

With Whom Are We To Pray?

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Whenever we pray together with another individual or a group of individuals, we ought to realize that this is a form of church fellowship. It is a way of expressing and enjoying the unity that God wants all of his Church to have. But especially when we are discussing or deciding with whom we are to pray, we must recognize prayer as church fellowship, with all the implications that fellowship carries with it, if we are to make a correct and God-pleasing decision. For that reason, a good share of this paper will deal with church fellowship and the principles involved in any joint religious venture.

Church Fellowship

The only reason we have, to believe that it is pleasing to God for Christians to pray or worship or do anything together with each other is because he, in his Word, says it is. He tells us that all believers are part of one body (Ro 12:4,5; 1 Co 12:12-27) and through their common faith enjoy the unity of a single body (Jer 32:39; Gal 3:26-28). God, in his love, has called us all into that unity (Eph 4:4-6) and wants us to remain perfectly united in our faith. It was for that complete unity among believers that Jesus prayed in his high-priestly prayer (Jn 17:20-23).

This unity, like the faith that produces it, is invisible. We refer to it as “Christian fellowship.” But, in order to strengthen and preserve this invisible fellowship, God asks us to exercise it with a kind of fellowship that is visible. This is what is known as “church fellowship.” We are encouraged by God and his apostles to keep the unity (Eph 4:1-3) by talking, singing, praying, and studying God’s Word with each other, by showing love for each other, and by enjoying every kind of fellowship in the name of Jesus (Ro 15:5,6; Eph. 5:19,20; 1 Th 4:9,10; 1 Jn 1:3,7). And to see to it that this church fellowship is practiced, God established workers in the Church “to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ by be built up until we all reach (perfect) unity in the faith” (Eph 4:11-13). Besides these encouragements from God, we have the example of the early Christian Church as it practiced all these forms of church fellowship: they prayed, studied God’s Word, celebrated the Lord’s Supper, met daily, took care of each other’s needs, ate at each other’s homes, and praised God together (Ac 1:14,15; 2:41-47; 1 Co 10:17; 2 Co 8:18,19; Ga 2:9).

God’s motive for all of this is that his people should remain faithful. He wants us all to be strengthened in the one, true faith. He wants us to be “built up until we reach (perfect) unity.” Paul expressed this motive when he urged “that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought” (1 Co 1:10). “Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming” (Eph. 4:14-16). God’s motive is one of love and protection. He wants to see to it that our faith is not taken away by wolving false prophets, or watered down by seemingly reasonable ideas.

Proper Exercise of Fellowship We are quickly reminded all too well of the false ideas and preachers that threaten the faith of our members, not to mention the members of the false-teaching churches, Because of this reality, God also encourages us to “watch out for false prophets” (Mt 7:15), to “keep away from them” (Ro 16:17), to “have nothing to do with them” (2 Ti 3:5), and to “not associate with” them (2 Th 3:14). God speaks in such general terms as “flee from all this” (1 Ti 6:11), and as specifically as “do not take him into your house or welcome him” (2 Jn 10) and “with such a man do not even eat” (1 Co 5:11).

Although these commands are the very opposite of those which urge church fellowship, God has the same motives and goals in mind in both cases. His motive is love and concern for each individual's soul and faith. Because he cares, he urges his faithful followers to join with other believers and to separate from those who may do them harm (1 Co 5:6,7). Because he wants each believer to grow and mature in faith he asks that we teach and encourage and admonish not only the strong and weak brothers, but also the sinning and erring brothers. Therefore, severing fellowship is not a loveless act, but it is an act of loving instruction and admonition to the fallen Christian. And God's goal in both cases is also the same: to keep the unity in his Church. The one keeps unity by exercising it outwardly. The other keeps it by avoiding harmful divisions in the Church.

Unity, the Deciding Factor

This unity is not only the goal of proper fellowship practices, it is also the factor that is to determine whether we join in worship with others or whether we refrain from fellowshiping with them. Where unity in the faith exists, fellowship is to be enjoyed (Ro 15:5,6). But where that unity does not exist, outward church fellowship must cease. Whenever anyone is told to sever fellowship, it is because the unity of faith in the Church has been ruptured by a false teaching which contradicts the true faith (Mt 7:15; 2 Th 3:14; 1 Ti 6:3,11; 2 Jn 10), by unrepented sin for which the sinner does not look to God for forgiveness (Mt 18:17; 1 Co 5:11; 2 Ti 3:5), and by divisions in general (Ro 16:17).

As an act of church fellowship, prayer with others must also be practiced only when there is true unity of faith. When talking about prayer fellowship, Jesus assumes that it is based on a single-minded faith, "that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done. . . for where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them" (Mt 18:19,20). Actually, true prayer that is directed to our heavenly Father is based on a true faith in God's Word. It is that Word which teaches us that God is our Father and we are his children. It is only through the Word that we know how to pray and for what to pray. If then, someone takes any truth presented in God's Word and refuses to go along with it, it is obviously not a complete and whole-hearted faith in God's Word that causes him to pray. His prayer is not based on a God-pleasing faith in the Word as it should be. So a prayer with such a person would not be proper fellowship because the necessary unity is not there.¹

When Is There Unity and When Not?

If then, we want to decide whether or not to pray with another person, we have to determine whether or not there is unity of faith with him. But, when does unity exist and when has it been disrupted to the point where we must call off all fellowship? We certainly can't look into a person's heart, as God can, to see exactly what he does or doesn't believe, But God does give us definite guidelines as to how to determine a person's faith (1 Jn 4:1-3). We are to listen to his personal confession first of all (Ro 10:10; Mt 12:37). Very rarely is this confession all inclusive of the many doctrines of God's Word. Therefore, until it is somehow shown otherwise, we are to assume that this personal confession is a confession of faith in the entire Word of God. One of the things that would qualify that personal confession is a public confession such as membership in a congregation or larger church body. By such membership, this person is saying, whether intentionally or ignorantly, that he believes as that group confesses or teaches. There are many, however, who confess God with their words but at the same time deny him with their actions (Lk 6:46). For that reason we are to judge a person's faith by all his fruit: not only his confession, but also his practice (Mt 7:16; 2 Ti 2:19). We are to look to see whether he follows what he says he believes. And after all that, "if his confession of faith is fully in harmony with God's Word, and if his practice does not contradict his confession, then we conclude that such a person believes as we do."²

When there is something in a person's confession or practice that contradicts God's Word, we must deal with it as error and sin. The relative importance of the error or doctrine to the person's basic faith in Jesus as his Savior makes no difference. God considers all of his Word and all of the doctrine in it to be important to faith (Mt 28:19,20 Jn. 4:23,24; 8:31). "God has not said that the degree or the seriousness of the error determines our prayer relations. If we can pray together with one whom a "small" error separates from us, we can pray together with one whom a "great" error separates from us...Error, not the degree of error, settles the question."³

When determining the existence of unity, it is most important to recognize the difference between a weak brother and someone who has disrupted the unity. "Weaknesses of any kind do not disrupt the unity of the Christian brotherhood."⁴ Jesus frequently referred to the disciples as having a small faith. And yet, he never refrained from praying or worshiping with them. The fact is, we are all weak. We all have small, imperfect, incomplete faith. And we all need each other's help to strengthen that faith through God's Word. So when we see a weak brother overtaken in a sin, that's when he really needs our fellowship. And God asks us to accept him (Ro. 14:1), bear with him (Ro. 15:1), confront him with his sin (Mt. 18:15-17), instruct him (Ro. 14:19; 15:2; 2 Th 5:14), and restore him (Gal 6:1). As long as they were willing to learn and be instructed, Paul patiently and in a brotherly fashion worked with weak Christians who had false ideas about the law, good works, Jesus as the Son of God, adiaphora, the resurrection, and the Antichrist. A Christian who has fallen into sin is still a brother. It is only when he refuses to be admonished that he is to be treated as an outsider (Mt 18:17, excommunication; 2 Th 3:14,15, cease fellowship). When a person refuses to be instructed by God's Word, he no longer has the same spirit of faith as those who have and hold to the truth. That man, by persistently clinging to his error in spite of admonition is disrupting the unity. So it is those who persistently, continuously, and deliberately hang to their divisive teachings and sins who must be avoided, and not the weak Christian.

In regard to Mt 18:15-20, Professor J. P. Meyer said about dealing with the weak brother, "Jesus connects His remark about joint prayer with His discussion of the efforts which a Christian will make to win his sinning brother. The struggle for winning back an erring brother's soul, where the eternal fate of the brother's soul hangs in the balance, is one that...stirs up the emotions to the depth of the heart. There the brotherhood, the strength of the spiritual unity which binds the brethren together, is put to the supreme test. If there is any manifestation of church fellowship, the disciplining of an erring brother is one, where the brethren in the name of heaven are to bind or loose a sinner, declare him to be an heir of eternal life, or condemn him to be a victim of hell,"⁵

Individual Cases

Now, what about praying on a canvass-witness call? with the person being instructed for membership? with the member of another church body who attends your services regularly? with the individual who confesses the truth but has doubts about changing membership from a heretical church body? with the stranger in the hospital who requests a prayer? To think that these and other similar "special" cases are exceptions to the rule, and that we are to simply follow our pastoral instincts in deciding what to do, is both presumptuous and careless. If we are to make a God-pleasing decision, we will have to apply his Word to each specific case.

A brief summary of the principles involved is given in "Prayer Fellowship," a pamphlet put out by the conference of presidents of the WELS in 1954: "It is always the will of God for his believers (whether in public or in private, whether as synodical representatives or as individuals) (a) to manifest in worship and in prayer the fellowship of faith that unites them, until and unless (b) confession of the truth and rejection of error require them to separate."⁶

If we are to put this principle into practice, we must realize that we not only have the right but the obligation from God to practice fellowship with every Christian until and unless it becomes evident that there is a lack of unity in faith. We could handle this by simply not looking very deeply into a person's confession or practice. But if we want to supply each sheep with the food God wants him to have, our first task is to judge the individual's confession and compare it with his practice. If anywhere along the line, his personal or public (church membership) confession or his practice disagrees with God's Word, we have to determine whether the person is a weak brother in need of instruction and encouragement or if he insists on taking an anti-Scriptural position. If he is a weak brother, he must be willing to be admonished and to correct the error (church membership or sinful way of life); otherwise he is persistently clinging to his error.

If it can be determined that a person is a weak brother we owe him our fellowship, especially as concerned pastors. We ought to show the love and care that Jesus and Paul did. We ought to reflect God's motive of love for establishing fellowship among believers, by making use of it to help the weaker brother know the truth of God's Word. There will, however, be those cases when we will have to refrain from public fellowship to avoid offending those who don't know all the facts.

If the person does insist on adhering to his error, we owe him our lack of fellowship. We ought to reflect God's displeasure in his stance by not praying or worshipping with him, by not welcoming him into our midst or our home, or in some cases, by not doing anything with him. "Trying to establish unity (as some feel we ought to do) while at the same time neglecting the Word, cannot only produce no more than a sham union, in fact, it will cause the rupture to increase."⁷

Determining whether a person is a weak brother or a persistent errorist is probably what gives us the greatest difficulty in making the decision whether or not to pray with someone. That, of course, is different in each case, and we simply can't cover them all. But we do have all the necessary information at our disposal. All we need to do is study the Word and ask God to help us understand. That we must be doing as long as we are alive and in the ministry.

May God give to each of us the wisdom to understand his will in these matters and the strength to carry it out, to, out of love, offer our fellowship to those with whom we share the unity of faith, and to withhold it from those who cause divisions in the faith and in the Church. Only when we do so according to God's guidance can his will to save all men be carried out.

Notes:

¹"Prayer Fellowship", J. P. Meyer, WLQ, vol. 47, p, 202.

²"Prayer Fellowship", WELS - COP, 1954, p, 2.

³Ibid. p. 6.

⁴Op cit., Meyer, p, 45.

⁵Op cit., Meyer, p, 293.

⁶Op. cit., WELS - COP, p. 6-7.

⁷Op, cit., Meyer, vol. 46, p. 248.

"Prayer Fellowship", a 1954 pamphlet put out by WELS Conference of Presidents

"Prayer Fellowship", J. P. Meyer, *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol. 46, pp. 184-195, 244-259, Vol. 47, pp. 33-45, 124-136, 196-207, 288-298

"Doctrinal Statements of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod", Commission on Doctrinal Matters, 1970, pp., 12-55

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