

Pertinent Passages Pertaining to Prayer Fellowship

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Esteemed Members of the South Wisconsin Pastoral Conference:

Your conference program has specified an exegesis from a Wisconsin Synod man, as well as from a man in your own midst, of pertinent passages pertaining to prayer-fellowship. Since no list of such passages was specified, I take it that each essayist was purposely given freedom to make the selection which he deemed most serviceable in setting forth what Scripture would have us bear in mind concerning, prayer fellowship.

To determine which Scripture passages are pertinent we need first of all to remind ourselves on the basis of Scripture what prayer really is. Only a Christian can pray. When the Lord wished to assure Ananias that Saul of Tarsus was no longer the zealous persecutor of Christians whom he dreaded, but that this Saul had himself been brought to Christian faith, He told Ananias, "Behold he prayeth." Ananias understood and upon coming to Saul immediately addressed him as Brother Saul. The unbeliever, and that means every man as he is by nature, attempts to pray. Thus it need not surprise us that we find almost all people speaking about praying, that we find them engaged in what they consider to be prayer. This is due to the fact that every man has a natural knowledge of God, consciousness of his accountability to God and of his dependence on God's supreme wisdom and power. Yet, in his sin-laden conscience man, as he is by nature, cannot approach God in true prayer. In the manner of the work-righteous Pharisees, unregenerate man vainly looks upon his prayer as a meritorious work; or he thinks of prayer as a charm whereby he may gain some of the things he would like to have though his heart is estranged from God and he is otherwise little concerned about honoring and worshipping God. Of such attempted prayers Jesus asserts that they are vain repetitions, saying in Matthew 6:7, "When ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do; for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking."

Through the Gospel message in Word and Sacrament the Holy Spirit has, however, entered our hearts as He did the heart of Saul of Tarsus, and led us to embrace the Savior's pardon and with it the full gift of His salvation. Through this Gospel message the Holy Spirit gives us the assurance that God is our dear Father. Paul says, Gal. 4:6, "Because ye are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of his son into your hearts, crying *Abba* Father." Here we see what Christian prayer is; this alone is true prayer. In prayer the Christian cries *Abba*; cries Father; he addresses God and speaks to Him as his heavenly Father on the basis of the precious Gospel promises of His Word.

When the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray, Jesus responded by saying, "When ye pray, Say, Our Father which art in heaven...." Thus, as Luther has explained in his masterful manner: "God would by these words tenderly invite us to believe that he is our true Father, and that we are his true children, so that we may with all boldness and confidence ask him as dear children ask their dear father." All this communing, this talking with God as with our dear Father, is done in Jesus' name, and can be done only in Jesus' name, namely in the faith that through Jesus, and through Jesus alone, God is our Father and we unworthy sinners His dear children. True prayer is therefore an expression of Christian faith, an act of Christian worship. Prayer that is meant to be anything else or anything less would remain an abomination to God.

Hence joint prayer will invariably and of necessity be a joint expression of faith, an expression of fellowship in faith, of fellowship in worship. It is difficult to understand how with a Scriptural concept of prayer anyone could think of making a distinction between joint prayers which are prayer fellowship and other joint prayers which could be something less than prayer fellowship. God would have His children, but only His children, came to Him together in prayer. To them the exhortations to prayer are directed individually and collectively.

Jesus Himself taught us this when He encouraged us to pray not "my Father, who art in heaven," but "our Father, who art in heaven." He wants us to remember that we are addressing the Father of a large family. God is our Father through Christ, but He is also the Father of many more children, who are our Spiritual

brothers and sisters. In our prayers God wants us to keep in mind that we stand before Him not merely as individual believers but as believers who are intimately joined together with all other believers here on earth and in heaven above as His dear family. In this sense all of our prayers are really joint prayers.

It is a blessed article of our faith that we know that all the children of God, though individually known to God alone, are constantly praying with and for us, that there is a blessed invisible fellowship of prayer going on constantly, in which the hearts of all believers are jointly raised to the throne of God's grace in supplication and thanksgiving. In this sense we are engaged in joint prayer also with every child of God when the Lord is preserving for Himself in the midst of errorist church bodies, even in the church of the Pope, the very Antichrist. Yet in this sense also every other expression of faith on the part of a Christian is at the same time an activity that he does together with all the other Christians as they are known to God alone, serving and benefiting them with his activity of faith, even as they also in turn serve him with their expressions of faith. Yes, before God every activity of our faith is at the same time fellowship activity in the Communion of Saints. This is the comforting truth which is brought out by Paul's exposition of the church as the body of Christ, as set forth in the 12th chapter of I Cor., in the first eight verses of the 12th chapter of Romans, and in the first 16 verses of the fourth chapter of Ephesians.

Yet I am sure that in using the term prayer fellowship the conference assignment did not have this joint praying of all believers in mind which is constantly going on but which only God can discern and behold. The conference assignment rather had prayer fellowship in mind in the sense that together specific individuals or groups consciously undertake to address a common plea to their heavenly Father. Jesus has prayer fellowship in this sense in mind when He says: "If two of you shall agree on earth as touching anything that ye shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven." We hear of such prayer fellowship when we are told of the members of the mother church in Jerusalem that they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in the breaking of bread, and in prayers (Acts 2:42). When Peter and John were released from prison, the believers at Jerusalem lifted up their voices to God with one accord (Acts 4:24). With reference to imprisoned Peter it is told us in Acts 12:4: "Prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him." Exhortations like Eph. 5:20: "giving thanks always for all things unto God and the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus," have such prayer fellowship in mind.

With whom would God have us engage in such joint prayer, with whom would He have us practice prayer fellowship? We do not find a separate answer in Scripture for this particular question. We rather believe that this question is answered by the answer which Scripture gives to the more general question: With whom does the Lord want me to express my faith jointly in any manner of worship or church work?

The answer that Scripture gives to this question is, first of all, this: With fellow believers, with Christians, with brethren in the faith we are to express our faith jointly in worship and church work, and thus also in prayer which is a form of worship. For to Christians, to believers go out the exhortations individually and collectively. Prayer like all worship is an expression of faith and only with Christians are we united in a common faith.

Yet this answer does not settle our question. It only raises a new one. Whom can we treat, select, and acknowledge as Christian brethren? Faith is a matter of the heart and as such recognizable only by God. "The Lord knoweth them that are his" (2 Tim. 2:19). Since it is the Lord who has set His heart upon His believers and hence made them His aim, and since it is He who also keeps them as His own, He really alone knows who His own, the members of His Church are. It would be presumptuous on our part to try to recognize Christians on the basis of the personal faith in their hearts. "Man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart" (I Sam. 16:7). Since we cannot probe the heart, God would have us deal with men on the basis of the confession of faith as a sincere expression of the real attitude of the heart. In case a clash appears between the confession by mouth and the confession by deed, we accept the confession by deed in preference to the confession by mouth, since deeds speak louder than words. St. John writes (1 John 4:1-3) "Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world. Hereby know ye the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God." Here we have an instance where a general directive is found in a very specific context in which

the specific context leaves a very definite impress upon some aspects of the statement. The judgment on the errorist involved that he is not of God pertains specifically to the type of errorist with whom John's readers were coping. Yet embedded in this statement is a general directive. Here the apostle bids his Christian readers, and that includes also us, to discern and recognize the spirit that is in a man on the basis of his confession. Scripture, of course, tells us that there will be hypocrites, that the true attitude of the heart will not always correspond with the confession which men make. Yet that is beyond our responsibility. God will at His own time deal with hypocrites.

Yet what kind of confession are we to look for in order to acknowledge anyone as a Christian brother for the purpose of a joint prayer, or for an other joint expression of faith, in short, for a practice of church fellowship? In John 8:31 Jesus says: "If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed; and ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." Also in his great commission to make disciples of all nations, Matthew 28:19,20, He bids us to teach them to observe all things whatsoever he has commanded us. On the other hand, He earnestly forbids His disciples to add to or subtract from His Word, Matt. 5:19, saying: "Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven; but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven." In Peter 4:11: Christians are told, "If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God." This makes it quite clear that, a Christian confession of faith will in principle always be a confession to the entire Word of God. The denial, adulteration, or suppression of any word of God does not stem from faith but from unbelief. Hence the Lord would have us recognize and acknowledge those as Christian brethren who profess faith in Christ as their Savior and with this profession embrace and accept His entire Word. With such brethren also prayer fellowship is in place, even as every other form of joint worship.

In order to understand properly what we have just said concerning a proper Christian confession of faith as the basis and prerequisite for prayer fellowship or for any expression of church fellowship, we need to distinguish with Scripture between an adherent of false doctrine or practice and a weak brother. Weakness of faith of one kind or another is nothing unusual among Christians. We are all weak in one way or another. The faith of all Christians and its manifestations are marked by many imperfections, either in the grasp and understanding of Scriptural truths, or in the matter of turning these truths to full account in their Christian lives. Such weakness is implied by the prayers of Paul in his epistles that his Christian readers may grow in Christian wisdom and understanding and become more fully rooted and grounded in love. Spiritual weakness in those whom Paul addresses as brethren and treats as such is also implied by admonitions like the one in 1 Thess. 5:14, "Warn them that are unruly, comfort the feebleminded, support the weak, be patient toward all men." Spiritual weakness in those whom we are to continue to fellowship as brethren is acknowledged in the general exhortation Gal. 6:1-3: "Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted. Bear ye one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ. For if a man think himself to be something when he is nothing, he deceiveth himself." In Ephesians 4:1-16 Paul points out that it is the very purpose of the public servants of the Word which the ascended Lord gives to His Church that through their ministration of the Word the many weaknesses may be overcome which seek to undermine the unity of the church. Weakness of faith is in itself not a reason for terminating church fellowship, including prayer fellowship, but rather an inducement for practicing church fellowship vigorously in whatever form suitable for helping one another in overcoming our individual weaknesses. That is why Scripture abounds in precept and example with exhortations to pay our full debt of love toward the weak. Weakness in fellow Christians which fraternal love will first of all seek to overcome within the fellowship also includes weakness in understanding God's truth and involvement in error. Paul's letters to the Galatians, to the Colossians; to the Corinthians teach this most lucidly. In all these cases Paul patiently built up the weak faith of these Christians with the Gospel to give them strength to throw off very serious errors in which they had become involved. 'While engaged in this service of love Paul still treated these Christians in their weakness as brethren and would certainly also have prayed with them. Especially in his two epistles to the Thessalonians Paul shows how far he was willing to go in still acknowledging Christians in their

obvious weakness as brethren in the faith and how far he was willing to go to pay his full debt of love to the weak by way of patient admonition so that the weak might be strengthened and raised up.

With equal clarity the Lord, however, likewise tells us in His Word, and that also through the same Apostle Paul, that we can no longer recognize and treat those as Christian brethren who in spite of earnest admonition persistently cling to an error in doctrine or practice, who demand recognition for their error and make propaganda for it. Any expression of Christian fellowship with them is out of place, also prayer fellowship.

In a very comprehensive way Jesus Himself first of all urged: Beware of false prophets which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves." False prophets are those who in their teaching or practice deviate from God's Word, demand recognition of their errors, seek to spread them, and to win adherents for them. False prophets come to us; they are not sent by God, for it is His desire that nothing but His pure Word be proclaimed to us. Often enough they are themselves deceived by their own sheep's clothing. Yet they are in reality "ravening wolves." They are that whether they are conscious of their false teaching or not. They threaten Christ's flock, His believers, with harm and destruction. Jesus would have us know that it is not a light and harmless thing to deviate from His Word. False doctrine undermines, breaks down, and destroys spiritual life. That the Lord in His grace often prevents it from becoming fatal, even in the false prophets themselves, is quite beside the point. In His Savior's love the Lord is seeking to preserve His precious Word for us and others, His Word which He has given to us as the bread of life, whereby alone faith is created, nourished, and preserved to eternal life. Adulterate the Word by omitting something, changing something, adding something, or compromising any part of its and faith is endangered. Hence, the Savior bids us to beware of false prophets, bids us to recognize them for what they are, to be on guard against them, to have no fellowship with them, lest we suffer spiritual harm. Whether their erroneous message is original with them, or whether they are peddling someone else's error, makes very little difference as long as they hold to its demand recognition for it, and persist in preaching it.

Through the Apostle Paul we are told just as emphatically that we cannot treat those as Christian brethren who persistently cling to error. He tells us in Rom. 16:17: "Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them." "*Parakalo de humas, adelphoi, skopein tons tas dichostasias kai to skandala para ten didachen hen humeis emathete poiountas, kai ekklinete ap' auton.*

Since some have questioned the translation of the King James version we have reason to ask whether or not it is a basically correct and acceptable translation of what Paul wrote in Greek to the Romans, The first point of contention involves the fact that the Greek words translated as divisions and offenses have articles, *tas dichostasias kai to skandala*. Are these articles specific or generic? The Authorized Version takes them to be specific articles, though it feels no need of translating them at all. For nouns defined by a phrase are of necessity specific. The other point of contention is whether the phrase "contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned, *para ten didachen hen humeis emathete*, is adjectival or adverbial. Does this phrase describe the kind of divisions and offenses that are caused and so modify these nouns? Or is this phrase adverbial: does it define the manner in which the divisions and offenses are being caused and so modify the verb "cause," which in Greek in a participle use *nomilly*? The *Authorized Version* takes the phrase to be adjectival: "divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned." This grammatical analysis of taking the aforementioned articles to be specific and the aforementioned phrase to be adjectival is grammatically sound.

Others have taken these articles to be generic and the phrase to be adverbial and translated: mark them which contrary to the doctrine which you have learned cause divisions and offenses. This, however, does not face the fact that instances can seemingly not be adduced either from the Greek New Testament or from Greek literature in which generic articles are used with plural abstract nouns. In divisions and offences we do, however, have clear plural abstract nouns. This leaves only the other possibility of taking the two articles under discussion to be specific and the phrase to be adverbial. Thus those who do not agree with the grammatical analysis of the Authorized Version more generally translate: mark them which contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned cause the divisions and the offences. If they choose a different word order this is still the

grammatical analysis. Grammatically there is nothing against this translation; but it does demand that the immediate context must make clear to what the specific articles refer. Such a translation is hardly tenable if nothing in the context clearly indicates to which divisions and offences such specific articles are referring. Then these articles are left hanging in mid-air.

The trouble is this, however, that interpreters choosing this translation have not been able to agree on what the specific reference is. None have been able to bring conclusive proof for their particular contention. Some have maintained that with the specific articles Paul had the divisions and offences in mind which were caused by the Judaizers with their denial of justification by faith in Christ alone. Yet this cannot be maintained with any certainty. In all of Romans there is not a syllable in support of the assumption that there were Judaizers at Rome of the kind that troubled Galatia. Acts 28:17 reports that when Paul arrived in Rome (at least three years after this epistle was written) the chief Jews in Rome whom Paul called together, assured him that they had not heard anything against him either by letter from Jerusalem or out of the mouth of their Jewish brethren. On the other hand, future danger from Judaizers was always there.

Others have sought to establish very specific divisions and offences by connecting Paul's exhortations in Romans 16:17 with chapters 14, 15, and 16. In chapter 14 Paul speaks at length of *skandala*, offences, in connection with the use of *adiaphora*, offences brought about by an inconsiderate conduct of the spiritually strong over against the weak who still had unnecessary scruples, conduct by which the faith of the weak was harmed and by which it could easily be destroyed. Paul also warns against divisions caused by the spiritually weak when they presumed to judge the strong. In chapter 15 it is still something else. Paul exhorts to the unity which ought to exist between believing Israel and the converted Gentiles. Thus even in the latter chapters we again have at least two different sets of divisions and offenses suggested, those which arose in connection with *adiaphora* and those which undermined the appreciation of the true unity of the church among the Jews and Greeks. It seems hopeless to try to establish a clear context pointing to very specific divisions and offences. We need to let Romans 16:17 stand as a very general closing admonition, leaving room for a wide range of application. Thus the grammatical analysis of the *Authorized Version* in taking the articles to be specific and the phrase adjectival is verified. St. Paul is admonishing the Christians at Rome to avoid those who cause divisions and offences contrary to the teaching which they had learned from him, teaching which had set forth the whole counsel of God as to faith as well as to Christian conduct. They had been taught by Paul again in this very epistle, in which he had veritably presented a thorough and orderly discussion of what pertains to Christian faith and life. Thus they were well able to keep a watchful eye on anyone who deviated from this teaching.

Paul is not thinking of anyone who might casually make an erroneous doctrinal statement, who might unwittingly harbor a false religious concept, who might lapse in weakness or stumble into a bit of un-Christian conduct. As the present participle, *tous poiountas*, shows, Paul has such in mind as cling to their doctrinal error, as adhere persistently in principle to their deviation in Christian conduct, and thereby create divisions and disturb and harm the faith of others. These the Roman Christians are to avoid, and that means cease all further joint expressions of faith with them, also prayer fellowship. That Paul does not mean social contact or any other ordinary contacts of life is evident from what Paul told the Corinthians when they misunderstood his exhortation that they should have no company with fornicators. In 1 Cor. 5:9-11 Paul wrote: "Yet not altogether with fornicators of this world, or with the covetous or extortioners, or with idolators; for then must ye needs go out of this world," "Avoid them" excluded any contact that would have acknowledged the persistent errorist as a Christian brother. These errorists who are to be avoided stand in contrast to the people mentioned in verse 16, who are to receive the holy kiss of Christian fellowship and brotherhood. If the error does not overthrow the foundation of saving faith, the termination of fellowship is not to be construed as an excommunication. He may still be a Christian, but his sincerity and personal faith do not prove his error right, nor do they justify continuing in fellowship with him.

Those who question the application of this inspired exhortation to all who persistently deviate from any teaching of God's word or Scriptural practice are apt to object that we have stressed the 17th verse of Romans 16 but failed to consider the following 18th verse adequately. Verse 18 reads, "For they that are such serve not our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly; and by good words and fair speeches deceive the hearts of the

simple.” “*Hoi gar toioutoi to kurio hemon Christo ou douleuousin alla to heauton koilia, kai dia tes chrestologias kai eulogias exapatousin tas kardias ton akakon.*”

This verse does not give a description by which Paul’s bidding to mark and to avoid is restricted only to a certain class of those who cause divisions and offences contrary to Scriptural teaching. Verse 18 does not serve the purpose at all of telling us whom we are to mark and avoid. It sets before us God’s own appraisal and judgment upon all those whom He would have us avoid, namely upon all persistent errorists. God would have us know that in the matter of clinging to error in doctrine and practice, and in defending and disseminating it, they are taking orders from their own heart, from their own desires—that is what belly means here. In this respect they are serving their own heart instead of the Lord Jesus, whether they are fully conscious of it or not, whether their service of their own heart and flesh, though unacknowledged, has fully undermined their faith in the Lord or not. The RSV translates *to koilia* as “appetites.” We cannot fellowship with such as though ours and theirs were a common cause.

St. John, the apostle of brotherly love, gave the same instruction in his inspired 2nd epistle. There we read in verses 9-11: “Whosoever transgresseth, and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God. He that abideth in the doctrine of Christ, he hath both the Father and the Son. If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house, neither bid him Godspeak; for he that biddeth him Godspeak is partaker of his evil deeds.” Here again we do not have a general exhortation but one that was first of all called forth by a very specific class of errorists. They were seemingly the same errorists mentioned in St. John’s first epistle, 4:1-3, followers of Cerinthus, who taught that Jesus was the natural Son of Joseph and Mary, and that the Christ eon had descended on Jesus at His baptism but left Him before His great passion. Yet this denial of Christ’s incarnation involved also the gracious purpose, the blessed fruit, the glorious outcome of Christ’s entrance into the flesh. The specific errorists involved here therefore overthrew the very foundation of Christian faith. This John says of such an errorist that he “hath not God.”

Note well, however, that there is nothing to indicate that the withholding of fellowship to which St. John exhorts is to be restricted to the type or errorist of whom he happened to have special occasion to speak. For the reason adduced for withholding such fellowship, “For he that biddeth him Godspeak is partaker of his evil deeds,” would apply equally well to any persistent errorist. When St. John warns against receiving such a man into one’s house and of bidding him Godspeak, he does not have an ordinary reception and a civil greeting in mind, such as we properly accord to all man, but a reception and greeting which would be understood as an acknowledgment of him as a Christian brother. If such an acknowledgment could be implied in a Christian greeting and a fraternal reception, then certainly by praying with him, which is of necessity an expression of faith. Those who join in prayer with a persistent errorist are partakers of their evil deeds. In more than one way are they sharing his evil deeds. They sin against the Lord, being indifferent to His Word. They sin against the church, for they give offense to its members by leading them to believe that one doctrine is as good as another, this making them indifferent. They sin against the persistent errorist by strengthening him in his convictions that he possesses the truth, instead of helping him by testifying against his error in all meekness. They sin against their own souls, because they expose themselves to the corrupting influence of error, which is never static but spreads.

In the matter of prayer fellowship, as in any outward expression of confessional fellowship, two Christian principles need therefore to direct us, the great debt of love which the Lord would have us pay to the brother, including the weak brother, and His clear injunction (also flowing out of love) to avoid those who persistently adhere to false doctrine and practice and all who make themselves partakers of their evil deeds. Conscientious recognition of both principles will lead to an evangelical practice also in facing public and private situations that day, confront us, situations which properly lie in the field of casuistry.