the law cannot make this happen. “In the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him” (1 Co 1:20a). If God were to be found in man’s wisdom how high an IQ would you have to have? What would happen to people who weren’t smart enough? It is not by close argumentation or valid syllogisms or brilliant intuitions that fellowship with God is achieved. No, “God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believed” (1 Co 1:21b).

“The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing.” The whole burden of the Word that is preached is that a Jewish carpenter was the Son of God, that he lived the perfect life of love which no one else could live, that in spite of that he died like a criminal, that God raised him from the dead. The world still calls that foolishness. Even when all of Europe was “Christendom” this message was all but obliterated by the “wisdom” of the *opinio legis*. Church membership is popular in some times and places. Morality seems like a good idea to almost everyone. Jesus the Teacher is admired. The preaching of the cross, however, is foolishness; “but to those who are being saved it is the power of God” (1 Co 1:18).

“Those he called, he also justified” (Ro 8:30). How does the justification that Christ won for all become the possession of the individual? “We maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law” (Ro 3:27). The law says, “Love” and the natural man does not have the capacity to love his Maker or his fellowman. Justification does not lie in that direction. If the law is beyond me and only condemns, if the gospel is foolishness and I can only reject it, where is salvation?

“It is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast” (Eph 2:8,9). An interesting translation of *χάριτι* appears in the Douay-Reims version, the old Roman Catholic authorized Bible in English. It simply says “*gratis*.” If “by grace” seems too theological and abstract, then there it is: *gratis*—absolutely free of charge.

And faith is simply trust in the God who loved the world and sent his Son to redeem the world. Religion says, “Do this. Do that. Love.” The gospel says, “Christ did this and everything, for you, out of love.” The very gospel which says that is the power of the gracious God to make a believer out of the person who hears it (Ro 1:16; 10:17). These things make the gospel unique, regardless of what the students of comparative religion say.

Even this faith is “not from yourselves, it is the gift of God.” It is not an accomplishment on our part—the leap of faith or the decision for Christ. Even in human relationships trust is produced in us by what another person is or does. With all our will we cannot really trust someone who is not trustworthy. But God is trustworthy and he has graciously convinced us of that and we believe.

This is “not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (Eph 2:9,14). Before we say anything about the works of believers let us pause briefly to comment on the phrase *ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ*. This expresses the very thing we are considering: (the gift of fellowship with God. We cannot begin to do it justice here but let us not

overlook its significance in our preaching and teaching. It is one of those phrases that might be a glib commonplace in the mouth of a professional religionist, but it is never a throwaway phrase in the Holy Spirit's Book. Where are we? Where do we live? ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ—ἐν with the dative, denoting sphere!

Back to Ephesians 2:10 and the works of those who are in Christ. Paul speaks of a new creative act. Where there was nothing God called forth something. As in the beginning he did it by his word of power, so now he does it by his word of grace. He has created us in Christ Jesus so that all our thoughts and words and deeds should be good by his standard and according to his judgment. God sees his workmanship, as he did in the beginning, and judges it to be “very good.” For this very purpose and with this result he has created us in Christ Jesus.

God prepared these good works in advance for us to do. Good works are God's work. He has designed them for us and designed us for them. The sun shines; that is its nature and function. Birds fly; that's just what they do. Those who are created in Christ Jesus do good works. The gospel does not say, “You must do good works.” it creates people who simply do them.

“I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing” (Jn 15:5). Here are the ἐν with dative, denoting sphere, and its antithesis: χωρίς with genitive, denoting separation or exclusion. ἐν ἐμοί, fruit; χωρίς ἐμοῦ, nothing.

“Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Mt 5:48). The particular aspect of perfection that the context suggests here is impartial love. In light of the context it is possible to paraphrase: “Be impartial in your love as your heavenly Father is impartial in his love.” These words are addressed to every Christian, not to a heroic few. We have not attained to this perfection and that is why we must live by the forgiveness of sins. But as we are God's children we must be working at it. As θείας κοινωνοὶ φύσεως [participants in the divine nature] we are to flee “the corruption in the world caused by evil desires” (2 Pe 1:4).

Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (Eph 5:1,2). In speech, posture, and attitudes children who are loved imitate their parents. Our Father loves us dearly and we imitate him when we love, motivated by the love of Christ.

Another group of words with which the New Testament expresses the fellowship that God has established with us are those compounded with σύν.

“The Spirit himself συμμαρτυρεῖ [testifies with] our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and συγκληρονόμοι [co-heirs of] Christ, if indeed συμπάσχομεν [we share: in his sufferings] that we may also συνδοξασθῶμεν [share in his glory]” (Ro 8:16,17). The knowledge that we are children of God is not something based on our feelings and emotions. This knowledge is based on the testimony of two witnesses. The Spirit (one witness) testifies with our spirit (second witness) that since God is our Father and his Son is our Brother we are God's children. He testifies to these things in the written Word and thereby makes us spiritually alive so that our spirits respond: “Yes, that is true; we are God's children.”

Therefore, Paul goes on, we share in the Son's blessed inheritance as co-heirs. This is important to remember when our fellowship with him results in suffering with him. Not only do we share in the benefits of his suffering; sometimes we also suffer because of our connection with him. Then we are encouraged by the reminder that this is “in order that we may also share in his glory. “Here is a trustworthy saying: if συναπεθάνομεν [we died with] him, we will also συζήσομεν [live with] him, if we endure, καὶ συμβασιλεύσομεν [we will also reign with] him” (2 Ti 2:11,12).

“But rejoice that κοινωνεῖτε [you participate in] the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed” (Pe 4:13). The parallelism of thought in those passages (2 Ti and 1 Pe) demonstrates the congruence of the κοιν- family and the συν- compounds. The agreement is demonstrated in a striking way in Philippians 3:10, where Paul speaks of the κοινωνία of Christ's sufferings and συμμορφιζόμενος [becoming like him in] his death.

In Galatians 2:19f Paul writes: Χριστῷ συνεσταύρωμαι [I have been crucified with Christ] and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” Not physically with nails but spiritually by his amazing grace, “I have been crucified with Christ.” The law of God killed him in my place and now it cannot kill me. God punished him in my stead and now he will not punish me. The devil did his worst to him and now he has no claim on me. Death could not hold him and it will not hold me.

My sin crushed the life out of him but on the third day he rose again. He broke the sinpower by his perfect life, by his sacrificial death, by his resurrection. Crucified with Christ, the sinful “I” no longer lives. “But Christ lives in me.” I am not free to sin but free to serve. My life is at the beck and call of him who lives in me. I am not free to do as I please in a selfish sense. In another sense I do do as I please, for the Christ in me is pleased to love God and my neighbor, to serve God by serving my neighbor.

To come to the subject of baptism at this late point in this first essay might suggest that it has little to do with the gift of fellowship with God. On the contrary, it has everything to do with it. For most of us it was the beginning of our fellowship with God, the means by which he bestowed the gift of fellowship.

“All of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death. We were therefore συνετάφημεν [buried with] him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life” (Ro 6:3,4). Jesus was buried in Joseph’s tomb because he was dead. We were buried with him (one of the σύν compounds) because we are dead. Dead to sin, dead to the law, dead to the world. Now, Paul is really talking about sanctification in this section. But it is sanctification based on justification—the only kind there is. He is talking about the implications of our fellowship with God, but he is thereby reminding us of the basis for this fellowship.

To be baptized in Christ’s name means to become his possession. And wherever the Owner goes, his possessions go with him. To be baptized in his name means to share in his relationship with the Father. Since his death was the acceptable sacrifice in the eyes of a just and holy God we are acceptable in God’s sight because we share in his death by baptism. That is important for our eternal future: if σύμφυτοι γεγόναμεν [we have been united with] him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection” (v 5).

Paul goes on, showing the implications of our baptism for today as well as for eternity: “For we know that our old self συνεσταυρώθη [was crucified with] him so that the body of sin might be rendered powerless, that we should no longer be slaves to sin. . . . Now if ἀπεθάνομεν σὺν Χριστῷ [we died with Christ], we believe that we will also συζήσομεν αὐτῷ [live with him] Count yourselves dead to sin ‘but alive to God in Christ Jesus (vv. 6,8,11).

Our old self was crucified with him. The old self is a rebellious sinner. He has nothing but unbelief and contempt for God. He is helpless to change for the better. He is vain and greedy, lacks spiritual understanding. At his best he is deluded by the *opinio legis*. Our old self was crucified with Christ. Baptism signifies that and, because the Word of God is in the water, it effects that.

This was done so that the body, which is the instrument of sin, “might be rendered powerless, that we should no longer be slaves of sin.” Sin still wants to use our mouths for gossip, deceit, and abuse. It still wants us to make gods in our own image. It still wants us to lash out at our fellow human beings or remain aloof from them in their bodily and spiritual needs.

Paul says: “Count yourselves dead to sin.” Consider yourselves dead, so that you can’t see or hear, walk or talk, think, or feel, as far as sin is concerned. “Dead to sin but alive to God ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ. Our baptism has established a relationship in which we will God’s will with him, think our Father’s thoughts after him accept our Brother’s imperatives and act on them.

“You are all the sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have been clothed with Christ” (Gal 3:26f). The expression “clothed with Christ” reminds us that our fellowship

is based on his righteousness. It is ours “through faith in Christ Jesus,” through trusting him and his righteousness.

“While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, ‘Take it; this is my body.’ Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, and they all drank from it. ‘This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many,’ he said to them” (Mk 14:22-24). It was not a night for riddles or parables or figures of speech. It was a night when the devil was loose and heaven and hell were struggling for possession of our immortal souls. It was a time for plain talk. Very plainly the Savior said: “This is my body; this is my blood.” It was the Passover and Christ is the Lamb and the Lamb must be eaten. His body and blood are offered to us in this Supper and we know that simply because he has said so.

When he came to this earth to be our Savior he did not stop being God, but he did become man. And then he was not something other than man. He is simply more than man. So the bread and wine do not change into something else, but in this Supper they are something more. This analogy does not prove anything nor do we understand this miracle by the analogy. We only illustrate in a halting way what Jesus’ words mean. And we believe his words.

It is not our intentions, words, or deeds that put his body and blood there. It is not our faith that insures his presence. He has said it, and with our mouths we eat his body and drink his blood.

“This is my blood of the covenant which is poured out for many.” Jesus was speaking in anticipation of the cross, the pouring out of his blood. In a sense that sacrifice had already begun when he set his face to go to Jerusalem for the last time. In another sense it was already finished, for what God purposes to do is as good as done.

The blood he was offering is the sign and seal of God’s covenant. The covenant is his unilateral, unconditional decision and promise to graciously save the lost. In Exodus 24:8 we read of the “blood of the covenant,” which was sprinkled on the people as a sign of God’s promise. The Prophet Zechariah used the same expression (9:11), “As for you, because *of the blood of my covenant* with you, I will free your prisoners from the waterless pit.” These words are addressed to the Daughter of Zion, of Jerusalem, to whom the LORD spoke in 9:9.

“See your king comes to you,
righteous and having salvation,
gentle and riding an a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”

All of Jesus’ words and actions in the Supper are pure gospel, the gospel in another form. His words and the bread and the cup announce that the God of free and faithful grace has loved us from eternity, redeemed us in time, deals graciously with us even now, and will come to take us to the heavenly supper where we will celebrate with him forever. Since he is there the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation are there. That is gospel and it renews faith in us and confirms and strengthens our fellowship with him. “For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you declare the Lord’s death until he comes” (1 Co 11:26).

It is in connection with this Supper that Paul makes repeated use of the *κοιν-* words in 1 Corinthians 10:16-21. He speaks of a *κοινωνία* [participation] in the blood and body of Christ. He says we all *μετέχομεν* [partake of] the one loaf. (Kittel regards *μετέχειν* as a flat and colorless word. Perhaps it is, but surely not when it is used as a synonym for or alternative to or explication of *κοινωνεῖν*). Paul says the people of Israel were *κοινωνοί* [participants] at the altar of sacrifice and he warns against being *κοινωνοί* with demons. “You cannot *μετέχειν* [have a part in] both the Lord’s table and the table of demons.” We shall return to this passage in later essays. For now, let us simply note that in the Lord’s Supper a most intimate fellowship is nurtured.

It remains, for the purpose of this first essay, to say that fellowship with God carries with it the privilege of prayer. “Your Father knows what you need before you ask him” (Mt 6:8). With those words Jesus is not trying to discourage prayer but to dissuade his disciples from hypocritical, ostentatious, babbling prayer.

Rather, “this is how you should pray: ‘Our Father in heaven...’” (Mt 6:9-13). In all of that Lord’s Prayer, in all prayer that follows this model, the Christian is thinking and speaking as one who is in fellowship with God.

Without that fellowship we could not call him Father, could not be heard. We ask him to nourish the fellowship, deepen it, safeguard it, and broaden it. We are asking him to let us share in, partake of his grace, holiness, and work.

It may seem that in this opening essay the entire dogmatics has been rehearsed. In fact, however, the subject of our fellowship with God has not been exhaustively treated at all. We have simply touched on those aspects of that fellowship with God, which also relate to the “horizontal” relationship of Christian to Christian in the church.

The Fact of Fellowship in Christ’s Church

In virtually all the passages we have touched on thus far, and in virtually all passages of the New Testament which treat of our fellowship with God, the personal pronouns and verb forms are plural. It is “we,” “us,” “our.” It is “your” in the plural sense. I am never alone in this relationship with God, in isolation from all other beings. I pray “Our Father ... ; give us this day our daily bread... ; forgive us... as we forgive... ; lead us not into temptation; but deliver us from evil.” Thereby I confess that there are other forgiven sinners whom the Holy Spirit has taught to pray, “Abba Father.” There are others who have received the gift of fellowship with God. I may never have thought through that implication of the Lord’s Prayer before, but there it is!

Let us return to that apostle and that epistle with which we began the first essay. The Apostle John writes in his First Epistle, first chapter: “We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also *κοινωνίαν ἔχητε μεθ’ ἡμῶν. καὶ ἡ κοινωνία δὲ ἡ ἡμετέρα* [may have fellowship with us, and our fellowship] is with the Father and with his Son” (I Jn 1:3).

Our *κοινωνία*—“the fellowship which is ours”—is first of all with God. John wants his readers to have a share in that with him and his fellow believers. The human relationship, the horizontal dimension, the interpersonal fellowship is really expressed in the *μεθ’ ἡμῶν* [with us]. We want you to have fellowship with God *along with us*. We met the verb *μετέχειν* in Paul and in Hebrews in our first study. Here we have the same concept in divided and transposed form *ἔχητε μεθ’*. As there is a gift of fellowship with God which believers enjoy, so it is God’s intention that all believers together share the enjoyment of that fellowship. Where the apostolic message is heard and received, there that fellowship is a fact. I am not a Christian all by myself. I share with others in the fellowship with God.

We are also reminded by John that this fellowship is brought about by the apostolic witness: “We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us.” John and his fellow apostles witness concerning Christ so that their readers may have what they have. That which creates and gives fellowship with God also brings about a fellowship of those who hear and believe the gospel: “We write this to make our joy complete” (v 4). The farther this sharing in fellowship with God extends, the more reason there is to rejoice.

This fellowship is a fellowship of believers in Christ, not a mere external association of voluntary adherents to a society or institution. This is apparent from John’s words in verse 7: “If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have *κοινωνίαν* with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from every sin.” We see this illustrated in the report of Luke at Acts 2:41,47: “Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.... The Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.” The passive in verse 41 and the active in verse 47 correspond to one another. Believers, “those who accepted (Peter’s) message were baptized.” In that way they “were added to” the church. They did not “join the church,” choose to be part of the fellowship. They became part of the church by being added. The One who added them was the Lord. He did it by Word and Sacrament. They were passive; he was active. The church is the number of those who are being saved.

Paul makes the same points in I Corinthians 10:17 that John makes in the passage considered above: “Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all μετέχομεν [partake of] the one loaf.” The “loaf” to which Paul refers is the bread of the Lord’s Supper. It is distributed as a κοινωνία [participation in] of the body of Christ (v 16). Those who partake of his body are his body. The dogmaticians properly distinguish between the sacramental body of Christ (v 16) and the mystical body of Christ (v 17). That does not explain or prove the mystery of what Paul says here. We are one body because (γάρ) “we all partake of the one loaf.” What he is saying is that participation in the Sacrament not only expresses unity, but also nurtures unity. Because it is the gospel (in another form), in principle it could even create unity, although we have no warrant to shape our communion practice according to that possibility.

The gospel in the Sacrament that nurtures my fellowship with God also nurtures the faith of others. Those who partake of the Supper and receive the gift are one in their sharing, not only in our congregation but everywhere. Not in this sacrament only, but also in this sacrament as a means of grace. In terms of the Third Article, the Holy Spirit not only-calls me but calls and gathers others also. He not only unites me with Christ, he unites others with Christ, and thus unites them with one another, wherever and whenever this Supper is celebrated.

And so the church is not a society of like-minded people who by a voluntary act have banded together. It is the communion of saints, who have been gathered in Christ by the Spirit of God working through the means of grace, including this Holy Communion of Christ’s body and blood. Our faith does not establish this fellowship with one another; the gospel does. Of course it is a faith-fellowship, a fellowship of believers. It is not, however, constituted by our faith; it is constituted by the means of grace.

The bread becomes one loaf as many individual grains are gathered in one place, changed into flour, and baked into one loaf. Although Paul does not say it in this verse, the corresponding analogy of many individual grapes gathered and pressed and poured out as one vintage may be inferred—as it was in the eucharistic prayers of the ancient church.

“Now you are the body of Christ and each one of you is a part of it” (1 Co 12:27). “ἐν Χριστῷ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others” (Ro 12:5). There are many members but there is one body, one church. In a way “body” and “members” are metaphors, but the body is a reality and the unity is a fact. It is not an ideal of which we dream or for which we strive. It is not a thing of the past, lost perhaps in the church’s second generation. Rather, it is a blessed reality. We learn this from Scripture, we know this by faith, and we confess it in the ecumenical creeds.

Paul reminds us, in an incidental way (Eph 5:29), that Christ feeds and cares for the church as surely as it is natural for man to feed and care for his body. We could not sustain the church as church, make it grow, or continue it from generation to generation. Even Peter, James, John, and Paul could not do that. It is the Lord who breathed life into it by his Word and sustained it by Word and Sacrament when it was so tiny and weak in an aggressively hostile world. It is he who keeps it today when the gospel is so little valued even by religious people and so muffled by the doublemindedness of Christians. He is alive and so his body is alive and he keeps it alive and gives it strength by the gospel.

In the time after Saul’s conversion and his subsequent visit with the apostles in Jerusalem, “the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace. It was strengthened; and, encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it grew in numbers, living in the fear of the Lord” (Ac 9:31). The church may be localized: Judea, Galilee, and Samaria. But it is one church: Note the singular forms of noun and verbs. The church may be localized: “To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy...” (1 Co 1:2a). But it is not isolated: It is “...together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ—their Lord and ours” (1 Co, 1:2b). It exists wherever there are people who call on the name of our Lord Jesus.

“I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be μία ποίμνη [one flock], εἷς ποιμήν [one shepherd]” (Jn 10:16) Jesus is not praying for unity here, expressing the hope that it will one day exist. He says, “There shall be one sheep pen, one

Shepherd.” And so it is. Those who listen to his voice are not many flocks but one. They are not one in the sense of being a grand and glorious visible institution. They are one because they have one Shepherd and they listen to his voice. The other sheep of whom Jesus spoke that day began to be gathered from every nation under heaven on the day of Pentecost. He continues to call them to be one flock to this day. And we are. He knows us all by name.

When Caiaphas gave the Sanhedrin counsel “that one should die for the people (rather than) that the whole nation perish, he did not say this on his own, but as high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the Jewish nation, and not only for that nation but also for the scattered children of God, *συναγάγη εἰς ἓν* [to bring them together and make them one]” (Jn11: 50-52). Caiaphas had voiced concern for the people of Israel, the *λαός*. God’s concern and plan was for the *ἔθνη* as well. No longer would there be Israel, God’s chosen, and all the rest. Rather, there would be—there is—one people, one nation, one flock, one family of God in Christ Jesus. “Through the gospel the Gentiles are *συγκληρονόμα καὶ σύσσωμα καὶ συμμετόχα* [heirs together with Israel, members of one body, and sharers together] in the promise *ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ*” (Eph 3:6).

“For he himself is our peace, who has made the two *ἓν* and has destroyed the barrier, this dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create *ἐν αὐτῷ εἰς ἓνα καινὸν ἄνθρωπον* [in himself one new man] out of the two, thus making peace, and *ἐν ἑνὶ σῶματι* [in this one body] to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father *ἐν ἑνὶ πνεύματι* [by one Spirit]. Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but *συμπολῖται* [fellow citizens] with God’s people and members of God’s household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is *συναρμολογούμενα* [being built together] and rises to become a holy temple *ἐν κυρίῳ*. And *ἐν ᾧ* [in him] you too are *συνοικοδομεῖσθε* [being built together] to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit” (Eph 2:14-22).

Here again is the *ἓν*, denoting sphere. Here the *σύν* compounds are used not for the fellowship of God and man but for the fellowship of those who are *ἐν Χριστῷ*. And here, repeatedly, Paul stresses the oneness of those who are *ἐν Χριστῷ*. God has made Israelite and heathen one. His purpose was to create one new man. He reconciled them in one body. Jew and Gentile have access to the Father by one Spirit.

There is not a plurality of churches (in the proper sense), more than one body of Christ. There are not various peoples of God. Those who are in fellowship with him are in fellowship with one another.

When the Gentiles were without Christ, they were also without God and without hope in the world (Eph 2:12). They were also, naturally, separated from God’s people, the people of the Promise. The Israelites were always ready to remind the heathen of that and the Gentiles were usually ready to accept their separateness from the Jews without regret. The wall of separation between them was made tangible by that stone screen in the temple, beyond which no Gentile—not even a proselyte of the gate—could approach.

Christ brought down that barrier between believing people and believing people when he removed the sin that separated man from God. When he established peace and fellowship between God and man he also established peace and fellowship between man and man. He took two kinds of people and created a third kind, neither Jew nor gentile but Christian (Eph 2:14-22).

Three times in four verses Paul used the word “peace.” He is our peace; he made peace; he preached peace. Kittel says: “The history of the word peace comes to an end in Ephesians 2:14. Christ does not bring a new conception of the term peace, He is it.”

In Christ a new people; in Christ a new building. The new building is erected on the foundation of the prophets and apostles, which is the Word of God. The cornerstone of this new building is Christ Jesus himself. In ancient buildings the cornerstone was that stone which gave direction to all the lines and determined all the angles of every other stone in the building. Paul is saying that this new building, the church, takes its direction from Christ and is thus a sound construction.

Thus it rises to become a holy temple ἐν κυρίῳ, a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit. Here God receives his people, meets with his people, refreshes his people, instructs and renews his people. “Here forgiveness and salvation daily come by Jesus’ merit” (CW 271).

Obviously this one, holy, Christian, and apostolic church is not a society for separating “our kind” from “their kind,” rich from poor, black from white, Americans from others. It is not an institution for protecting the rights and privileges of a certain class of people.

The church is something else, something new. One and holy. Some day the unity will be there to see and the holiness will be obvious. That may be before midnight today or it may be in a future that begins after our earthly pilgrimage is ended. That day will come when our Lord returns to acknowledge his own before his Father and the world. Meanwhile, “I believe in one, holy, Christian, and apostolic church.”

“The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. For we were all baptized ἐν ἐνι πνεύματι [by one Spirit] into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink” (1 Co 12:12f). When we received the gift of fellowship with God in baptism the Holy Spirit also incorporated us into one body. He did not take into account our ancestral religion or culture, our economic or social status, or any of the things that usually divide people and keep them separate. There is one body in which all parts inhere. There is one Spirit of whom we all have a share. “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Ga 3:28).

The Apostle Peter (1 Pe 2:4f, 9f) also employs the two pictures, building and people, to teach the reality of our fellowship with God. At the same time he instructs us regarding the function of the church. In verses 4 and 5 he characterizes the believers as stones who are built into a temple of God and, at the same time, a holy priesthood: “As you come to him, the living Stone rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him—you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” Recalling the priesthood of the Old Testament we are reminded that while they were individuals their work was corporate work and was carried on for the spiritual benefit of all. Someone has said, “We are not pebbles in a box but vines in a Branch.” There is an organic union with Christ and with one another. Our function: *together* to offer spiritual sacrifices—the response of faith.

In verses 9 and 10 Peter says that the function of the new Israel (γένος [race], priesthood, ἔθνος [nation], λαός [people]) is to “declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.” It is the responsibility of each individual, but never of individuals only. This assures us that we are not alone in serving him. It reminds us, too, that we are not simply free lances in our faith-life. I am part of something much greater than I. *Together* we declare his praises, as a *people* who are the people of God.

“You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have been clothed with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all εἰς ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ” (Ga 3:26-28). Through faith in Christ Jesus, baptized into him, clothed with him, all the sons of God are *one in Christ Jesus*. Fellowship with God means *ipso facto* unity with all that believe and are baptized. That there may be hypocrites in the number of those who gather around Word and Sacrament does not negate the fact of the unity of all believers in one fellow ship.

The commission that the risen Christ conferred on his apostles is to be discharged by his church “to the very end of the age” (Mt 28:16-20). This assignment is not something for one individual to carry out alone, as *the* steward of the mysteries of God, *the* ambassador for Christ, *the* interpreter of God’s will. This is corporate activity and there is great comfort in that. There is also, implicitly, responsibility to the communion of saints. Jesus is my personal and only Savior, but I am not his only disciple and servant.

Before we leave this familiar passage we ought to note, too, that the Savior is assuring his own of the continued existence of his church. More, he lets us know how we can be sure of its existence. Where the Head is the body is and the Head is always present where there is baptizing and teaching (v 20). There disciples are being made (v 19).

Jesus' promise to be with his church extends far beyond the lifetime of those who first heard it. It extends to the end of the age. Hostile governments and clever philosophers and reckless blasphemers have pronounced the death sentence upon it in every age. But it endures and it will endure until he comes again as Judge of all. Meanwhile, he is with us to add his blessing to the work he has given us to do.

There is a fellowship in the gospel which is not only a sharing in its blessings but also a sharing in its work: "In all my prayers for all of you I always pray with joy because of your *κοινωνία* in the gospel from the first day until now" (Php 1:4f).

There is a partnership in God's grace which is not only a participation in its riches but also a sharing of that grace with others: "It is right for me to feel this way about all of you since I have you in my heart, for whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you *συγκοινωνούς* [share] in God's grace with me" (Php 1:4-7).

There is the closest bond in shared faith: "To Titus, my true son in our *κοινήν πίστιν* [common faith] "(Tit 1:4). There is an affectionate concern for those who are co-partakers in God's salvation: "Dear friends, although I was very eager to write to you about *τῆς κοινῆς ἡμῶν σωτηρίας* [the salvation we share], I felt I had to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints" (Jude 3).

Those who are one in Christ are one with those who have fallen asleep *ἐν Χριστῷ* and will share in his glory on the day of his return: We who are still alive and are left *ἀρπαγησόμεθα* [will be caught up together with them] in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so *σὺν κυρίῳ ἔσόμεθα* forever" (1 Th 4:17). They are our "brothers *μέτοχοι* [who share in] the heavenly calling" (Heb 3:1).

"But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel" (He 12:22-24). This does not celebrate a *private* covenant with a "personal Savior" but a communion of saints in him. We are one with those who have reached their goal, a life that transcends this one. Their earthly ties are broken, but not their connection with God and with the church. God does not plan to spend eternity alone. He has no plans for him and me alone. There is a city, an assembly, a church. Their names are written in heaven. They may not appear on plaques in anyone's hall of fame, but they are inscribed in God's family register.

When Simon Peter confessed Jesus as "the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Mt 16:16), it was not as one of the wise and learned but as one of those blessed children to whom the Father revealed it (Mt 11:25; 16:17). Jesus went on to say, that day in Caesarea Philippi: "And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church" (16:18).

Did Jesus build his church on this man? If he did, then the church must fall when Peter falls, and he did fall. It must die when Peter dies, and he did die. But Jesus says, "The gates of Hades will not overcome it" (16:18). The rock must be something more substantial and enduring than Simon son of Jonah. The foundation on which the church is built is Christ himself and no one can lay another foundation (1 Co 3:11).

The foundation is the confession concerning him, the truth of who he is and what he has done. Those who confess him as Peter did are built on this Christ. They are brought to fellowship with God in his Son and are joined with one another by the gospel in Word and Sacrament, which proclaims Christ and imparts faith in him. He is alive, powerful as ever, though his power is hidden by the cross.

Because he lives, this Rock on whom the church is built the gates of death and hell will not overcome the church. Social scientists speak of "the post-Christian era" and speculative theologians speak of "the death of God" and the church is dismissed as irrelevant. The superstition crops up in denominations that Christ can work effectively only where two or three million are gathered in his name. In terms of numbers, prestige, impact on the affairs of nations the church may seem of no consequence. Its witness is misunderstood. It is hampered by the limitations and frailties and failures of its members.

Let us remember our Savior's words here and not despair. "I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. There is no reason for the church to read its own obituary or for us to take the attitude that when we and our generation and our synod pass, then the church will have died out. Whatever the future holds for the communion of saints the Lord holds its future in his hands and it does have a future. It is not a phenomenon that will pass. Other religious phenomena will endure till the end of time but only this one is eternal: "The gates of Hades will not overcome it."

Our Lord also said to Peter: "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven; whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (Mt 16:19). Jesus gave Peter the keys of the kingdom of heaven, the power to bind and loose. We know from Matthew 18:18-20 that he also gave it to his other disciples and to the whole church. He gave it to all who confess what Peter confessed. In John 20:23 it is the *risen* Christ who says: "If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

That is to say, Jesus did not give Peter something that he withheld from other confessors. But assume that Peter alone is the Rock and has the keys. What provision is there for a successor? What scriptural authority confers that succession on the Bishop of Rome? But assume that this authority is conferred on the Bishop of Rome. What authority would he have? It would only be the authority to preach the gospel. That authority, however, every Christian has. What an authority it is!

"I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them" (Mt 18:19f). In this passage, addressed to his disciples, Jesus makes clear that the mission of his church is to preach the gospel. The corollary is that where the gospel is preached the church is. He does not prescribe any organizational forms. He does not comment on the individual faith of the two or three who gather in his name. They are exercising the Office of the Keys they are gathered in his name, they are agreed in what they ask from God. The *ὅσα ἐὰν* [whatever] and the *οὔ...ἐκαὶ* [wherever ... there] lend a timeless universality to what he promises here. I cannot think of myself as the only person who has fellowship with God. I must not imagine that there was ever a time or ever will be a time when the Lord does not have his own. I may be sure (marvelous assurance!) that where the gospel is there the church is, no matter what name may be attached to the external institution of those who gather in Christ's name.

Let us look briefly at a passage that is very important in our study of church fellowship. It could (perhaps should) have been noted in the first essay and it will receive further treatment in the later essays. For now we simply give attention to its relevance to the fact of our fellowship in Christ's church.

In his high-priestly prayer our Lord said to his Father: "My prayer is not for them alone. I pray for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be *ἐν* Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be *ἐν ἡμῖν* so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, *ἵνα ὡσιν ἐν καθὼς ἡμεῖς ἐν* [they may be one as we are one]; I *ἐν αὐτοῖς* and you *ἐν ἐμοί*, *ἵνα ὡσιν τετελειωμένοι εἰς ἓν* [may they be brought to complete unity] to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me" (Jn 17:20-23). It is a given here that the apostolic message will continue to make believers. Jesus prays that the result of this will be unity in God and unity with one another. The unity of believers with one another is not identical to that of the Father and the Son but analogous to it (*καθὼς*).

In order to achieve this purpose he has given his own the same glory that the Father has given him. I believe that the glory which the Father gave the Son and which the Son gives to his own is that "glory of the Lord" which is a recurring theme in the Old Testament. It is God's self-revelation in connection with his saving activity. Every other definition or identification of that glory I have encountered can be related to it.

The unity of his believers is to be testimony to the world that the Father has sent the Son and that he has loved Jesus' disciples even as he has loved Jesus. Now that is the gospel! Jesus is the well-loved Son in whom the Father loves the world. The gospel creates the unity of believers and the unity of believers is an

expression of the gospel. It may not always be (is not) a clear and unmistakable testimony. It may not (does not) always impress the world. The outward divisions of the church deceitfully belie this unity. But Jesus' prayer has been answered; this unity does exist. That is what all these passages in this second essay have taught, and there are many we have not included. The unity which does exist, which is God's creation, which is the answer to Jesus' prayer must suffice as the testimony to the world of God's love for Christ and Christ's love for us. But we are encroaching on later subjects.

Jesus' prayer that they all may be one has been answered. That is implicit in Paul's injunction, "make every effort to keep the *ἐνότητα* of the Spirit through the *συνδέσμῳ* of peace" (Eph 4:3). He is speaking of a unity, which exists, which comes from the Spirit. He creates and maintains it. It is not merely a unity of ideas and interests. It is not merely a community spirit. Communities have been built around false gods, false teachings, a wrong way of life. Paul is speaking about a real unity that cannot be wrong because the Holy Spirit cannot be wrong.

He speaks explicitly of that unity: "There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called—one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all" (Eph 4:4-6). ἓν, ἓν, ἓν. One, one, one. Paul is not saying that it ought to be. He is saying that it is. It did not cease to be one church during the centuries of christological controversy. It did not cease to be one during the sixteenth century. It is one, united, in spite of the multitude of erroristic and schismatic sects, which divide it outwardly today. We know this because God's Word teaches it. That is to say it is an article of faith.

"I believe in the Holy Christian Church, the communion of saints." The way in which *Christian Worship* sets it off signals that we understand "communion of saints" epexegetically: "The holy Christian church, that is, the communion of saints."

Was it understood in just that way by those who introduced it into the Roman Symbol? And was *sanctorum* understood as masculine, with reference to believers; or as neuter, with reference to the elements of the Lord's Supper? And was *communio* understood as the Latin equivalent of the Greek *κοινωνία* in the sense of fellowship or in the sense of participation? And when did the idea of the communion of those who have gone before with those who are still on earth enter into the church's understanding of "communion of saints"?

It is by no means certain how the phrase was understood when it first came into use. It would be presumptuous for us to say today how it *must* be understood. On the basis of Scripture we can say, however, that the church is the fellowship of believers. We can also say that participation in the holy things—the means of grace—is the way in which God creates and sustains the church. We can also say that there is a unity among believers that is by no means broken when some of them go to heaven. We can say, "I believe in the communion of saints" and thus be confessing our joyful appreciation of the fact of fellowship in Christ's church. One reason that the teaching and practice of Jesus and the apostles is so important to us is that we are in fellowship with *them*.

The Expression of Christian Fellowship

The gift of fellowship with God and the fact of our fellowship in Christ's church are not mere abstractions. They find concrete expression in our mutual, reciprocal, joint actions as members in the Body of Christ.

Let us begin again in 1 John 1. John is writing to people who have fellowship with God, whom he knows as brothers and sisters in Christ's church. He writes: "We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have *κοινωνίαν* with us.... We write this to make our joy complete" (1 Jn 1:3,4). The apostle of love is seeking the edification of his fellow believers. That is an expression of fellowship, fellowship made concrete in action. Even the way in which he expresses it is an expression of fellowship.

This kind of edification and encouragement is not limited to apostolic activity or to letter writing. St. Paul exhorts the Christians in Ephesus: "Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs" (5:19).

The believers in Colosse are to express and strengthen the fellowship by reciprocal instruction and admonition: “Teach and admonish one another with all wisdom” (Col 3:16).

We observe here, too, that this expression of fellowship is not an end in itself. It is not merely ceremonial, symbolic, formal. It is something practical, with a practical purpose. It renders spiritual service to fellow believers. “Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching” (Heb 10:24,25).

It also serves the practical purpose of bearing witness to the fact that God loves us, that we love him, that therefore we love the brothers. To say that fellowship finds expression is virtually the same as saying faith produces fruit. “We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers” (1 Jn 3:14). Not everything done in love is an expression of fellowship in Christ’s church, but every true expression of fellowship is an act of love.

Love for the brethren bears witness to our fellowship with God. It also bears witness to the brothers of our joint fellowship in Christ. It expresses itself in action.

“This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ ἔθηκεν [laid down] his life for us. And we ought θεῖναι [to lay down] our lives for our brothers. If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth” (1 Jn 3:16-18). Christ put his life on deposit for us. We draw on what he deposited for us. We draw life from his life.

Now we ought to put our lives on deposit for the brothers so that they can draw on us. It may not happen very often in our environment that a believer is called on to die for a fellow believer. But we should be willing to live for one another. Jesus did that before he died for us. He lived for us, keeping the law of God in our stead. Even on the night before he died, knowing that he had that great sacrifice to make, he was willing to wash his disciples’ feet. We are not often called on to do heroic things for the brothers. But let us always be willing to do the little things.

Fellowship (love) is expressed in action. It is not just a big emotional surge or wave of feeling. ἀγάπη acts. That was God’s way. He did not sit in heaven and say, “Oh, those poor people, my heart bleeds for them.” No, he saw our need and our sin and he acted. At enormous cost he came and rescued us. To give, to help, to act for the advantage of those who need what we have is love. It is an expression of fellowship.

“Keep on loving one another as brothers. Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it. Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering” (He 13:1-3). Fellowship is not only being *with* one another in the faith relationship. It is also being *for* one another, even for those who are strangers. It means identifying with one another in time of persecution. We do not have to stop with these things, but we do have to start. Kindness is for the person next to you, not only concern in principle for the communion of saints. Understanding is for the brother who is telling you his troubles. Help for the one you can see and whose need is apparent.

“Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, love one another deeply, from the heart” (1 Pe 1:22). Faith has enabled us to love the brothers without any kind of faking. That person who is hard to get along with, the one, whose personality is as prickly as a porcupine, needs your disinterested good will and concern. Peter is not asking for a great show of emotion but for that steady, unbeatable, unquenchable good will which cannot be turned to bitterness.

The special love of Jesus’ disciples for one another is also a testimony to the world that we are in fellowship with him. “A new commandment I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. All men will know that you are my disciples if you love one another” (Jn 13:34,35). What is new about this commandment? “Love one another” is as old as God’s holy immutable will. What is new is “as I have loved you.” What is new is the motivation, the self-sacrificing love of the Lamb of God. What is new is his example, his bearing our sins in his own body.

“All men will know that you are my disciples if you love one another.” Even unbelievers will recognize it. It is a sobering thought whether that kind of love is evident in our lives. Where it exists, it will show. It will not be showy, necessarily, but it will be apparent. It was said of the early Christians, by those without, “Their Master has implanted in them the belief that they are all brothers.” The love of Christians will not pridefully refuse love to those who are not disciples. It will not be hostile to those who are not yet Christians. But it begins with love for those who are one with us in the family of believers.

Is there malice, spite, coldness, and dislike in my attitudes toward and relationship with my fellow Christians? If there is anything of these it is too much. The worldling will pick it up and draw some unfortunate conclusions from it. He will conclude, at least, that I have not learned much from my Master.

Where we recognize any lack of love in our lives, let us focus on the love of Christ and learn from his life and death. And then let us practice: practice love, practice fellowship. The practice of fellowship takes practice. It means dealing with one another, as we would deal with Christ, as Christ would deal with us. “As we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers” (Ga 6:10).

Fellowship is expressed by sharing in the means of grace. The primary significance of Word and Sacrament is that they are means of grace, proclaiming and conveying and bestowing God’s forgiveness. They are God’s means for creating and sustaining fellowship with him and among believers. But when Christians partake of these means together (and they were given for joint use in the church) they are also expressing their unity in Christ and with one another. This is not so much a thesis based on an explicit passage as it is an inference drawn by all who call themselves Christians.

Ecumenists, unionists, fundamentalists, those who do not understand grace and those who do not believe that Word and Sacrament are means of grace—all realize that the joint use of Word and Sacrament is the expression of fellowship. Those who are willing to include the heterodox or the heretic in the joint use of the means of grace do not deny that this is an expression of fellowship. Rather, they simply declare that they are in fellowship with the heterodox and the heretics.

Where two or three come together in Christ’s name (Mt 18:20) they are expressing something about their relationship to him and to one another. When the disciples in Jerusalem “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the *κοινωνία*, to the breaking of bread and to prayer” (Ac 2:42), they were expressing their unity with Christ and with one another. “On the first day of the week (the church at Troas) came together to break bread. Paul spoke to the people” (Ac 20:7). That gathering around Word and Sacrament was an expression of fellowship.

“Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a *κοινωνία* [participation] in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a *κοινωνία* [participation] in the body of Christ?” (1 Co 10:16). The Holy Supper is sometimes said to be the primary, preeminent, supreme expression of fellowship. Where that is said in order to justify other expressions with the heterodox, grading expressions of fellowship according to degrees of doctrinal agreement, we want none of it. Where it is said in the realization that there can be nothing more expressive of fellowship than partaking of the Host’s body and blood, it is valid. It should also serve to make vividly clear that if I cannot commune with certain groups of Christians then no other expression of church fellowship with such groups is in order, either.

Perhaps an illustration from past procedures of the U.S. Bureau of the Census can heighten our appreciation of what it means to express our unity at the Holy Supper of the Lord. When they wanted to determine how many families actually lived in a house they asked a simple question: “Do you eat together?”

We are family. The fellowship that is renewed by the gospel in the Supper is also expressed in the celebration of that Supper. Our eating and drinking together expresses a unity with the entire body of Christ, the church. “Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are *ἐν σώμα*, for we all *μετέχομεν* [partake of] the one loaf” (1 Co 10:17).

“We are one body.” The world hates the gospel and our environment is Christ-despising, Christ-ignoring. But there is a place in this world, in the midst of a hostile culture, where Christians gather to be

strengthened in faith toward God and in fervent love for one another. There is a place where believers gather to express their unity in Christ and with one another.

It is after his words concerning the Lord's Supper that Paul goes on to talk about solutions to various practical problems in the church at Corinth. The Holy Communion was a good place to begin. The individual grain or grape is not unimportant in God's eyes. But it is not important by itself. It is a part of the loaf, part of the cup. At the altar each Christian is important, but each Christian also is aware: "My ego must shrink so that I do not hinder the flourishing of Christ's Body."

Two customs which are not of the essence in the Lord's Supper were once practiced in connection with the sacrament. These were the *φίλημα* and the *ἀγάπη*.

There are expressions of fellowship, which are not means of grace but which could hardly be shared in by those who could not commune together. We cannot say with absolute assurance that the *φίλημα*, a holy kiss, was used in the celebration of the Lord's Supper in apostolic times. We can say there was a *φίλημα*, that it was used in connection with the sacrament in the second century church, that a case can be made for its sacramental context in the New Testament, that it was not a means of grace. References appear in Romans 16:16; 2 Corinthians 13:12; 1 Thessalonians 5:26; 1 Peter 5:14. It was not a means of grace, but it was a sign and an expression of fellowship. It was a demonstration of brotherhood, even in non-Christian usage. When Christians used it they were saying: "Brotherhood in Christ exists here."

The *ἀγάπη* may not have been observed in all of the congregations of the apostolic age. It was observed in the churches that are addressed in 2 Peter and Jude. It was observed in the church at Corinth. It was observed in Corinth in connection with the Lord's Supper. "For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.... So then, my brothers, *συνερχόμενοι* [when you come together] to eat, wait for each other if anyone is hungry, he should eat at home, so that when *συνέρχησθε*, [you meet together] it may not result in judgment" (1 Co 11:26, 33f). Again, something that was not a means of creating or sustaining fellowship was a means of expressing it.

A helpful statement of relatively recent vintage and of impressive authorship is brought here to clearly make the point we have been stressing in the last few paragraphs. I do not know the specific problem or group for which the following paragraphs were written, but I expect it was for leaders of SELK—the Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church (in Germany). The statement was written in 1978 by Professor Carl J. Lawrenz.

ON DEFINING CHURCH FELLOWSHIP

Joint proclamation of the Gospel is an expression of fellowship, *not because the Gospel is a Means of Grace*, but because when I proclaim the Gospel I am expressing my faith, and when I proclaim it with others I am expressing my faith jointly with them.

Joint celebration of the Lord's Supper is an expression of fellowship, *not because the Lord's Supper is a Means of Grace*, but because in partaking of the Lord's Supper I am also expressing my faith, and by partaking of the Lord's Supper with others, I am expressing my faith together with others.

That in proclaiming the Gospel with others, I and they are at the same time being edified by the Gospel as a Means of Grace is more important and vital than that in doing so we are jointly expressing our faith. What God in His grace does for me and others through the Means of Grace is always more vital than our joint responses of faith.

That in partaking of the Lord's Supper with others I and they are strengthened in our faith, inasmuch as the Lord's Supper is a Means of Grace, is more important and vital than that we are jointly expressing our faith, jointly proclaiming Christ's death. Again, what God does for us is always more vital than what we in faith do in response.

Yet when we are defining an expression of fellowship, it is imperative that we simply define it as a joint expression of faith. To bring in the factor that in some instances we are jointly using

a Means of Grace means introducing an irrelevant factor which in itself has nothing to do with the essence of an expression of fellowship and thus leads to unclarity.

When expressions of fellowship are classified as primary if they involve a joint use of the Means of Grace and others as secondary if they do not involve a joint use of the Means of Grace, this also leads to unclarity inasmuch as an irrelevant factor seems to make certain joint actions of faith more of an expression of confessional fellowship than others.

Fellowship in Christ is expressed by praying together with fellow Christians. The very wording of the Lord's Prayer teaches us that in all our prayers we are joined with the community of believers, even when we pray by ourselves. It is only natural that Christians will also give outward expression to their unity in God's family by joining with fellow believers in prayer.

Actually, it is not only natural. It is spiritual, for our Lord encourages us to pray together, to make common cause in our prayers to God: "I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them" (Mt 18:19,20). His presence, his name, his disciples, a common cause—all these bespeak a blessed unity. God answers such prayer; it is pleasing to him. It is a fitting expression of a fellowship, which exists. We hasten to add that its prime purpose is not to express fellowship. Its purpose is to assent to God's will, seek his direction, and implore his blessing. But it is an expression of fellowship. Thus, those who "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the *κοινωνία*, to the breaking of bread," also devoted themselves "to prayer" (Ac 2:42).

When we speak of sharing in Word and Sacrament or of praying together as expressions of fellowship, then it is self-evident that joint worship is also an expression of fellowship. "Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Eph 5:19,20). Again, this is not merely or primarily an expression of fellowship. But it is that as surely as it is addressed "to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Christians also express their fellowship with one another in Christ by praying for one another, asking for the prayers of the church, assuring one another that they do pray for each other. Paul encouraged the believers at Ephesus to "keep on praying for all the saints. Pray also for me" (6:18,19). He was sure that his fellow Christians in Corinth prayed for him and that their prayers made a difference: "You help us by your prayers. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted us in answer to the prayers of many" (2 Cor 1:11). There is a picture of teamwork that is expressive of fellowship in Paul's words in Romans 15:30-32. He speaks of wrestling together in prayer with them and then taking refreshment together with them between his bouts with hope who were less receptive than he expected the Christians at Rome to be. Many of his letters include assurances such as the one at the beginning of this letter: "I remember you in my prayers at all times" (Ro 1:9,10).

Joint work in the gospel is an expression of fellowship. "I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your *κοινωνία* [partnership] in the gospel from the first day until now" (Php 1:3-5). Partnership in the gospel means shared activity, and that is possible when people are one in their confession of God's truth. There is nothing in Paul's words to suggest that there may be some Christians whose only privilege or responsibility is to pray, pay, and obey. People who are aware of and appreciate their partnership in the gospel do not say to the pastor, "Your church." They do not speak of the church's work as "what they (other people) are doing." The Christian who realizes that he is a partner in the gospel knows that all his words and actions say something about the hope that is in him and about the fellowship to which he belongs.

People who worship and fast and pray together send off missionaries together: "While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to

which I have called them.’ So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off” (Ac 13:2,3).

The conference at Jerusalem ended with a threefold expression of fellowship between Paul and Barnabas on the one hand and the three pillars on the other hand. It was expressed by a handshake. It was expressed by an agreement on the division of work. It was expressed by an assurance that the church’s poor would not be forgotten. Such expressions would have been unthinkable if there had been no true fellowship. Those expressions were inevitable because there was true fellowship (Ga 2:9,10).

Paul did not remind his fellow apostles that the care of the poor is not the church’s primary assignment. He recognized that it was necessary work and he eagerly took it on, and he turned it into a marvelous opportunity for helping his Gentile believers express their fellowship with the Jewish Christians.

Nouns and verbs built on the *κοιν-* root appear frequently in his letters in connection with the great relief offering that was gathered from the young Gentile churches for the saints in Jerusalem. The Macedonian churches “urgently pleaded with (Paul and his co-workers) for the privilege *τὴν κοινωνίαν* [of sharing] this service to the saints” (2 Co 8:4). The word that NIV renders as “privilege” is *χάρις*. That, of course, is a very big word in Paul’s vocabulary, not to be separated from the saving acts of God in Christ. “Privilege” is not a mistranslation, necessarily, but it must be kept in mind that it is a “privilege” connected with faith in Christ and membership in God’s family. And so the “sharing in this service” is an expression of fellowship.

To the Corinthians themselves, by way of encouragement in the matter of the collection, Paul wrote: “Because of the service by which you have proved yourself, men will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity *τῆς κοινωνίας* [in sharing with] them and with everyone else” (2 Co 9:13).

To the Romans he wrote: “Macedonia and Achaia were pleased *κοινωνίαν τινὰ ποιήσασθαι* [to make a contribution] for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem. They were pleased to it, and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles *ἐκοινώνησαν* [have shared in] the Jews’ spiritual blessings, they owe it to the Jews to share with them their material blessings” (Ro 15:26,27). Notice the phrase that could be literally translated “to practice fellowship.” Not a formal, ostentatious, self-conscious, contrived act but a practical reaching out with help to those through whom God blessed the nations. Such material aid might be offered to people who are not Christians. Indeed, it ought to be, but then it is not an expression of fellowship toward those who share in spiritual things with us.

Before the time of famine, before the great fellowship collection, the church in Jerusalem had had its unique way of expressing fellowship in the care of its poor. There were those who remembered Jesus’ words, “Sell your possessions and give them to the poor” (Lk 12:33), and acted on those words. “All the believers were together and had everything *κοινά* [in common]. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need” (Ac 2:44,45). “All the believers were *μία* in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but *ἦν αὐτοῖς ἅπαντα κοινά* [they shared everything they had]. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was with them all. There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need” (Ac 4:32-37).

Not incidentally, notice that the gospel was being preached, the Great Commission was being carried out. But then, not at the expense of the church’s mission but as a fruit of it and as an expression of unity, a kind of “Christian communism” was being practiced.

This was not a socialistic scheme for the redistribution of wealth. It was not set up as a test of anyone’s faith or love. It was simply brotherly love, acting in a voluntary way, forgoing the normal claim to ownership in order to help those in need.

What made this expression of fellowship even more impressive was the fact that this was a mixed group. There were old and young, but there was no great to-do about a generation gap in the church. There were rich

and poor, but no one was promoting class conflict. In any multitude there is great variety in temperament and interests, but there was no talk of good guys and bad guys. They were from many different countries and had as many different mother tongues, but they were of one heart and soul.

The sharing of goods was carried on in other ways in other churches. Even in Jerusalem this form did not endure. Methods change and forms diverge, but the sharing of this world's goods with those in need remains as an expression of fellowship.

The practice of fellowship, the expression of fellowship, church fellowship is not limited to joint participation in the means of grace. There are many more New Testament examples of Christians sharing what they have, acting in love, as the expression of fellowship. We cannot include them all but let us mention a few.

“On hearing of (the Baptist’s murder), John’s disciples came and took his body and laid it in a tomb” (Mk 6:29). Thus they identified with their dead master, expressing their unbroken fellowship with him. At the time of Jesus’ death there was a man of some prominence who was not ashamed to give his own burial place to a traveling rabbi who hadn’t had a place to lay his head even while he lived. Joseph, who had a reputation as a just and devout man, expressed his fellowship with a Man who had been executed as a criminal. The first question is not; “Whom may I bury?” It is rather, “What are we saying when we accord the deceased a Christian burial?” When we have answered that then we have provided a basis on which to answer the other question.

Again and again, especially in Paul’s writings, the practice of fellowship comes through as mutuality and reciprocity. “Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves.... κοινωνοῦντες [Share with] God’s people who are in need. Practice hospitality.... Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but συναπαγόμενοι [be willing to associate with] people of low position. Do not be conceited” (Ro 12:10,13,15f). The motivation is spiritual but the concerns are also social, material, philanthropic.

“For just as the sufferings of Christ flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows. If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you κοινωνοὶ ἐστε [share in] in our sufferings, so also, (κοινωνοὶ ἐστε) [share in]) in our comfort” (2 Co 1:5-7). In these matters what is yours is mine and what is mine is yours.

“Anyone who receives instruction in the word κοινωνεῖτω [must share] all good things with his instructor” (Ga 6:6). Again, the fellowship involves a mutuality. The recipient of spiritual blessings is to respond with a share of his material possessions. Perhaps Paul is even calling on the catechumen to share spiritual blessings with the instructor. What pastor has never experienced that the spiritual sharing on the part of those he feeds and leads seemed to benefit him more than his work was benefiting them?

The writer of Hebrews makes reference to an expression of fellowship that may seem rather remote to us. “Sometimes you were publicly, exposed, to insult and persecution; at other times κοινωνοὶ γενηθέντες [you stood side by side] with those who were so treated. συνεπαθήσατε [you sympathized with] those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property” (10:33f). More people, in absolute numbers, have suffered and been put to death for the name of Christ in this century than in any other. That we have not experienced such things in our land is a special grace from God. But if we have not, in our hearts, felt any sense of fellowship with or suffered with those who are persecuted, we must really learn anew about the communion of saints.

Because the final essay will deal with the preservation of fellowship we will not enter in on the subject of church discipline here. Nevertheless, let us say that to admonish and instruct those who err in doctrine and practice, or who have sinned, is also an expression of fellowship.

It should not be necessary to cite passages when the assertion is made that the expression of fellowship extends beyond the local congregation. There was a *cooperative* collection for the needy saints. There was a *sharing* of the apostolic writings. There were *exchanges* of workers and members. The church at Corinth had to be firmly reminded that it was not the only functioning fellowship, but that demonstrates that the church’s universality was recognized and assumed.

If we did not express our fellowship in Christ today by walking together and working together in a synod, in federations, in associations, we would probably get the idea for such cooperation from, the example of the apostolic church. To be sure, we would not find any prescribed organizational structure or administrative forms. We would, however, find local congregations who saw or were helped to see beyond their local interests, to see the larger picture of the church's world mission. And then they cooperated and shared and fellowshiped.

The Recognition of Fellow Christians

The Savior's prayer "that they all may be one" has not been left unanswered. The unity of all believers in Christ's church is a blessed reality. For believers to express that unity in the practice of Christian fellowship is not optional. This fellowship is practiced in a variety of ways, all of them related to the means of grace, but by no means limited to joint participation in the means of grace.

Indeed, we are not to think of degrees of expression or levels of fellowship. Christ is one, his Body is one, and the fellowship is one. Therefore, expression is one. Anyone with whom we practice any form of fellowship is one with whom we can in principle commune, assuming such persons are competent to examine themselves.

But how are we to recognize those with whom we can express fellowship? Are all that identify themselves as Christians included? Are we to recognize those who confess to certain fundamental teachings although they may differ with us in others? Are we to fellowship with those who differ from us only in their doctrine and practice of fellowship?

We begin again with the apostle of love. "We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have *κοινωνίαν* with us.... If we claim to have *κοινωνίαν* with him, yet walk in darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have *κοινωνίαν* with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from every sin" (1 Jn 1:3.6ff). Where is the fellowship of faith? It is where the apostolic word is, and where it is received. It may be assumed to exist where the truth is and where the truth is received.

Conversely, the rejection of the truth by word or deed destroys or precludes fellowship. It prevents the expression of fellowship because it negates the assumption of the fellowship of faith.

Restated, we do not recognize fellow Christians on the basis of faith in their hearts but on the basis of their confession of the truth. Faith in the heart we cannot know, for that is God's province. Confession of the truth we can recognize and we can assume that the truth has done its work in the heart of the confessor.

That we are not competent to discern faith in the heart but may assume it where there is a confession of the truth is deduced from John's words but is also based more directly on a number of other passages. "For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man's spirit within him?" (1 Co 2:11). "The Lord knows those who are his" (2 Ti 2:19). With regard to Gentile Christians Peter told the conference of apostles at Jerusalem: "God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us"(Ac 15:8). God knows the heart; man cannot. God provided evidence of the Gentiles' fellowship with him, a share in the Holy Spirit. Peter did not have to make a subjective assessment; he could call attention to something objectively observable.

"It is written: 'I believed; therefore I have spoken.' With that same spirit of faith we also believe and therefore speak" (2 Co 4:13). Faith and confession belong together. There may be, there have been, hypocritical confessions. But the hypocrisy, like the faith, is beyond our competence to ascertain. Paul could write to the Romans (6:18), "You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness." Obviously, he was recognizing them as fellow Christians. On what basis could he do that? "Thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves of sin, you wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching to which you were entrusted" (Ro 6:17). He was not judging their subjective faith. He was assuming it on the basis of their adherence to and conformity with the apostolic doctrine, "the form of teaching."

Faith and confession belong together. “If you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved.... Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the Word of Christ” (Ro 10:9,10,13,17). A person’s deeds may belie his confession and then his deeds outweigh his words, but it is in the confession of faith that Christians recognize one another and are constrained to give expression to the fellowship of faith which the Word of Christ has created.

What is the confession on the basis of which fellowship may be recognized and expressed? It is important for us to remember that creeds and confessions are not an invention of the post-apostolic era: “‘but what about you?’ (Jesus) asked. ‘Who do you say I am?’ Simon Peter answered, ‘You are the Christ, the Son of the living God’” (Mt 16:15f). The idea of a clear confession of faith as a mark of the believer did not originate at some juncture when the church’s first love had cooled: “Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world” (1 Jn 4:1).

The primary, but not the only, confessional sign of recognition is the one elicited by Jesus from Peter and cited above, Matthew 16:16. Other examples of this basic confession abound in the New Testament. “If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in him and he in God” (1 Jn 4:15). “Therefore I tell you that no one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, ‘Jesus be cursed,’ and no one can say, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ except by the Holy Spirit” (1 Co 12:3). “This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God” (1 Jn 4:2,3).

The confession of the incarnate Son of God is the primary criterion for the recognition of fellowship. Jesus himself established loyalty to his teaching as another. “To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, ‘If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free’” (Jn 8:31,32). One who holds to the teaching can be assumed to be free in the truth, a fellow believer. “Everyone on the side of truth listens to me” (Jn 18:37). In his First Epistle John wrote: “Those who obey (Jesus’) commands *ἐν αὐτῷ μένει καὶ αὐτός ἐν αὐτῷ* [live in him and he in them]. And this is how we know that *μένει ἐν ἡμῖν* [he lives in us]: we know it by the Spirit he gave us” (1 Jn 3:24). How do we know that we are in the fellowship? By the Spirit he gave us. How do we recognize *others* as members of the fellowship? By their *ὁ τηρῶν τὰς ἐντολάς* [obeying the commands].

Where is Jesus’ teaching, word, truth to be found today? Everything we can know about him—his saving work, his intentions toward us, and will for us; everything that can be said about him with authority is in the words of those whom he sent out to make disciples of all nations. Part of their assignment was “teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Mt 28:20). They were not to teach more or less than he had taught.

They did what he sent them to do. They are still doing it in the pages of the New Testament. Their words are Christ’s Word for every age, including ours. Without the Scriptures we would not know whom to believe or follow. No part of that Word is dispensable, negotiable, and expendable. Only those who adhere without aberration or deviation to this Word of Jesus can be recognized as fellow believers with whom we are unconditionally free to give expression to our fellowship in Christ.

In his prayer for the church and its unity Jesus said: “I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message” (Jn 17:20-23). The word translated “message” is really *λόγος*. The apostolic *word* does God’s work of making believers and making them one. Where it is faithfully presented it may be assumed that it will make faithful disciples. There we may recognize others as fellow Christians with whom we *have* fellowship and therefore ought to *practice* fellowship.

On the day of Pentecost “those who accepted (Peter’s) *λόγον* [message] were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day. They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the to the breaking of bread and to prayer” (Ac 2:41,42). There were objective and observable marks by which the people recognized one another and on the basis of which they *counted* one another as fellow believers and in

keeping with which they gave expression to their fellowship. Word and Sacrament, which created faith, were also the objective signs that the faithful were present. But then the acceptance of the message, the reception of Holy Baptism, the devotion to the apostles' teaching were also objective signs that fellowship was there and could be expressed in a variety of ways. The objective evidence was there and their practice of fellowship was inevitable. If the objective evidence had been lacking, the practice of fellowship would have been unthinkable.

The expressions of fellowship between Barnabas and Paul on the one hand and James, Peter, and John on the other were possible on the basis of objective, observable faithfulness to the gospel truth. Not only on the basis of the confession of Jesus as Lord, not only on the basis of the facts of salvation history, but also on the basis of teaching justification by faith without the works of the law, fellowship was recognized and expressed. There *may* have been disagreement on the practical application of principle in the question of circumcising Titus, but there was no question regarding what Paul preached. Hence, there was mutual recognition and no problem with cooperation in the gospel work (Ga 2:2-5,9).

John unites the concept of faithfulness to the apostles' teaching and the concept of recognition by an objective test when he writes, "We are from God, and whoever knows God listens to us; but whoever is not from God does not listen to us. This is how we recognize the Spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood" (I Jn 4:5,6). Jesus said: "A tree is recognized by its fruit.... For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks.... For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned" (Mt 12:33f,37). Actions can speak more loudly than words, but there will be God-pleasing actions and deeds only where the truth prevails: "Whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God" (Jn 3:21).

To sum up what has gone before in this essay, fellowship is to be recognized and acknowledged and expressed where there is agreement in Jesus' teaching, the apostles' doctrine. All of that relates to the central truth of salvation in Christ alone, by grace alone, through faith alone; none of it, therefore, is expendable. All of it is God's truth, given by the Spirit of truth, and therefore none of it is to be treated as inconsequential. In principle, confession of Christ is commitment to and acceptance of his whole Word.

This very Word makes clear to us that indifferent things are not to stand in the way of recognizing those who are one with us in Christ. Paul writes to the Colossians: "Do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day" (2:16). The weakness of another's faith, his lack of clarity with regard to freedom in the gospel, as well as matters which are not settled by God's Word and over which brothers may therefore disagree, do not preclude recognition of one another. Paul sums it up in his Letter to the Romans: "Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters" (14:1). To refuse recognition on racial or national, social or economic grounds would be unthinkable: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Ga 3:28).

To one who did not live in the church or for one who was of a particularly individualistic nature, it might seem as though each Christian as an individual bore the sole responsibility for recognizing those with whom he is to practice fellowship. We are, of course, never relieved of personal responsibility. The frequent though not exclusive use of the plural personal pronouns, however, reminds us that we do not exercise this responsibility all by ourselves. It is clear from the pages of the New Testament that churches recognized one another by receiving members from one another, by cooperating in the relief enterprise, by sharing the letters they received. Since in most cases the Christians did not know one another personally and could not hear the personal confession of each individual, there was only one basis on which they could accord this mutual recognition. That was the apostolic teaching. They were confident that the apostolic teaching was one and that the various churches in various locales received it with one mind and heart. "I myself am convinced, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, complete in knowledge and competent to instruct one another.... I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church in Cenchrea" (Ro 15:14; 16:1).

To go on at such length regarding the question of who is to be recognized as a fellow Christian with whom we may practice fellowship is to acknowledge implicitly that there are people whom we cannot

recognize and with whom we do not give joint expression of fellowship in Christ. Again, as in the matter of recognition, non-recognition must be objectively grounded.

Even within an outward grouping of Christians the testing of spirits is necessary. It does not involve a scrutiny of life-style or a measuring of degrees of sanctification. It is based on an objective criterion: “It has given me great joy to find some of your children walking in the truth, just as the Father commanded us” (2 Jn 4). “Some,” John says. Obviously there are also some that are not walking in the truth. A distinction is made; the basis of the distinction is walking in the truth. John does not explicitly tell his readers that action must be taken or what that action must be. They will understand, however, that those who do not walk in God’s truth cannot continue in fellowship with those who do.

With regard to those whose teaching is other than Christ’s teaching he is more direct in prescribing non-recognition and refraining from the expression of fellowship: “If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take him into your house or welcome him. Anyone who welcomes him shares in his wicked work” (2 Jn 10f).

We cannot recognize a fellowship in Christ with those who do not acknowledge “that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh” (1 Jn 4:2f), who deny the Son (1 Jn 2:23), who do not honor the Son (Jn 5:23). They are not from God, do not have the Father, do not honor the Father. They are not in fellowship with God and so there is no fellowship to recognize or express. “Therefore, my dear friends, Flee from idolatry.... The sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God, and I do not want you to be *κοινωνούς* [participants] with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons too; you cannot *μετέχειν* [have a part in] both the Lord’s table and the table of demons” (1 Co 10:14,20f).

“Do not be yoked together with unbelievers.” That would be even more incongruous than an ox and an ass hitched to the same implement. “For what do righteousness and wickedness *μετοχή* [have in common]? Or what *κοινωνία* can light have with darkness?” There are those synonyms again, linked in parallel construction with their connotations of sharing. “What *συμφώνησις* [harmony] is there between Christ and Belial? What *μέρις* [in common] does a believer have with an unbeliever? What *συγκατάθεσις* [agreement] is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God” (2 Co 6:14-16). Again we have the *σύν* compounds in a discussion of fellowship, not so we can marvel at the language but so that we can learn not to give recognition to what is not of God.

It is probably valid to say that Paul is not speaking here of heterodox Christians but of pagans, and that therefore these words of 2 Corinthians 6 should not be applied directly to those who confess Christ but are in error with regard to some teaching of his Word. At the same time, let us not forget that false teaching is unrighteousness and false doctrine is darkness (v 14). All untruth and error comes from Belial, the father of lies (v 15).

Later in the same letter Paul speaks of those who preach *ἄλλδὸν* [another] *Ἰησοῦν* whose preaching produces *πνεῦμα ἕτερον* [a different spirit], who transmit an *εὐαγγέλιον ἕτερον* [different gospel] (2 Co 11:4). With sad irony he notes that his readers “put up with it easily enough.” They shouldn’t have. “Such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, masquerading as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. It is not surprising, then, if his servants masquerade as servants of righteousness” (2 Co 11:13-15). Notice Paul’s (and God’s) judgment on them. Notice that it is based on objective, observable phenomena. Obviously Paul could not recognize as brothers and practice fellowship with people who were preaching another Jesus, a different spirit, a different gospel. He still recognizes the weak and inconsistent Christians who are duped by them (cf. his Letter to the Galatians), but it is inconceivable that he could have extended any sign of fellowship to false, deceitful, masquerading servants of unrighteousness.

The carelessly tolerant ecumenical climate of our time has produced people who think it was proper for Jesus to say, “Watch our for false prophets,” but who regard it as impolite when his ministers say it today. They think that if there are false prophets they must be lecherous, covetous Elmer Gantry types. No “nice” minister could possibly be a false prophet—unless he crosses up someone’s wedding or funeral plans. Then he is a bigot.

But Jesus says that there are false prophets. He analyzes and describes their inner condition: “They are ferocious wolves.” And he provides the sign by which they can be recognized for what they are: “By their fruits you will recognize them” (Mt 7:15f).

A prophet’s fruit is not how he lives but what his prophesying (preaching) produces. If he turns people away from Christ and his righteousness, away from God and his grace, away from the wisdom of the Holy Spirit in his Word, away from the means of grace, he is a false prophet. If he makes sinners comfortable in their sin, encourages the self-righteous in their complacency, offers the broken and contrite only a plan for self-improvement, he is a false prophet. If he confuses law and gospel, justification and sanctification, he is a false prophet. The denial of baptismal regeneration, the treatment of the Lord’s Supper as a mere memorial, the separation of election from the gospel, the notion of *ex opere operato* benefit from the sacraments, the view that the Spirit must be added to the Word before the Word can be efficacious—these cannot bring forth good fruit. False prophets will always devalue grace as they devalue the means of grace. They will always direct people to look for something in themselves to be sure of their salvation. You will recognize them by their fruit and then it will never occur to you to recognize them as fellow Christians with whom you may share in the sacred things or express fellowship in other ways.

It is unthinkable that Paul or John or any of the apostles could have accorded any degree of recognition to those whose errors they exposed and whom they condemned. Christ is one, his Body is one, the truth is one, fellowship is one. We cannot imagine them joining in prayer with the Judaizers, canvassing the neighborhood with the gnostics, putting on a Christmas pageant with Hymenaeus and Philetus who taught that the resurrection has already occurred—while refusing to go to the Lord’s Table with them. We do not have a little bit of fellowship with Roman Catholics and Southern Baptists, a little more with those who know Luther’s Small Catechism, something just short of altar and pulpit fellowship with the LCMS. Fellowship is one, and where it cannot be recognized on the basis of the one truth it does not exist and cannot be practiced.

There are times when Christians must withdraw their fellowship from someone with whom they enjoyed unity in the past. They have recognized them by their confession in word and deed in the past. Then something occurs which belies that confession and breaks the fellowship. Christians recognize the fact that the fellowship has been broken. Strictly speaking, they do not “break fellowship.” Rather, they recognize that it is broken and act accordingly.

“You must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat . . . ‘Expel the wicked man from among you’” (I Co 5:11,13). The focus here is on ethics rather than on teaching, on a way of life which belies the Christian confession. Paul does not speak of sins into which such a person might lapse in a moment of weakness. He speaks of persons whose characteristic activity is a denial—of Christian faith. You must not associate with, not even eat with such a person. You must expel such a person. Why? Because it is evident that such a person does not have fellowship with God and so he is not in fellowship with God’s children. “This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Anyone who does not do what is right is not a child of God; neither is anyone who does not love his brother” (1 Jn 3:10).

Some attempt to limit the “Keep away from them” of Romans 16:17 to situations which exactly replicate the causing of divisions and placing of obstacles which was going on in Rome. But if Paul’s injunction is to apply to those who make an issue of meat eating and Sabbath keeping, or who refuse to give consideration to the brother with a weak conscience, must it not apply to anyone who—contrary to the apostolic teaching—disrupts the unity of the church in any way? If Paul is referring to a specific case, still he is enunciating a general principle. He does not say, “Regard them as you would regard pagans or tax collectors” (cp. Mt 16:17). He does say, “Keep away from them.”

Others try to limit the application of this passage to those who explicitly deny the fundamental truths of our salvation. However, when Paul or the other apostles spoke of such people they identified them in terms of their particular false teaching.

Still others ask, “How can you presume to say of baptized Christians who hold to the fundamental articles of salvation that such people are not serving our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own appetites’?” (Cf. Ro 16:18). But the judgment is Paul’s, not ours. He has not instructed us to declare that such people are not serving Christ. God’s Word has declared it. He has instructed us to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in the believers’ way. He has instructed us to keep away from them.

The recognition of fellow Christians is not an academic exercise. It is a vital part of our lives as believers. It is often difficult for a Christian, in spite of the clear instructions of Jesus and his apostles, to know whom he can recognize as a fellow believer and with whom he may give expression to that fellowship.

I believe that the following extended quotation from the sainted Professor Carl J. Lawrenz can be of great help in our dealing with an individual who is a member of a heterodox church. It is entitled “A Statement on the Application of Our Fellowship Principles” and is to be found in the essay collection of the WLS Library. It is quoted here in its entirety:

The Lord in His Word tells us: “Him that is weak in the faith receive ye, but not to doubtful disputations.” Wherever Christian faith manifests itself and expresses itself the Lord would have us strengthen and encourage it. After the manner of the Savior Himself we are not to break the bruised reed or quench the smoking flax. We are not to “offend” those who believe in Him, and who by their confession lead us to assume that they do believe in Him, even though they may still be weak in Christian understanding and judgment. We are rather to do all in our power to build them up in their faith and Christian understanding.

On the other hand, the Lord tells us in His Word to mark them which cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which we have learned and to avoid them. This clearly applies to all adherents of false doctrine and practice. It is clear that this will keep us from practicing Christian fellowship publicly with all those who follow adherents of false doctrine and practice and who identify themselves with them, whether they themselves are fully conscious of what they are doing or not.

Now in our private contact with individuals who happen to be affiliated with a denomination with which we are not in fellowship, especially also erroristic Lutheran synods, it will often be a matter of earnest, conscientious judgment which Word of the Lord applies, or at least applies for the time being. Through friendship or family relations we may often be thrown together with such individuals, who in these intimate contacts make a fine confession of Christian faith, who in many a way by word or deed give evidence that they profess to cling as humble sinners to the Savior and His grace alone. We find ourselves one with them in all the simple Catechism truths, which have an opportunity to come up for discussion. They assert that they want to do nothing less than to disobey their Lord or to do anything contrary to His Word. Yet they are weak in understanding the implication of their church are not conscious of the inconsistencies in which it involves them. The doctrinal errors, the false practice, the unionism to which their denomination is committed may not be even so apparent in their own church group or at least escapes their detection. You will, of course, be interested in getting them to see it and untiring in your effort to accomplish that as opportunity presents it self. But the background of knowledge and understanding to grasp it is still missing, or the occasion to enter upon it. Confidence is required to enter upon a fruitful discussion of these matters. Doubtful disputations, which are beyond their grasp, would only close the door of opportunity.

In the meantime these intimate contacts and relations give natural occasions to join in prayer at meals, in private devotions, in singing of Christmas hymns. Are we then simply to say that we cannot recognize them as fellow Christians because of their church affiliation, even though we are not yet in a position to convince them of the wrong in which they are involved?

They may be sick, may be facing severe temptation. On such occasions you would take the initiative in encouraging them to turn to their Lord and Savior and to embrace what he in His Word holds out for just such an occasion, if a brother in faith were involved. Does the Lord in this instance first want us to make it clear to the individual that we cannot recognize him as a fellow Christian because of his church affiliation, that we can only testify to him as one whose status is in doubt? That would make him uncertain rather than certain of his faith.

If, however, in these private relations you deal with him as a fellow Christian on the basis of the personal confession which he has made to you, he may fully understand why you are still not willing to fellowship with him in public. He will realize that you do this because you are bound in your conscience and troubled concerning something in his church affiliation, though he does not fully understand it as yet. The very confidence that you have gained by strengthening and comforting him in his faith with God's Word may cause him to pause and to desire to enter in upon a discussion of the matters that trouble you in his church affiliation.

It is important to see that even in such situations recognition is accorded and fellowship is expressed on the basis of confession. Not an attempt to diagnose the condition of someone's heart, not intuition, but confession. Confession is the means by which fellow Christians are recognized.

The Preservation of This Blessed Fellowship

It may be said, from the viewpoint of our subject matter that the Apostle John wrote his First Epistle in the interest of strengthening and preserving the fellowship, which his readers had with God and shared with one another. The fellowship was threatened by the heresy of Cerinthus. Any other misbelief, ignorance, or sin would also endanger the fellowship and he strove to remove these by instruction and exhortation. "We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may (continue to) have *κοινωνίαν* with us... We write this to make our joy complete" (1 Jn 1:3,4). My parenthetical phrase is not based on an appeal to John's grammar but to the historical setting. Fellowship existed; it was endangered; an effort to preserve it was in order.

It is probably not an overstatement to say that all the epistles of the New Testament were written for the purpose of preserving a fellowship that was in danger. That is not the only way in which to characterize that marvelous collection of inspired letters but it is, I think you will agree, a legitimate characterization.

At Ephesus (Re 2:1-7) there was an orthodox church to whom the Lord said, "You have forsaken your first love" (2:4). Here was a church that knew what the Lord's business is about, and they did it. Here was a church that going when the going got tough. It practiced church discipline. It put false apostles to the test of God's Word and refused to accept or tolerate their efforts. The Lord was not unappreciative of these characteristics and that record, but his evaluation was: "You have forsaken your first love."

How did that show itself? Was their discipline legalistic: "Three steps of Matthew 18 and out, so we can maintain a clean congregation here"? Had their witness to unbelievers become cynical and calculating: "People like that never make good members anyway"? Had their worship grown so stereotyped that it was all form and no fervor? Had it become so individualistic and innovative that visitors from sister churches were bewildered at the way everyone seemed to be just doing his own thing? Had they failed to administer welfare and relief in any organized way because they didn't think that was the church's business? Or, had they organized their charity so that it became the business of a few experts in that sort of thing? In their contacts with other Christians had they demonstrated a hypercritical unwillingness to walk in the shoes of others for the purpose of at least understanding them? Was their orthodoxy preserved at the price of love? Did they pose false alternatives: "We can be loving or we can be orthodox"? Had their labor in the Lord become drudgery? Had their perseverance taken on a certain bitterness? Did they rationalize: "It is our concern for doctrine that hampers us in evangelism," when the real problem was that they were lacking in love for souls?

We do not know how that manifested itself in the church at Ephesus. We do know what always threatens our fellowship: lovelessness or “less-love-ness.” In the seventy-eight generation of the church, the sixth generation of our synod’s existence, we should watch for signs that we are no longer amazed by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, astounded by the love of God, responsive to the Spirit’s prompting. It is not orthodoxy that dulls love but a lack of love that makes orthodoxy dead.

“Remember,” says the Savior, “the height from which you have fallen” (2:5a). There was a time when you were “high” on love for him who first loved you. Remember? Remember! Then, “Repent and do the things you did at first” (2:5b). Repentance is a turning from a turning to. Turn from self-love, love of things, love of leisure, lovelessness. Turn back to the things you did at first.

What were the things that they—that we—“did at first”? Rejoice that God has given you his name in Holy Baptism, turned you from an orphan on the way to hell to an heir of eternal life. Consider the practical significance of that washing with water: daily drowning of loveless Old Adam, daily renewal of the man who imitates Christ’s love. Appreciate the Word of Life as you did when you were learning the story of salvation and first realized that God has done these things for every human being and that therefore he has done them for you. Speak again as a child to the Father. Cherish the Supper where the Host is also the Meal, where you receive him and thus receive life. Cherish the Table where your brothers and sisters in Christ gather as a family and share in the foretaste of the eternal banquet. Deal compassionately with those brothers and sisters, be considerate and caring with your fellow human beings whom you don’t understand or whom you understand too well. Love as you have been loved from eternity: with no illusions, but seeing the need and acting on it. The Lord doesn’t say, “Remember and feel bad.” He says, “Remember and return.” Return and do better.

This church was in possession of a letter from Paul, written a long generation before. In it the apostle had urged them to live a life worthy of the calling they had received. “Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.... Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you” (Eph 4:2f,32). This is not cultivating the macho image, ever ready to lash out. This is the spirit that seeks to preserve the fellowship.

A wonderful example of this spirit in practice is to be found in the history of the first Christian congregation, in Jerusalem (Ac 6:1-7). There was no social security program or government pension for the church’s widows, so the believers provided for the widows’ welfare. Then a dispute arose because those who had been raised in the homeland seemed to be receiving better treatment than those from the diaspora. The apostles were too busy to keep track of such administrative details and there was strife in the church. But not for long. This strife did not become a lip-smacking gossip item for unbelievers to gloat over. The believers did not choose up sides and throw rocks at one another. They recognized, with the apostles, that people were going to be hurt in their spiritual life; the fellowship was in jeopardy. Seven deacons were chosen and all seven had *Greek* names. It was a successful effort, growing out of love, to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.

Our Savior made it clear to his disciples for all time that whatever injures the brother threatens the brotherhood and, not incidentally, fellowship with God. “Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift” (Mt 5:23f).

On another occasion he said, “If anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a large millstone tied around his neck” (Mk 9:42). We naturally think of children when we hear the expression “little ones.” But in fact it can mean anyone who is little in faith or weak in knowledge of the gospel. It refers not only to children but also to new and still immature believers. Because they are little, these little ones must look up. Every Christian ought to realize that there is almost certainly at least one person in the family of believers who looks up to him or her. There is someone or there are several persons who look to you for a cue as to how they ought to live as Christians in the world.

You and I have a responsibility not to offend such persons, to cause someone to fall from faith because of something we say or do—or fail to say or do. Jesus is warning us here against an insensitive disregard of these little ones. As Christians we can't say, "It's my business how I talk," or, "It's my business how I act." That's irresponsible talk, because we are always on the Father's business, and we are responsible for those who look up to us. We are to put our thoughts and words and deeds under the rule of how they affect or influence Christ's little ones.

James and John and their mother had the bad manners and selfish spirit to ask for preferential treatment shortly after Jesus had announced that he was going up to Jerusalem to die. In that select fellowship of the Twelve there existed a spirit of self-seeking rivalry. It is the kind of spirit we can easily recognize in others, a spirit of which we are ashamed when we recognize it in ourselves.

Worldlings dream of being monarchs whose words are law, governors who can impose their will on people. In our democratic society with our congregational polity we are not so likely to get away with that in our fellowship. But who is entirely immune to the desire to be boss, the neurotic need to have people tugging at the hem of our garments and asking, "Pastor, may I?" It is a temptation in the ministry to think of people as objects to be used or nuisances to be put up with, to think of a congregation as a machine to be fine tuned and driven to our goals. It is a temptation to use public prayer as a tool for persuading Christians to do our will instead of a petition seeking God's direction so that his will may be done. It is a temptation to be pushy, assertive, bossy—to forget that we are brothers in Christ's church, "but it shall not so among you" (Mt 20:26, KJV). All of that is lovelessness and it endangers the fellowship.

Paul wrote to the Christians at Rome: "Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters" (14:1). It becomes clear from chapter 14 what those particular matters were in that church at that time. They had to do with Sabbath-keeping and the eating of meat. Paul made it clear that whether one observed the day or not, whether one ate meat or not, the decision and the action were legitimate ways of giving thanks to God (14:5f). We would say that he declared these matters adiaphora by his injunction in verse 1 not to pass judgment on disputable matters.

His understanding, his judgment, was and is the apostolic position: the Christian is free in these matters. Therefore, those who do not understand or exercise their freedom must not be assertive and turn their compunctions into a test of Christianity: "Let us stop passing judgment on one another" (14:13). On the other hand, the strong must not be inconsiderate of the weak: "Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All food is clean, but it is wrong for a man to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble. It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother to fall" (14:20f).

Uninformed legalism and inconsiderate use of freedom are both hazardous to the fellowship. We are not Christians in isolation. We are members of a community of brothers and sisters. It was a Christian preacher who said, "No man is an island," and he had it right.

In the following chapter, Paul addressed the fact that many in the church at Rome were Jews and may were Gentiles. And so he prayed, ". . . May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and one mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (15:5f). And he enjoins them: "Accept one another, then, as Christ accepted you, in order to bring one praise to God" (15:7). Can new Christians or new Lutherans accept our German-American work ethic, our pace, our priorities? Can they tolerate our reserve, our formal worship, our uptight ushers? Can we accept those who are more emotional and exuberant, less job oriented, more laissez faire? If there is not mutual acceptance the fellowship is in danger and there can be mutual acceptance only where there is love.

Paul warns against factions based on cults of personality in 1 Corinthians 1. "I follow the former pastor; I follow the senior associate; I follow the junior associate" (1:12, paraphrased). He counsels us to suffer wrong or be cheated rather than to submit a dispute to the world's judgment (6:1-8). He enunciates the principle of adiaphoron with regard to meat offered to idols but warns against a loveless application: "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.... So this weak brother, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge" (8:1,11).

The false teaching regarding the resurrection is dealt with near the end of this letter. The many problems, caused by lovelessness in one form or another, which placed the fellowship in hazard, occupy the first fourteen chapters of I Corinthians. One of those is the great chapter on love, reminding us that in the whole matter of recognizing and expressing and safeguarding fellowship we are not in the realm of New Testament ceremonial law. There is no such thing. There is only the law of love, for God and the neighbor, for Christ and his church.

“Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus” (Php 2:5). The New Man is in utter contrast to the old man with his selfish ambition and vain conceit (v 3). After that reminder and injunction what could Euodia and Syntyche do except “agree with one another in the Lord” (Php 4:2)?

The fellowship is preserved through the ministry of those who admonish us in the Lord. It is jeopardized when our attitude toward them is anything other than love and esteem. “Now we ask you, brothers, to respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you” (1 Th 5:12f). Need it be said that these words are not only for application by pastors to people but also for application by pastors to themselves? Our presidents and administrators and circuit pastors work hard among us. They are over us in the Lord. Sometimes they need to admonish us. That is hard work because they are concerned to preserve the fellowship and they must find the right words and they must do it in love—when we are at our least lovable, our most unlovely.

There are many more passages and you are probably thinking of them now, but we must move on. Let us remember, though, that when we as individuals remember and repent and return to our first love, then the church is doing that. We don’t wait for the corporate body to pass a resolution to show the fruits of repentance.

But if I do not heed the Lord’s warning and you do not heed him then we will forfeit the fellowship he has given us, which is such a rich blessing to us. “If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place” (Re 2:5). No synod or church body can presume to have a secure and permanent place in God’s scheme of things. We should expect the Lord’s constant testing of our reason for being, and the test that he applies here is love.

Certainly, we should keep on doing the things which the Lord commended in the church at Ephesus. They worked hard and they didn’t give up’. They exercised doctrinal discipline. They hated the practices of the Nicolaitanes, which the Lord also hates (Re 2:6). The Nicolaitanes turned the liberty that we have into license. They turned the forgiveness of sins into an opportunity to violate plain morality. They compromised with paganism in the public festivals. Today they would participate in the various services of civic religion. They would give churchly sanction to easy divorce and promiscuity. They would develop a marriage ceremony for homosexuals who wanted to “build an enduring relationship.” They would try to sanctify “living together” with the Word of God and prayer. The Lord hates these things; the church at Ephesus hated them; we are to express and exercise the same holy hatred. But, paradoxically, we are to express and exercise this holy hatred as loving people.

There had been an incestuous adulterer at Corinth almost fifty years before this message to the Ephesian Christians was dictated. That was very bad, but what was even worse was the complacency of the congregation. They were so proud of their knowledge and their spiritual gifts that they failed to act in the interests of the brother or the brotherhood. “When you are assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus and I am with you in spirit, and the power of the Lord Jesus is present, hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord” (I Co 5:4f). We note that this is not primarily for the purpose of having a “clean” congregation but for the man’s ultimate salvation. Baptized person he is, but excluded he must be.

It is worth noting the close connection between Paul’s words here and Jesus’ words in Matthew 18:15-20. There is the object of winning the brother over, the two or three (“I am with you in spirit”) assembling in Christ’s name, the presence of his power (“There I am with them”), and the act of exclusion. Someone has made the evangelical observation in connection with Matthew 18 that “our Lord is not showing us the quickest way to get rid of a sinner but the lengths to which love will go in order to gain him.”

Paul does make clear that the congregation must look to its own spiritual welfare in dealing with the manifestly impenitent. “Your boasting is not good. Don’t you know that little yeast works through the whole batch of dough?” Whether it is the leaven of immorality or of antinomianism or of indifference to the brother’s welfare, it will permeate the whole fellowship and render it unclean in God’s sight. Therefore, I get rid of the old yeast that you may be a new batch without yeast—as you really are. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed,” and nothing could be more inappropriate than for old yeast to remain where the angel of death has been warded off by the blood of the Lamb. “Therefore let us keep the Festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and wickedness, but with bread without yeast, the bread of sincerity and truth” (I Co 5:6-8). The church cannot for long cherish the gospel where a sense of horror at sin in its midst is missing.

At Pergamum there was a confessing church that neglected discipline (Re 2:12-17). It took courage to confess in that city: Satan had his throne there. It was a great center of idolatry and Jesus’ faithful witness Antipas had been put to death there (2:13).

The church at Pergamum lived by the promises of Jesus in the face of fierce persecution. But the Lord had to remonstrate with those Christians: “Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: You have people there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality” (Re 2:14). ‘ The reference is to what is recorded in Numbers 25:1,2, the sin of the Israelites with the gods and the women of Moab.

What some members of the congregation were engaged in was probably prompted by “practical” considerations. To practice one’s trade or profession or business required membership in guilds. Membership in the guilds involved participation in the sacrifices to the patron deities of the various crafts and occupations. That was idolatry, of course, Then the (neat that had been offered to idols was shared by the guild members—they had a banquet. It was not unusual after the banquet to visit the temple prostitutes or to make other arrangements for engaging in sexual immorality.

Now, the guild members in the church may well have argued, “Our livelihood depends on it. We have to belong. We need to cultivate and maintain these business contacts. It doesn’t really mean anything, and our kids will starve if we leave the guilds.” The church in Pergamum tolerated it. Perhaps they said, “We won’t have any members left if we discipline these people. We can certainly understand the situation and exercise a little charity. If we excommunicate them, then they won’t hear the gospel at all anymore. Besides, if word gets out that we’re cracking down on these things who will ever want to join our congregation?” And so, they also found it possible to tolerate the teachings of the Nicolaitanes (Re 2:15). Lifestyle became doctrine and the gospel would certainly be lost.

“You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons too; you cannot have a part in both the Lord’s table and the table of demons” (I Co 10:2). It is not consistent for a person to confess the Nicene Creed and partake of the Sacrament and then join in the rituals of those who worship a god who has not created, redeemed, or sanctified us. “Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God” (2 Co 6:14-16).

Paul is not forbidding marriage to an unbeliever, unwise and difficult as that is. He is not speaking of business partnerships, though those may be inadvisable. He is not talking about social relationships, as strained or hazardous as they may be between Christian and unbeliever. He is not barring the believer from political life, although that may be full of many special temptations for a Christian. He is speaking of fellowship, in the interest of safeguarding the *κοινωνία* and he says: “You don’t belong together in religious matters or observances.”

Let us watch and pray that we do not grow lax in discipline through any kind of rationalization. We have seen in our generation the havoc that can be wrought in a Lutheran synod that lets the fear of bad press and a black eye in the media override the need to exercise discipline. False tolerance is not an expression of love. It is not love to let the sinner continue in his sin, the false teacher to enjoy equal time and status. It only confirms

them in their delinquency. It teaches indifference to others, causes the weak to fall, discourages sister congregations, “justifies” the world in its unbelief.

As we try to grow numerically, broaden our financial base, do the building that needs to be done, open the school and keep it open, help fund the synod’s budget, we may be tempted to neglect discipline. If we work with one eye on the world’s reaction, seek its approbation, hope to attract a few influential people by demonstrating that we are not narrow, we may hear (if we still have ears to hear) our Lord saying: “I have a few things against you.”

In the midst of the concluding messages in his comprehensive Epistle to the Romans Paul wrote, “Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ send greetings. I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them. For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people” (Ro 16:16-1e). He is speaking in verses 17 and 18 of some people who are not to be included in the holy kiss and ecumenical greetings of verse 16. Rather, the church is to “keep away from them.” Obviously, there is an internal problem, for there would be no need for such an injunction with respect to pagans, unbelieving Jews, or heathen philosophers.

Some baptized people, communicants, were causing divisions and obstacles in the church. They were spoiling the external unity of the believers and endangering the faith of all. Instead of *ποιούντας τὴν κοινωνίαν* [practicing fellowship] they were *ποιούντας τὰς διχοστασίας καὶ τὰ σκάνδαλα* [causing divisions and obstacles]. The present participle indicates habitual, persistent, characteristic activity. For whatever reason, deliberately or unknowingly, they were doing it. We do not have to look far for likely reasons. In chapter 15 Paul had stressed the unity of Jews and Gentiles in Christ. Ten times he used the word “Gentile.” He had his reasons. Anyone who would insist on Jewish superiority after that must be regarded as a causer of division. In chapter 14 he discussed the use of meats and the Sabbath observance and warned against scandalizing the weak brother. What could be more serious and disruptive of the fellowship than to “destroy your brother for whom Christ died” (Ro 14:15)? What could be more divisive than a refusal of Jew or Gentile to “accept one another ... just as Christ accepted you” (15:7)?

Now, their activity and attitudes did not necessarily involve a rejection of the gospel truths of salvation. But they were not consistent with the teaching they had learned, and which Paul had set forth in this letter. Their *ποιεῖν* was *παρὰ τὴν διδαχὴν*.

It should not be difficult for anyone to see that, whatever the particular situation in Rome, a general principle is enunciated here. The timeless and universal directive is to watch out for any that persist in disturbing the church’s unity.

There is no need for us to judge that such persons are serving their own appetites. That is the Holy Spirit’s judgment. Their activities may or may not have resulted in the loss of faith. Their activities are a disservice to Christ and his church, and there can be no further recognition or expression of fellowship with them. Indeed, to recognize such persons or to practice fellowship with them would in itself be causing divisions and offenses.

To ignore this principle or to refuse to apply it jeopardizes our fellowship with God. In a subtle and insidious ways “by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people.” We are naive if we imagine that we could not be deceived.

The action called for in Romans 16:17 is not the same as handing someone over to Satan or treating him as we would treat a pagan or lowlife type. It is a separation, a withdrawal from fellowship, a withholding of recognition as a fellow believer. Paul prescribes a somewhat different action in 2 Thessalonians 3:6,14f. In his first letter he had written concerning the last things and stressed the imminence of the Lord’s return. The reaction of some members of the church was to quit working and wait. Thus they became dependent on their fellow Christians for daily bread and they were a general nuisance. Paul writes: “In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers, to keep away from every brother who is idle and does not live according to the teaching you received from us.... If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of

him. Do not associate with him, in order that he may feel ashamed. Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.”

Again, this is not excommunication: “Do not regard him as an enemy.” It is certainly a suspension of the practice of fellowship: “Keep away.... Do not associate with him.” Paul hopes it will be temporary, that the person will be ashamed and repent. He hopes, we hope, that the effect will be salutary, that the person will not be hardened. Here is love in action: love for Christ and his Word, love for the fellowship which is being disrupted, love for the erring: “Warn him as a brother.”

Church discipline is intended to have an instructive and admonitory effect on all: “Those who sin are to be rebuked publicly, so that others may take warning” (1 Ti 5:20). It is to prevent the spread of false teaching that has the potential to ruin souls: “Avoid godless chatter, because those who indulge in it will become more and more ungodly. Their teaching will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, who have wandered away from the truth. They say that the resurrection has already taken place, and they destroy the faith of some.... ‘Everyone who confesses the name of the Lord must turn away from wickedness’” (2 Ti 2:16-19). Without amputation gangrene simply does spread and will ultimately kill. The quotation from Numbers 16:5, from the story of Korah, reminds us that to trifle with error and continue in fellowship with errorists is to incur God’s wrath.

Admonition cannot continue indefinitely, even in issues that do not directly touch on the essence of the gospel. “Avoid foolish controversies and genealogies and arguments and quarrels about the law, because these are unprofitable and useless. Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him. You may be sure that such a man is warped and sinful, he is self-condemned” (Tit 3:9-11). Such a person demonstrates that he does not care about the unity and harmony of the church. He himself is dividing it. The church should recognize the fact.

“Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God.... If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take him into your house or welcome him. Anyone who welcomes him shares in his wicked work” (2 Jn 9-11). Your essayist is not of the opinion that *τοῦ Χριστοῦ* is an objective “the teaching about Christ.” John is not simply speaking here of the doctrine of the incarnation or the atonement. This is a genitive of authorship or source: “the teaching from Christ.” None of that is expendable or negotiable. There can be no brotherly recognition of a person who no longer has use for the teaching which comes from Christ, who “runs ahead and does not continue in” it. Here the apostle of love makes clear that it is not love to aid and abet the errorist in his error. It is not love to be indifferent to the teaching of God’s Word, to discount doctrinal differences. And the restoration fellowship can come about only by the teaching of Christ: “Whoever continues in the teaching has both the Father and the Son” (v 9)

“Only hold on to what you have until I come” (Rev 2:25). What they had and what we have, what he wants us to hold on to until he comes, is the gospel. Paul wrote to Timothy: “What you heard from me, keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus. Guard the deposit that was entrusted to you—guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit who lives in us” (2 Ti 1:13f). The very form of the apostles’ words is the safe model for our teaching. It makes for healthy teaching. It is not dead ‘orthodoxy but the life-giving Word. It is not a collection of outworn thought categories but the power of God for salvation.

We are to hold on to that so that we do not try to combat today’s new immorality with the old moralism, legalism, pietism which try to motivate Christians with blue laws and prohibitions. God helping us, we are to hold on to our gospel freedom so that we do not despise the gifts of sex and food and drink and recreation which God has created for the enjoyment of his redeemed people.

The fellowship will be served and preserved when we remember that the law makes no concessions. It only condemns. The gospel sets no conditions. It only forgives.

While we exercise great patience in recognizing that the fellowship has been broken we will also be patient when it comes to recognizing and establishing new fellowship relations. We will take to heart our Lord’s warning, “Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees” (Mt 16:6). We will be on guard against any teaching, even in a person or group bearing the “conservative” label, that is in any way work-

righteous or synergistic. We will be on guard against any teaching or tendency, even in a person or group bearing the “Lutheran” brand, which allows reason to sit in judgment on God’s Word. At the same time we will avoid any assumption that we are right because we are we, or because of our heritage, or because we have Luther for our father. That is, we must not let party spirit stand in the way of unity. “So then, no more boasting about men!” (1 Co 1:21).

We know that confessional unity cannot be fostered unless “we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ” (2 Co 10:5). We know that what Christ has to say to his church he says in the Scriptures and that there is no hope of confessional unity where there is no agreement on *sola Scriptura*, where there is talk of so-called “open questions,” where there is any thought of agreeing to disagree on what God’s Word teaches. “See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ” (Col 2:8).

As we look longingly to discover brothers whom we have not yet recognized we remember Paul’s words in Galatians: “A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough” (5:9). And we remember what that letter is about and we are very wary of any teaching that conditions the gospel in any way. Any if, and, or but is in principle already a denial of God’s grace and Christ’s redeeming work.

How tempting and how disastrous it has been for Lutherans in our land in our time to declare union where confessional unity of faith does not exist. How tempting for us to practice fellowship with those who are “almost like us.” How urgent must be our prayers that the Holy Spirit bind our consciences to the Word of Truth. To speak the truth in love can never mean speaking something other than the truth. Hermann Sasse has reminded us that in the same prayer in which our Lord prayed “that they all may be one,” he first prayed, “Sanctify them through thy truth.” Thus, “the quest for truth and the quest for unity are one” (*This Is My Body*, Minneapolis: Augsburg 1959, p 334). Truth and unity are not alternate emphases, to be stressed according to one’s predilections or predispositions. Flacius had a porcupine personality that made him go too far in his prickly dealings with Melancthon. Let us not emulate him in that or in his false teaching on original sin. But let us make his words on the subject of unity and truth our own: “I thirst for ... unity with brethren as the dry land longs for rain, but my conscience is captive to God’s Word. I think and do what I have to think and do.”

There are many other passages from the mouth of Jesus and the pens of the apostles that could have been considered in these essays. There could have been more in-depth treatment of many passages that were included. There are a few thoughts on the assigned topic, which have not found a place in these lectures. Indulge me by permitting an appendix.

Where there is no discipline there will finally be no confession. The confession becomes one more tradition among a variety of traditions, one more option in a cafeteria of options. Where there is no discipline error gains equal status with truth. Then you have a Hinduism and Freemasonry that says, “Everything is true,” and you proceed to the despairing, “Nothing is really true.” Then there can be no fellowship of faith because there is no faith.

There are two problems with our synod’s scripturally based fellowship principles. The two problems are not unrelated. First, too few people share them with us; second, they are sometimes difficult to apply. They are, nevertheless, drawn from God’s Word and are not negotiable.

To speak of love rising above principle in fellowship matters is inappropriate, since these principles are rooted in love. Evangelical love recognizes the need for patience with the weak. Evangelical love recognizes the need to avoid the persistent errorist and to excommunicate the impenitent sinner. There is no way anyone can “rise above” evangelical love.

Legalism does not always result in abrasive orthodoxy. Sometimes it manifests itself in vacillation and compromise. Either way it undermines the gospel.

Tolerance and flexibility are not in themselves hallmarks of evangelical practice. They may have their source in ignorance of or indifference to the truth.

Firm and consistent practice is not self-evidently a sign of legalism. It may be, it really ought to be, motivated by the gospel.

Not only Scripture but also history teaches us who are in this blessed fellowship not to think or say, “God we thank you that we are not like other people.” Most of the errorists whose aberrations are dealt with in *Formula of Concord* were heroes of or participants in the Lutheran Reformation. Most of them were members of the Wittenberg faculty, where the gospel had rained down so benevolently. Luther recognized Melancthon as a wonderful gift of God and often deferred to him in questions of philology. The man really invented and imple mented our kind of ministerial education. Bugenhagen and Cruciger be came extreme Philippists. Agricola was one of the earliest co-workers of Luther and a champion of the Reformation, but the antinomian never could divide law and gospel; he helped to formulate the “Augsburg Interim” as well. Osiander was a brilliant man, who served as prefacer and proofreader on Copernicus’s earthshaking *Concerning the Revolutions of the Celestial Orbs*. He was a courageous man, who resigned his St. Lorenz charge in Nuremberg when the “Interim” was introduced there. Still, he gave his name to an ancient heresy in new garb. Remember well-meaning Amsdorf with his well-intentioned, “good works are injurious to salvation.” Flacius, who loved unity but loved truth even more, still has a doctrinal error named for him.

There was a time when Melancthon had a better understanding of fellowship principles because he had a better understanding of the gospel, perhaps because he still had Luther to keep reviewing it for him. At that time he gave beautiful expression to the fact of the *Una Sancta* coupled with the need for clear confession. His words could be ours. In fact, they are ours, for the time was 1530 and the document was the *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*:

We take no pleasure in discord, nor are we indifferent to our danger; its extent is evident from the bitter hatred inflaming our opponents. But we cannot surrender truth that is so clear and necessary for the church.

We believe, therefore, that we must endure difficulties and dangers for the glory of Christ and the good of the church. We trust that God approves our faithfulness, and we hope that posterity will judge us more equitably. For we have undoubtedly brought into view many articles of Christian doctrine that the church sorely needs...

And so we shall commend our cause to Christ, who will one day judge these controversies. We beseech him to regard his afflicted and scattered churches and to restore them to a godly abiding harmony.