

A Statement on the Applications of Our Fellowship Principles

Drawn up by Prof. Carl J. Lawrenz

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 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 both privately and publicly with those who manifest themselves as persistent errorists. It will also 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 the 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 to disobey their Lord or to do anything contrary to His Word. Yet they are weak in understanding the implication of their church fellowship, 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 itself. 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 Christian hymns. Are we then simply to say that we cannot do this because that would be church fellowship, and 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 weighed down by a heavy cross, 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 in 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.