

Current Issues Concerning Church Fellowship

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Introduction

Unionism is a sign of the times... In union there is strength. Union eliminates much waste, senseless competition, makes for greater economy, efficiency, service, better times. Union, cooperation, is hailed as the cure-all for the manifold troubles of the present day, as the best possible solution of the vexing twentieth century problems. The Christian Church has been effected by the trend of the times, and cries for greater union within its sphere are heard everywhere. During the last thirty years no fewer than eleven mergers of two or more large bodies of Christians have been effected, and the end is not yet.¹

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 effected 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.²

These two citations, in order, direct our attention to issues and events sixty years ago and thirty years ago. The first quote came from within a Lutheran synod that had every intention of standing firm against the onslaught of unionism. The second quote reminds us that the same synod was itself found to be persistently guilty of unionism, a primary factor in leading our own synod to terminate church fellowship with it. Synods and situations change, often rather swiftly and often for the worse.

We are just as capable of apostasy from biblical fellowship teachings as others are. The spirit of the times still exerts a powerful, though often subtle, influence on our people and us. The impact of disagreements over church fellowship issues has been great. The ranks of our pastoral ministerium have been thinned by suspensions and resignations over these issues, with several losses coming during the past few months. The losses to our synodical rank and file, though not easily calculated, are probably substantial. Problems may result from doctrinal disagreements based on personal conviction. They may also stem from misunderstandings resulting from ignorance. Ten years ago a seminary professor wrote, "Today we have a whole generation of pastors, teachers, and laypeople who simply do not understand this whole matter of fellowship."³ To some degree the same words are valid at the present time.

Presumably with these and other observations in mind, this pastoral conference is devoting the bulk of these sessions to matters of fellowship doctrine and practice. Other assigned papers are designed to examine exegetically the biblical basis of the doctrine and share historical insights gleaned from those who experienced the often tumultuous events surrounding the breakup of the Synodical Conference. This presentation is to focus more on issues that confront us as we teach and apply the biblical principles in our contemporary setting. The issues facing us are stated in the form of questions that have been or are being asked within our synodical

¹ Theodore Laetsch, "Foreword" to Volume VI of the *Concordia Theological Monthly*, January, 1935, p. 1.

² Richard D. Balge, "Foreword" to his five studies, "Christian Fellowship in Principle and Practice," presented to the Dakota-Montana District Pastoral Conference in April, 1994.

³ Wayne Mueller, "History of Fellowship Practice in the Wisconsin Synod," 1986, printed in Jahn, p. 442.

circles. Our desire is to answer them and, in doing so, to clarify our doctrine and practice for ourselves and others.

Part One: Issues Facing Us as We Deal with Ourselves

Questions: Do our fellowship teachings and practice enjoy the solid biblical and exegetical foundation we say they do? Do we do our homework to gain the personal conviction that this is what the Lord really says?

In books, articles, essays, booklets, and pamphlets we have frequently stated what we hold to be biblical truth regarding Christian fellowship, church fellowship and the relationship between the two. Here is a summary:

1. *Christian fellowship* is a reality that exists among all believers. This fellowship comes through faith in Jesus Christ and is a great gift of God to be cherished and expressed.
2. The outward expressions of this *Christian fellowship* or unity in Christ are normally called *church fellowship* activities. *Christian fellowship* expresses itself in joint activities in the lives of believers. All activities in which believers jointly express Christian faith are part of the practice of church fellowship.⁴
3. The presence of *Christian fellowship*, that is, of saving faith in the heart, is known to us and others through external confessions of word and deed. According to their confessions, therefore, we recognize those with whom we share *Christian fellowship* and with whom we desire to express *church fellowship*.
4. When another professing Christian (or church body) confesses full, unqualified agreement with us on the basis of *all* of Scripture,⁵ we joyfully acknowledge the reality of Christian fellowship and seek to practice church *fellowship* with them.
5. When another professing Christian (or church body) confesses less than full agreement in all teachings of Scripture, but teaches or tolerates error, we seek to determine the cause of such conduct.
 - a. If we learn that the presence of error in the confession is due to a sin of weakness or ignorance, we seek to offer appropriate encouragement, admonition, and instruction to the person who needs it. We thus affirm that Christian fellowship remains intact and continue to practice church fellowship with the weak brother or sister.
 - b. If, however, we determine that the error is persistently embraced or tolerated despite correct information and patient admonition, we can no longer be confident about the reality of Christian fellowship since persistent rejection of God's word is not a characteristic of faith. We withhold all expressions of church fellowship with the person involved, seeking in love to bring about repentance. This inability to practice church fellowship with "persistent errorists" applies to teachers and their followers. It also applies even if there is other evidence that may indicate the possibility of saving faith in the heart of an errorist and therefore the possibility of a continuing Christian fellowship.
6. In all our dealings with those who are weak brothers and persistent errorists, we lovingly keep in mind other believers who may be observing our actions. We strive to make it clear to everyone what we are doing and why lest we cause someone to stumble in their faith and lest we cause unnecessary confusion in the church.

⁴ In saying "all activities" that are joint expressions of Christian faith are part of the practice of church fellowship, we are stating one aspect of the "unit concept" of fellowship. All such expressions require the same degree of agreement in biblical teaching; they are to be dealt with as a unit. The term "unity concept," when used, usually refers to this unity of ways of expressing Christian faith and fellowship.

⁵ In saying that "all of Scripture" is the basis for our confession, we are stating the other aspect of the "unit concept" of fellowship. Agreement on all teachings of Scripture (as a unit) is the desired basis for church fellowship.

Our conviction is that these fellowship principles are either directly stated in or legitimately drawn from the Bible. They are not merely “our” doctrine but God’s word to us. Still, the question asked of us is precisely to that point: *is what we teach and do utterly biblical and exegetically tenable?* It remains our task to give an answer.

Many claim that our doctrinal position is not founded on Scripture, but based on misinterpreted passages or logical deductions that ultimately distort Scripture. Most serious opponents to our position basically claim that the passages on which we base our doctrinal statements do not say or mean what we say they mean. In particular, those Bible passages that call for a separation from errorists and their errors are said to have two limitations that we fail to consider:

1. Limitation #1: The “error” referred to is said to be error in *fundamental* doctrine, one that overthrows the heart of Christianity, not any or all errors that go against any and all of Scripture. The “truth” or “teaching” mentioned in such passages is said to refer specifically to the gospel or primary truths that are necessary for the creation or preservation of saving faith. In short, Christians are being told to avoid or withhold church fellowship from errors that blatantly attack or directly undermine fundamental Bible truths and saving faith itself. False teachings having to do with non-fundamental doctrines do not necessarily qualify for such reaction. We, then, are said to be going beyond Scripture by applying the passages to lesser errors in heterodox Christian churches and by prohibiting church fellowship when such errors are tolerated.
2. Limitation #2: The “errorists” referred to are said to be those who are outside the Christian church and who consciously seek to deceive by falsehood, rather than any who teach or tolerate error, knowingly or not. Professing Christians, even those who consistently embrace or endorse false doctrine, are said not to be the kind of people referred to in the passages frequently cited to establish our doctrine. We are thus accused of going beyond Scripture in applying such passages to the habitually heterodox. We are said to be widening the scope of biblical fellowship prohibitions by defining error and errorists too broadly.

We do not have time for thorough exegetical studies at this time and on this point. Nor is this the assigned purpose of this paper. For illustrative purposes, however, we now mention arguments thrown at us in connection with Paul’s words of Romans 16:17-18, a section of Scripture previously studied in-depth by this conference. In these verses we are told to keep on the lookout for and ultimately to avoid those who persistently cause dissensions and put deathtraps in opposition to the teaching we have learned. These people are not serving the Lord Jesus but their own appetites or interests. Exegetical studies among us have repeatedly concluded that these errorists may or may not fully realize what they are doing. They may well be like others who have spread errors with the express purpose of serving God (see, e.g., John 16:2, Acts 22:34, 26:9, Php 3:6). In a recently published article, Professor Panning writes:

The word *τοιούτοι*, people of this sort, ... does not pinpoint whether the errorists are malicious deceivers or themselves deceived, whether they are inside the church or outside of it, whether they are on the scene or absent, or whether still coming in the future. Paul’s purpose here is simply to emphasize why such people must be avoided... The two words [*τοὺς τὰς διχοστασίας καὶ τὰ σκάνδαλα*] used to convey the concept of false teaching do not conclusively tell us whether the errorists are ill-informed people and themselves misled or whether they are vicious wolves consciously and intentionally fleecing the flock. Nor does it make any appreciable difference. The damaging effect on the simple is the same.⁶

⁶ Armin J. Panning, “Romans 16.17,18” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol. 93, No 3 (Spring, 1996), p 194,195.

Those who oppose our doctrinal position invariably want Paul's words limited to conscious errorists who are purposely as well as persistently outside the professing Christian community and whose goal is to overthrow the gospel itself. Therefore they wish the words "contrary to the teaching" [παρὰ τὴν διδασχῆν] to be understood as a reference to teachings specifically designed to supplant the *fundamental* doctrines of Scripture or *the gospel* in its most narrow definition. Exegetically, our findings over the years have not led us to limit the words in this way. Again, Professor Panning offers a suitable summary:

Nothing is said about the specific doctrines that are being subverted, whether they be major or minor points, fundamental doctrines or non-fundamental. The only thing stated is that by departing from the "teaching which you learned," the errorists are effectively "causing dissensions and offenses."...Persistently adhered to and carried out to its logical conclusion, every error ultimately is faith destroying. It is against the bringers of such evil that Paul urges his readers to be on guard (σκοπεῖν).⁷

The same kinds of questions have been asked about the meaning of 2 John 9-11, for example, and whether this has to do with our stand over against *all* errorists, including the heterodox, or simply against non-Christian heretics. The context and the meaning of ἐν τῇ διδασχῆ τοῦ Χριστοῦ (i.e., whether τοῦ Χριστοῦ is an objective or subjective genitive) is frequently the subject of debate. Is this the "teaching Christ taught" which includes all of his words, or the "teaching about Christ" that may be limited to fundamental doctrines such as the deity of Christ or the vicarious atonement. This brief sampling of exegetical points and counterpoints will hopefully underscore the ongoing need for us to continue firm in our thorough study of the Scriptures.

Other criticisms have surfaced. Some who fully embrace our doctrine of fellowship feel that certain Bible passages have incorrectly (and unnecessarily) been pressed into duty to support it.⁸ Others among us feel that the point has not been made strongly enough that the basis of our doctrine is not limited to a few isolated "proof passages." They want us to stress more emphatically that the foundation is really found throughout Old and New Testaments as the Lord, through prophets and apostles, dealt with errorists and error. These views also invite a new resolve on our part to do our homework. Observers have noted, sometimes charitably and sometimes not, that some of our pastors seem at least partially ignorant of the issues involved, inconsistent in identifying as well as applying the principles, and not at all sure of themselves when called on to explain our position to others. Our shared calling will remain the same. "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth!" (2 Ti 2:15). This issue faces us continuously in fellowship matters as in all others touched on by the Word of God.⁹

Nor is it sufficient for us to quote the fathers, synodical and otherwise, to show we are aware of solid biblical studies on the issues being debated. That is traditionalism. Eighty years ago, Professor J. P. Koehler offered this definition while warning against such an approach:

Traditionalism is the way of thinking where tradition, the form of teaching inherited from the fathers, is decisive. This way of thinking obtains not only among Catholics, where tradition often

⁷ *Ibid.* Interested readers will also find parallel findings and observations concerning the nature of the error and/or the identity of the errorists spoken of by Paul in the following works: Theodore Laetsch in *op.cit.*, p 8-9; Martin Franzmann, "Exegesis on Romans 16.17ff.," in *Concordia Journal* January 1981, p 18-19; Walter A. Schumann, "Romans 16:17,18," in Jahn, *op. cit.*, p 48-49; Wilbert R. Gawrisch, *ibid.*, p 252f.; Armin W. Schuetze, *ibid.*, p 339f.; John F. Brug, *Working Together for the Truth: The Biblical Doctrine of Church Fellowship* p 40-42.

⁸ A prime example of this might be 2 Co 6:14, "Do not be yoked together with unbelievers."

⁹ While no substitute for the direct study of Scripture itself, a large number of valuable writings have recently been published for our continuing education. This year alone, *Essays on Church Fellowship* (Curtis A. Jahn, Compiling Editor) and *Working Together for the Truth: The Biblical Doctrine of Church Fellowship* by John F. Brug have been published by Northwestern Publishing House. To prepare for the challenge of applying the Bible principles evangelically, please be aware of "Points to Remember in Making Applications" by A. Schuetze (p 483ff in the former volume) and "Some Guidelines in Applying the Principles" by J. Brug (p 106ff in the second volume).

runs counter to Scripture, but also among Lutherans. This expression is not meant to describe the falsity of the tradition, but the tendency to trust human teachers and their interpretations rather than Scripture, immediately and without reservation.¹⁰

Fifty years ago, John P. Meyer expressed similar sentiments while issuing this warning to his generation. We do well to hear him out.

If we, their children, now content ourselves with simply repeating the terms our fathers coined, we may appear to be in complete agreement with them, while in reality, because we fail to mine those doctrines ourselves from the Scriptures themselves, we are virtually in basic disagreement. We accept them on the authority of our fathers, not because we have ourselves become sure of them out of the Scriptures. Traditionalism has taken the place of unreserved submission to the Word of God. There may seem to be a world of difference between traditionalism and unionism, but under the skin they are twin brothers.¹¹

Questions: Can we be sure we have a pure confession of revealed truth? Doesn't our fellowship teaching assume on our part a perfect identification, understanding, and acceptance of every doctrine of Scripture?

The issue facing us here is a skepticism that anyone is able to attain a perfect and complete grasp of everything the Bible declares coupled with the belief that we require this very thing. It involves the suspicion that we are guilty of teaching a perfectionism in the realm of doctrine. Admittedly, we do work with the assumption that our doctrinal confession is based on the whole of Scripture and is accurate. Further, any departure from this confession is classified as "error" and viewed with concern since it jeopardizes our ability to practice church fellowship with those who err. Are we assuming too much? Do we overestimate the accuracy of our confession? Are we also perhaps even guilty of arrogance in this matter? Our response must include the affirmation that our confession is, in principle, based on every word of Scripture. But this is not at all the same as claiming perfect knowledge or perfect confession from our lips or lives. We know well that our knowledge and our prophesying are incomplete (1 Co 13:9,12), limited not only by what God chose to reveal in his written word, but also by our human sinfulness and frailty in grasping what he says. Professor Armin Schuetze has addressed this issue:

This [The Christian's confession in principle to the entire word of God] is not to say that every confession can or must be all-inclusive. This is not to say that the confession must reveal a perfect understanding of everything Scripture teaches and a perfect trust in every situation... There are times when many a Christian cries out as did the man who sought healing for his son, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief" (Mk 9:24).¹²

Our confession of God's truth is always to be coupled with prayers to the Holy Spirit for continued enlightenment and growth in knowledge and wisdom. A generous amount of humility and an openness to correction are also appropriate. But these virtues need not and dare not obscure our conviction regarding the clarity of Scripture, the promised working of the Spirit to open our hearts and eyes to his truths, and the grace of God in bringing us to receive the truth with thankful and obedient trust. So while we welcome correction and clarification from others, we rightly assume our confession to be pure until something impure in it is brought to our attention. This attitude need not stem from pride or parochialism.

¹⁰ J.P. Koehler, "*Gesetzlich Wesen Unter Uns*," translation by A. Hillmer & W. Gieschen, p 16.

¹¹ John P. Meyer, "Unionism," in Jahn, *op. cit.*, p 65.

¹² Armin W. Schuetze, "Joining Together in Prayer and the Lord's Supper," in Jahn, *22, op. cit.*, p 479.

Maintaining a balance in this issue is important. False humility or failure to trust the clarity of Scripture will make us reluctant to confess much of what God has revealed for the good of mankind. “Open questions” will multiply, confessions of selected fundamentals will replace those that take important stands on a variety of doctrines, and the ability to testify against error will diminish. We recall the Iowa Synod’s desire to expand the number of “open questions” a century ago in its rejection of Missouri’s “overly-strict confessionalism.” The goal was to widen the boundaries of confessional fellowship. Successor church bodies to the Iowa Synod demonstrate well the price to be paid for this kind of thinking. The false ecumenism and indifference to doctrine characterizing so much of today’s American Lutheranism show the folly of assuming we know less than we really do by the grace of God.

Questions: Do we slight the reality of the invisible church by an overemphasis on visible churches and confessions? Has our practice of church fellowship basically taken the place of exercising Christian fellowship on a much wider scale? Do we exhibit a “party spirit” more than a true ecumenism?

The concern expressed here is whether our emphasis on visible church memberships and public confessions leads us to de-emphasize the reality and blessedness of the invisible church. In exercising a limited church fellowship, based on a shared confession, are we forfeiting or devaluing the wider Christian fellowship based on a shared faith in Jesus? This question was asked already sixty years ago: “Does church fellowship now take the place of, and so exclude, all universal Christian fellowship in the visible church?” The questioner then answered his own question: “We (Synod) have adopted the...view, viz., that church fellowship now takes the place of, and excludes all universal Christian fellowship in the visible church.”¹³

At the risk of trying to answer a potentially complex question in too few words, let us state that we do not distinguish mechanically between the invisible church and visible ones, as though they each have independent realities and functions. Rather, we hold that the invisible church, the spiritual body of believers, makes its presence known and expresses itself through visible people and churches. But how does it do so? How does the invisible church, in an objective and trustworthy way, make itself recognizable to us who cannot look into hearts? Primarily by its use of the pure word and sacraments (the marks of the church). And since people may externally use the gospel and remain hypocrites, we also go by their confessions in word and action, which testify to God’s truth as it is embraced in faith. With that in mind, we may respond to the question in a couple of ways.

1. *We do acknowledge and value the invisible church.* Belief in the reality and blessedness of the invisible church is at the heart of our focus on external evidences of it. An emphasis on the pure gospel and adequate confessions does not lead us away from the invisible church, but allows us to discern its presence with as much certainty as we can gain here on earth. It is not a matter of swapping fellowship with members of the invisible church with a lesser fellowship with visible church members, but seeking to preserve and express fellowship with the invisible church as made recognizable to us in visible ways (use of pure gospel and adequate confessions). Since God’s word calls us to value the invisible church *and* to practice responsible church fellowship with visible churches, we do both.
2. *We do not forfeit or hinder Christian fellowship in the invisible church.* We are fully aware that the fellowship enjoyed by all members of the invisible church goes far beyond that enjoyed and visibly expressed in visible churches. We also affirm that practicing church fellowship in ways limited by God’s word in no way hinders or restricts the ongoing Christian fellowship maintained by the Holy Spirit. We grieve over our inability to recognize and express in visible ways the fellowship we

¹³ Adolph A. Brux, “Christian Prayer-Fellowship and Unionism,” unpublished manuscript, 1935, p 78. Dr. Brux was referring to the LCMS, of which he was a member, but his charge could also have been leveled at the WELS since our doctrinal position and practice was identical with that of the LCMS at that time.

possess with many believers, yet we are comforted with the assurance that we are sharing expressions of faith with them outside the context of church fellowship.

Let us also state our awareness of how quickly and how subtly a “party spirit” can grow up among us. An emphasis on correct teaching for the sake of faith and souls can easily become an emphasis on orthodoxy because we are orthodox. The temptation to exalt our external fellowship over against another is constant. It is also easy to tell others, “This is simply the way we do things and where we draw the line in this matter,” rather than explaining the biblical basis and loving rationale behind it. Whether motivated by laziness or insecurity, this behavior is mechanical if not legalistic, misses the real point, and will inevitably be understood as loveless and devoid of true ecumenism. There are many potential pitfalls here.¹⁴ Stating the issue in a more positive way, Professor Reim’s words merit our attention:

Take for instance the repeated call to be of one mind, to stand fast in one spirit; to be striving together for the faith of the gospel. If we read into these words, as we should, an exhortation to conserve the unity of our own ranks and thus to keep ourselves at maximum strength for the struggle to which we are called, then let us be fair enough to see that they also apply to an expanding of this unity and the resultant union—wherever this can be done without sacrifice of truth. Because of our conservative traditions, we need that reminder. It is so easy to lean over backward on this union question, to turn our thumbs down without taking the trouble to look into the matter or to think it through. One can become quite pharisaic in such an attitude, condemning out of hand every such effort at achieving unity as gross unionism. Or one may be conservative through sheer inertia rather than through conviction. Let us watch our step.¹⁵

Among the many fruits of the gospel is a preoccupation with what Christ has done for us and for others, rather than a sinful preoccupation with ourselves. The love revealed in the gospel also drives out fears that would otherwise build synodical hedges higher and thicker than necessary to protect souls by preserving truth. Let us seek to maintain balance and accuracy in exhibiting truth and love while having nothing to do with dissensions and factions.

Part Two: Issues Facing Us as We Deal With Professing Christians Within Our Doctrinal Fellowship

The issues mentioned in the preceding section primarily call for self-examination, introspection, self-appraisal. Our focus now widens to include those with whom we share both Christian fellowship (by faith in Christ) and church fellowship (based on a shared confession).

Question: Do we adequately cherish the doctrinal fellowship and value the unity we have?

The record speaks against us, not necessarily of violent clashes and open breaks, although we have had them also, but of that peculiar Wisconsin Synod characteristic of standing on our freedom and rights whenever there is some common task to be done, that inability to submerge our rugged individualism or yield a personal opinion.¹⁶

Opponents of our doctrinal position on fellowship have suggested that our lapses in expressing mutual appreciation, kindness and courtesy are significant. They reason that our unwillingness to practice church

¹⁴ J.P. Koehler, *op. cit.* p 15-16, offers suitable warnings and clarifications in this regard.

¹⁵ Edmund Reim, “The Strength of Christian Unity,” 1940 essay, in Jahn, *op. cit.* p 30-31.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* p 11. The reading of this entire piece is wholeheartedly encouraged.

fellowship with people beyond our confessional boundaries stems more from mean-spirited contrariness than from biblical conviction.

The acknowledgment, preservation, expression, and enjoyment of spiritual unity is a prominent part of our calling in Christ. This is very much included in conducting ourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Since we all remain sinners just as surely as we share the status of saints, the enjoyment and exercise of our God-given fellowship often requires strenuous effort. Sometimes sufficient effort is simply not made, strife becomes apparent, and sin prevails. The sins of dissension and factions are indeed serious and fully capable of barring us from the inheritance of God's kingdom (Gal 5:20-21). Little wonder that people may at times ask if we cherish Christian fellowship within the confines of doctrinal unity as well as beyond.

Let our response be this, that we resolve to return to the life-giving word, the gospel of grace in Christ. There we find pardon for our pettiness and peevishness, there we find the basis of our brothers' pardon and standing with God as well, and there we also find both motive and strength to reflect divine love in our dealings with each other. Love gives birth to love.

Question: Do we understand that our shared unity is rightly called a fundamental one?

In our circles the term "fundamental unity" is likely to be a reference to what C.F.W. Walther wrote in 1868 in his "Theses concerning the Modern Theory of Open Questions."¹⁷ Thesis 5 declared, "It is the duty of the church militant to strive for complete agreement in all matters of faith and doctrine; yet a higher level than fundamental agreement will never be attained." We hold this to be a true statement, full of insight and applicable to our congregations and synod as well. But we do well to make sure we know that the phrase means.

Because of the way some people have used the words and want them to be understood, it is also important to know what Walther did not mean to say. Those who oppose the idea that agreement on *all* teachings of Scripture is important as a basis for church fellowship prefer to stress unity on the fundamental teachings of Bible. They want to understand the thesis as saying that the highest level of doctrinal unity we can attain is a unity in these fundamentals, and thus differences of opinions in non-fundamental teachings are tolerable and not decisive of fellowship. From Theses 8 and 9 in the same series of theses, however, we learn with certainty that Walther did not mean we must content ourselves with mere "agreement on fundamentals."

It is the duty of the church to take action against any deviation from the doctrine of the Word of God, whether a teacher or a layman, an individual or a church be involved.—Those who persist in deviating from the Word of God in any point whatsoever are to be excluded from the church.¹⁸

The meaning of "fundamental agreement" is simply that of "basic agreement" on the words and teachings of God's word. The agreement involves a submission to the revealed word without reservations - even if those who agree are incapable of articulating "all matters of faith and doctrine." In a very real way we must settle for basic agreement, since to a greater or lesser degree we have doctrinal deficiencies such as gaps in knowledge, limitations in understanding and sluggishness "of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken." But if we are honestly determined to believe all that the Bible says, we have fundamental agreement.

The practical import of understanding this is perhaps obvious. Should I or my fellow believer err in a matter of biblical doctrine and practice, we will deal with one another on the basis of this fundamental agreement. We will not jump to the conclusion that the other is a confirmed heretic, regardless of the seriousness of the error. "In spite of all such differences, where there is an unconditional willingness to hear what God has to say in his Word, there is fundamental agreement."¹⁹ Based on our professed basic unity we

¹⁷ These were first used for discussions at pastoral conferences and then printed in the October, 1868 issue of *Lehre und Wehre* p 318-319.

¹⁸ The translation of the theses is that of J.P. Meyer and are provided in Jahn, *op. cit.* p 62-63.

¹⁹ J.P. Meyer, *Ibid.*, p 64.

assume we are facing a sin of weakness. Only if we meet repeated refusals to heed admonitions to forsake the error may we declare the other a persistent errorist, a willful heretic, and sever church fellowship with him. The “basic agreement” then no longer exists.

Questions: Are we “quick to listen, slow to speak,” and slow to pass judgment in our dealings with one another? Do we understand how prevalent cases of casuistry might be among us?

We must remember that there are hard cases (cases of casuistry) in which it is difficult to determine which scriptural principle applies. For example, is it still time to warn, or is it now time to avoid? In such cases like-minded Christians may not reach the same conclusion at the same time. We should be careful not to pass hasty judgment on decisions which fellow Christians have made in such difficult cases. We may not know all the circumstances that led them to their decision. We should patiently listen to their explanations.²⁰

Despite our fundamental unity, we must deal with varied and variable situations that call for thoughtful (and often thorny) applications of agreed on principles. Appropriate uses of our God-given fellowship include seeking advice from fellow Christians, informing them of situations and decisions that might cause confusion or spiritual stumbling, and explaining why a certain, perhaps difficult, decision was made. Appropriate responses to this kind of communication will often involve the willingness to be content if my confessional brother applied a principle in a way I may not have. Full agreement on the principles does not mandate uniformity of applications.

Keeping these things in mind is also important over against those who oppose our doctrinal stance. It is sometimes said that we show our fellowship doctrine to be a sham by making “hundreds of exceptions” and tolerating “totally different applications” by different people who are supposedly in agreement. In general, dealing with people on the basis of their private rather than public confession (something we shall speak of later) is often involved here. Cases of casuistry are real and numerous in life. Our ability to understand the issues involved, give a gentle reply to those who question our actions, and maintain adequate communication within the fellowship is of great value.

Part Three: Issues Facing Us As We Deal With Professing Christians Not In Our Doctrinal Fellowship

Our focus now widens yet again to include those with whom we, at least publicly, do not share confessional unity (the basis for church fellowship), but who in some way do profess faith in Christ as Savior (the basis of Christian fellowship).

Questions: How do we go about determining the other person’s real or true confession? Is it adequate or accurate to take a person’s church membership as his or her confession?

Determining a person’s religious or doctrinal confession is obviously a crucial part of applying fellowship principles. Remember that according to their confessions we recognize those with whom we share *Christian fellowship* and with whom we desire to express *church fellowship*. On the basis of the same confession we also determine whether or not we are able, under God, to practice *church fellowship* with them without sacrifice of truth.

A key, perhaps *the* key, element of a professing Christian’s confession has traditionally been the person’s church membership. Even a cursory look at the literature produced within our synod over many decades illustrates how this has been so. A number of quotations will now be given to establish the point. The

²⁰ John Brug, *op. cit.*, p 107. Armin Schuetze, in Jahn, *op. cit.*, p 484, gives a parallel paragraph.

often-vigorous manner in which the point is made, moreover, probably tells us something else: using church membership as a valid criterion in this matter has been challenged or questioned for decades as well.

As long as a person is affiliated with a synod with an impure confession, he shares the responsibility for the error. He can meet that responsibility only by testifying in word and, if need be, in deed by withdrawing from his synod. But maintaining his membership and at the same time fellowshipping with members of a church that has a different confession, is an inconsistency, an inner lack of truthfulness, which, as such, cannot but lead to a compromising of the gospel in one way or another. It would seem that persons who are in earnest about a synod's confession, be it their own or another, would for that reason shrink back from a selective fellowship, while on the other hand, a readiness for it would indicate an indifference toward synodical confessions.²¹

Membership in a church body is confessionally decisive for conclusive action regarding fellowship. Whether we know people personally or not, we shall never come closer to their hearts than when they announce their doctrinal stand by their affiliation. If it develops by personal contact that their affiliation is in conflict with the testimony of their lips and due to ignorance, as symbolized by Absalom's 200 men who went with him in their simplicity and knew not anything (2 Sa 15:11), the problem we face is not one of fellowship but of instruction. Lacking opportunity for the latter, we also lack opportunity for the former, as well as the obligation thereto. Selective fellowship is not a necessity compelled by circumstances; it is a presumption. It means that we arbitrarily go beyond confession in establishing fellowship.²²

Membership in a church body is an act of confession. Through his membership a person confesses himself to the teachings of that church. In joint expressions of faith that are public, such as, for example, public worship, prayer together in public, and going to the Lord's Supper together, you would have to judge the other person on the basis of this confession of church membership, which is a public confession. To disregard this public confession would only create offense and confusion. Whoever is a member of a persistently erring church body needs to be avoided in all joint public expressions of faith.²³

We call all such organizations of Christians "visible churches" because we can identify the members of such groups by their public acceptance of the confession of that church and by their participation in the activities of that church.... The false teaching which is tolerated in a heterodox church is always dangerous to people's faith. Christians have a duty to separate themselves from such error to protect themselves from it and to warn others against it.²⁴

Those who object to using church membership as a primary evidence of a person's confession maintain that doing so is often inaccurate and unfair. To more and more people church membership seems to mean less and less. Ours is an age of individualism and eclecticism in religion, so the creedal stances of groups may not accurately reflect the convictions of their own members. This is also an age of consumerism and people are known to choose churches for specific features and services they want while they overlook or ignore other features, including doctrinal positions, that do not interest them. Besides, personal friendships, family ties, geographic proximity and other essentially non-doctrinal factors often exert strong influence on many who join

²¹ John P. Meyer, "Unionism," 1945, in Jahn, *op. cit.*, p 85.

²² E. Schaller, "Concerning Christian Brotherhood and Christian Fellowship," 1948, in Jahn, *op. cit.*, p 163.

²³ Armin W. Schuetze, "Timely Topics," 1961, in Jahn, *op. cit.*, p 337.

²⁴ John F. Brug, *op. cit.*, p 17.

churches. We admit, then, that the personal or “real” confession of people may differ slightly or substantially from that of the congregation or church body with which they are publicly affiliated. So merely equating church membership with someone’s real confession can be inaccurate.

It should also be mentioned that the Christian community has known this for a long time. Difficulties in determining an accurate confession are nothing new. Particularly in the case of a weak Christian we have always allowed for a possible inconsistency or conflict between one’s public and private confession. If from private, personal contact with any professing Christian we learn that he trusts Jesus as his Savior and expresses a commitment to the whole of Scriptures without reservation, we have reason to consider him a weak brother rather than a persistent errorist despite his flawed public confession. In seeking clarification about the inconsistencies, we may well learn he is weak in faith or largely if not fully unaware of the seriousness of the errors involved. He may be genuinely open to counsel and instruction. “Accept him whose faith is weak,” and do so on the basis of the private confession you received through personal contact.

Important reminders are in order. In many, if not most, situations we lack time and opportunity to gain such insights through adequate personal contacts and conversations. This is not said to provide an escape from the privilege or responsibility to seek such clarification. It is a statement of truth, one that is frequently lamented by those who are truly ecumenical and biblically confessional at the same time. Unable to react to a private confession we must heed the public confession as though it were perfectly accurate and valid. To assume it is false or inaccurate is presumptuous on our part.

We accept every confession of faith as a sincere expression of the real attitude of the heart. In case a clash appears between the confession by mouth and the confession by deed, we accept the confession by deed in preference to the confession by mouth, since deeds speak louder than words. Since we cannot probe the hearts, and since it is impossible for us to look into them except by means of the confession, we take every confession, whether agreeing with our own or not, as genuine, as correctly reflecting the faith of the heart. When understood thus, faith, confession, and doctrine become interchangeable terms.²⁵

It is neither honest nor loving to rely on subjective suspicions or make arbitrary judgments in such matters. Also, should we have the benefit of learning a private confession that is in conflict with a public one, this will normally have an impact only on our private relations with that person. Our public dealings with the weak brother will still be based on the public confession. This is all that other Christians have to go on. Unless or until the wider fellowship is more fully informed of the matter, public offense and confusion will inevitably result.

Questions: Do we wrongly assume that most professing Christians outside our doctrinal fellowship are willfully and consciously in error, or might we do better to consider them simple, deceived souls? Do we understand the crucial need to distinguish weakness from persistence in error and to respond accordingly?

As stated above, opponents of our fellowship doctrine and practice frequently wish we did not take the public confessions, primarily church affiliations, of professing Christians so seriously. A slightly different but closely related concern is now addressed. When we observe an erring public confession, such as membership or activity in a heterodox group, why do we seem to jump to the conclusion that this is a conscious and willful action of a persistent errorist and avoid all expressions of Christian fellowship until shown otherwise? Why don’t we rather charitably assume that the erring confession more likely stems from weakness and ignorance and treat the person as a weak brother until shown otherwise? In short, why do we seem to assume the worst rather than the best?

²⁵ John P. Meyer, “Prayer Fellowship,” 1949, in Jahn, p 147.

For the most part this concern has already been addressed. We accept a person's confession, whether it fully agrees with Scripture or not, as a sincere expression of his faith in the heart. To do otherwise is arbitrary and presumptuous, reflecting more what we want the confession to be rather than what the confession really is. Professor Schuetze expands this thought:

Am I dealing with a weak brother who needs encouragement and brotherly help? Or am I dealing with a persistent errorist with whose error the Lord does not want me to become identified by practicing religious fellowship? I must judge and evaluate on the basis of what is open to my perception and evaluation. I must look at the person's confession. What does he say? Does his life contradict his confession? Is this person willing to be corrected by the Word of God? In asking such questions, in forming conclusions, I must guard lest I try to look into the person's heart. This can happen in either of two ways. I may say: "I don't think he really believes what he is saying; his words sound good, but I think he's a hypocrite." Or I may say: "I think he's better than he sounds. He has a good heart; he's really sincere even though his confession and life don't show it." In either case I am attempting to judge the heart rather than what is openly visible to me.²⁶

Our insistence that we judge by another's confession should not, however, be understood as though we were not interested in more information and possible clarification. We are well aware that true Christians, for a variety of reasons, may be unable or ill-suited to express their faith in most appropriate ways. There may be a lack of maturity or information. Our Lutheran forefathers understood the same thing and expressed their desire that opportunities for sound instruction might be granted. We recall the familiar words from the Preface to the Book of Concord:

As to the condemnations, censures, and rejections of godless doctrines, . . . these indeed had to be expressly set forth in this our declaration . . . not only that all should guard against these condemned doctrines, but also for certain other reasons they could in no way have been passed by. Thus, as it is in no way our design and purpose to condemn those men who err from a certain simplicity of mind, but are not blasphemers against the truth of the heavenly doctrine . . . We have undertaken this also for this reason, *viz.*, that all godly persons might be warned diligently to avoid [their obstinate and blasphemous teachers]. For we have no doubt whatever that even in those churches which have hither-to not agreed with us in all things many godly and by no means wicked men are found who follow their own simplicity, and do not understand aright the matter itself but in no way approve the blasphemies . . . We are also in great hope that, if they would be taught aright concerning all these things, the Spirit of the Lord abiding in them, they would agree with us, and with our churches and schools, to the infallible truth of God's Word.²⁷

Reviewing these issues will hopefully alert us once again to the crucial need and central challenge that confronts us in applying fellowship principles: to do everything we reasonably can to determine if we are dealing with a weak brother or a persistent errorist. Then our duty is to admonish the weak in patience and to separate from the persistent errorist with promptness. If this sounds a lot like a call to deal with others on an individual basis, good. How else might we gain the assurances or clarifications we desire? If it then sounds like a sort of "selective fellowship," please remember the important difference. As used in recent decades, the term "selective fellowship" implies a partial or total disregard of a person's or church's confession in seeking arbitrarily to establish church fellowship. Striving to deal with people individually need not mean disregarding

²⁶ Armin W. Schuetze, "Joining Together in Prayer and the Lord's Supper," 1995, in Jahn, *op. cit.*, p 484. A parallel paragraph is also in John Brug, *op. cit.*, p 108.

²⁷ "Preface to the Christian Book of Concord," *Concordia Triglotta* p 19.

that person's confession in any way, but clarifying what it is and how we may react to it. Still, this is an area that merits constant reevaluation and reappraisal, lest we slip into a biblically unacceptable way of doing things. Consider these words:

We and our people live and work and play in a world where there are more than 20,000 Christian denominations... Membership in a denomination is often rather ambiguous in terms of what that means doctrinally... Like it or not, we have to come to terms with the real world. We have to help one another relate to that world with confessional strength and evangelical flexibility.²⁸

These are good words, stating a source of frustration in appraising confessions and stressing fitting attitudes in addressing the problem. However, the good words are used to endorse the humanly devised "levels of fellowship" concept in the LCMS. The expression "levels of fellowship" refers to expressing differing degrees of church fellowship based on differing degrees of perceived doctrinal unity. This entire concept is utterly foreign to Scripture. No hint of tolerating some degree of error or expressing some degree of fellowship is to be found in Scripture. It is neither "confessional" nor "evangelical" by biblical standards. It certainly has "flexibility" but one that smacks of compromise rather than evangelical practice. However we approach the challenge of diagnosing someone's confession accurately and responding to it adequately, let us do so with love and truth maintained together.

Question: Do our doctrinal statements on fellowship forbid us to regard all members of heterodox churches as "Christian brothers" or "fellow believers?"

A number of voices from within our synod have taken issue with some of our official or authoritative doctrinal statements on this point. One statement in question is this one:

A Christian confession of faith is in principle always a confession to the entire Word of God. The denial, adulteration, or suppression of any word of God does not stem from faith but from unbelief... *We recognize and acknowledge as Christian brethren those who profess faith in Christ as their Savior and with this profession embrace and accept His entire Word.*²⁹ (emphasis added)

The point that is presumably being made by the statement is that members of heterodox churches obviously don't embrace and accept the entire word of God without reservations. That's why they are called "heterodox." And if that is so, we do not "recognize and acknowledge" them as "Christian brethren."

Immediately after this statement about the Christian's confession concerning Scripture being one without reservations, the same document continues:

Actually, however, the faith of Christians and its manifestations are marked by many imperfections, either in the grasp and understanding of Scriptural truths, or in the matter of turning these truths to full account in their lives. We are all weak in one way or another. . . Weakness of faith is in itself not a reason for terminating church fellowship, but rather an inducement for practicing it vigorously to help one another in overcoming our individual weaknesses. In precept and example Scripture abounds with exhortations to pay our full debt of love toward the weak.³⁰

²⁸ Ralph Bohlman, quoted by Wilbert Gawrisc in "Levels Of Fellowship"—Scriptural Principles or Rules of Men? *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* Vol. 88, No I (Winter, 1991), p 11.

²⁹ Doctrinal Statements of the WELS 1970, "Church Fellowship," p 52. Also in Jahn, *op. cit.*, p. 404.

³⁰ Doctrinal Statements of the WELS 1970, "Church Fellowship," p 53. Also in Jahn, *op. cit.*, p. 404-405.

This essayist believes that those two paragraphs need to be considered together. Otherwise a terribly wrong impression may result, namely, that all heterodox professing Christians dare not be regarded or considered to be Christian brothers. Professor Carl Lawrenz wrote an “Essay on Church Fellowship “ which accompanied and expanded the theses under discussion. In it he seems to have tried to clarify the same point by emphasizing the progression of thought between the two sections quoted above:

*Yet in order to understand properly what we have just said concerning a truly Christian confession of faith as the basis and prerequisite for Christian fellowship, we need to distinguish with Scripture between an adherent of false doctrine or practice and a weak brother.*³¹ (italics added)

The main point is hopefully clear. A truly Christian confession reflects an allegiance and submission to Scripture that is without reservation, despite possible or probable imperfection. It remains a wholehearted acceptance of the Bible, yet admits to less than a whole understanding of all biblical points. A non-Christian confession, on the other hand, reflects a conscious, stubborn rejection of portions of Scripture, a less than full allegiance to all that God says. This is far different than imperfect knowledge and weakness of faith. Such an attitude calls for repentance and, if persisted in, forces us to regard the confessor as an unbeliever.

A second, similar statement that some have found fault with for the same reason is this:

A true Christian confession of faith is one that confesses itself to the **whole** Word of God. . . . A true confession does not depart from the Word of God at any point. **This is how you can recognize those whom you are to regard as fellow believers.**³² (emphasis in original)

The words immediately following these again address the issue of weakness as opposed to willful departures from God’s Word. They are designed to qualify and clarify the message:

Perhaps you’re now thinking: “I don’t understand all of Scripture. I don’t always express the truth of Scripture accurately in all I say...I see many weaknesses in myself and my personal confession.” This is something every Christian will have to admit. How far from perfect everyone of us is!...As Christians we are all to help one another to overcome our weaknesses...God has something else to say to you concerning false prophets, who, although they may be professing Christians, persist in error despite patient correction from the Word of God.³³

A careful reading of the statements, in context, shows they intend to address our inability to recognize and regard *persistent errorists* as brothers. Their being at ease with a flawed confession makes all the difference. The statements were not intended to apply to people whose confessions reflect spiritual weakness or ignorance. We gladly greet weak brothers as brothers and pledge ourselves to serve them accordingly.

Something else may be kept in mind here. It is possible that the word “brother” was used to denote “confessional brother” rather than “Christian brother.” At certain periods of church history, some terms can gain a special meaning that is understood at the time but can cause confusion for those who come later. This might have contributed to the problem some find with earlier doctrinal statements.

A related question may be asked as well: Does our inability to greet persistent errorists as fellow believers mean that we are *absolutely certain* they are unbelievers? Since all embracing of error stems from

³¹ Carl J. Lawrenz, “Essay on Church Fellowship,” 1970, in Jahn, *op. cit.*, p 425.

³² Your Blessed Fellowship In Christ, n.d., p 7. Also in Jahn, *op. cit.*, p, 397.

³³ Your Blessed Fellowship In Christ n.d., p 8. Also in Jahn, *op. cit.*, p 397-8

unbelief, we might logically deduce that this is so. Yet we hesitate to do so. We humbly acknowledge at least the possibility that what appears to be a willful embracing of error and what appears to be a saving faith in the Savior may dwell in the same person simultaneously, at least for a time. Historically, theologians have referred to a “happy inconsistency” when professing Christians cling to errors pertaining to non-fundamental doctrines of Scripture. God forbids us to practice church fellowship with such, but we hesitate to declare them outside the Christian fellowship. What we *are* sure of is that the tolerated or defended error in the persistent errorist’s confession makes it impossible for us to assume he is a brother in Christ.

Question: Do we adequately demonstrate love for people as we demonstrate hatred for error?

This kind of question calls for humble self-examination and will lead us to repentance. In weakness we never love “adequately.” We daily sin much, often by loving little. But the question, when asked by those who question or reject our fellowship practices, probably means something else. Is our approach to church fellowship basically loveless? Does it inexorably lead us to treat others uncharitably and without compassion? Professor Brug provides a fine foundation for discussion by dealing with basic definitions and expectations:

Today some people claim that the church needs more love and less zeal for doctrinal truth, but neither truth nor love can serve its purpose unless both are kept together. If we really want to help our neighbor, but in ignorance we are telling him falsehoods which will lead him to hell, such “love” is really a deadly device of Satan. If we know the truth, but we proclaim it in an arrogant, self-righteous way, we place a stumbling block in the way of our neighbor... We must share the truth in a gentle, tactful way, but to withhold the truth from someone is never love. If one night you saw that you neighbor’s house was on fire but you failed to scream warnings to them because you did not want to disturb their sleep, everyone would call you stupid and uncaring. But when false teaching is placing people’s souls in danger of the eternal fires of hell, we are urged to keep quiet about it and to call such silence “love.” What is more unloving—to fail to warn people against a fire, which can destroy their bodies, or to fail to warn them against false doctrine which can destroy their souls? Failure to warn of danger is never love... The church needs to keep truth and love in balance just as an airplane needs two wings to fly. If either wing is lost, the plane will crash. If either truth or love is lost, the church cannot carry out its mission. Truth and love are not opposites. They are not rivals. They are partners which dare not be separated.³⁴

God has called us to speak the truth in love. Neither what is said nor the motive in saying it are optional. We assume proponents of false ecumenism imagine they are showing love and accomplishing what is good for people. Practicing church fellowship without regard for confessional unity is perhaps done in the hope that such activity will bring people closer to God and each other. But this cannot and will not happen when the truth of Scripture is neglected. Early in this century Adolf Hoenecke identified the basic flaw in such thinking:

All unionism is based on the assumption that the truth of Scripture will not be urged in earnest, especially not in so far as it condemns all errors, even the smallest, and warns against them as poison to the soul. For as soon as this would be done, such a union would collapse.³⁵

Defending the presence of error or tolerating diversity in doctrine is really not showing love and will never further God’s kingdom. Nor can it improve any Christian-to-Christian relationship other than in a most superficial way.

³⁴ John F. Brug, p 27-28

³⁵ Adolf Hoenecke, quoted in Jahn, *op. cit.*, p 378.

In a fellowship where diversity of doctrine and practice is tolerated and abounds, it becomes impossible to fulfill the duty to correct weak brothers. Where difference of doctrine is tolerated, each position considers itself to be the strong one and all the other positions to be the weak ones. The ability to deal scripturally both with weak brothers and with those who prove themselves to be persistent errorists is lost.³⁶

We acknowledge that the world's way of viewing such matters is far different. The world only sees "more pure" or "less pure" as viable options for doctrinal stances, never of absolute truth. It further thinks in terms of "narrow-mindedness" or "broad-mindedness" in attitudes toward diversity of ideas. It conceives of no degree of unity without compromise and toleration. But God's word, speaking absolute truth in perfect love, never tolerates or defends error but always champions 100% unity based on full truth. As has been well said, "That they may be one" is inseparably connected to "Sanctify them by the truth" (Jn 17:11,17).

Part Four: Issues Facing Us As We Deal With our Society and Culture in General

Question: Do we artificially and perhaps overzealously apply fellowship principles to activities and events that are not intended or understood by others as joint expressions of faith?

Some activities are by their very nature expressions of faith. The proclamation of the gospel, the celebration of the Lord's Supper, and the sending out of missionaries are examples. Society generally acknowledges these as purely or predominantly religious activities. When people do them together they become joint expressions of faith, that is, expressions of church fellowship. Other activities, however, may or may not be expressions of faith. Giving a greeting in the form of a kiss or a handshake, extending hospitality or offering physical help and support are examples in this category. When people do these things together, there may or may not be any joint expression of faith intended or understood by the participants. Even though everything a Christian does is done to the glory of God, the principles of church fellowship may not always apply to such activities done with others.

We are sometimes accused of trying to apply fellowship principles in situations in which no one else is even thinking of joint expressions of faith. Community concerts and recitals containing religious music selections, baccalaureate services, veteran organization participation in funeral rites, and fraternal groups with pan-religious prayers and ceremonies are examples sometimes mentioned. The problem is said to be intensified in a society like ours, in which the distinction between religious, nationalistic and cultural activities is frequently blurred. America is quite religious, but the religion of choice is usually quite generic and God is reduced to a semi-personal deity for the majority. Our cultural climate is non-doctrinal and religious groups are largely considered to be interchangeable. So, claim some, we're reading much more into activities than almost everyone else in our culture does. No one else is thinking of doctrine, much less of doctrinal prerequisites.

At a certain point we may recognize the validity of the argument. To recite the Pledge of Allegiance and join others to refer to ourselves as "one nation under God" is not normally seen as a joint confession of faith requiring unity in faith concerning the Triune God. The same may be said about taking oaths in the name of God or singing "God bless America" in a public arena. Circumstances and the people involved may even lead us to classify the same or similar events differently at different times.

Our response will emphasize the truth that we dare not dismiss our own conscience even though others see no religious, doctrinal or moral dilemma in something and have no qualms at all. Overall, however, we feel that people underestimate the degree to which people in our society judge something to be religious. They likely do see the majority of religious activities as joint expressions of faith just as we do. The difference is that with a generic and non-doctrinal religious mindset, they have few scruples concerning doctrinal prerequisites. The

³⁶ John F. Brug, *op.cit.*, p 84.

loving thing is to testify as tactfully and consistently as we can that this is not pleasing to the true and living God.

To some degree, it seems, our perennial difficulties in pleasing people at weddings and funerals may stem from similar deficiencies in our society. We see these services primarily as theocentric events, sacred worship services that also have civil or societal elements included. Many others consider them primarily as family events, personal milestones, cultural icons and social activities that have (sometimes incidental and invariably generic) religious features. Yet even the fact that society recognizes the religious aspects of such services is a signal to us that we dare not put a stamp of approval on people's inadequate and inaccurate concepts of God and worship.

Determining which aspects of "church activities" are truly religious expressions and which are marginally or debatably such will remain a challenge among us. At times confessional brothers may be fully agreed on the principles yet may define some activities differently and thus make different applications. Despite such differences in definitions or personal judgments, they will nevertheless agree that maintaining the confessional prerequisites for all that express a shared faith is still the biblical route.

Question: Do we unnecessarily antagonize people by dwelling on prohibitions and at times doing so discourteously? Do we slander heterodox believers by leading people to think everything they have to say is incompatible with sound doctrine?

It is easy to answer a question like this by pointing to people like Noah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and others and then observing how poorly they would have fared in popularity polls of their day. Disciples are frequently reminded in Scripture that they are not above their Master and will be hated for expressing faithfulness to the truth. To be sure, we cannot escape antagonizing the world to some degree and often to a large degree. But do we "unnecessarily" bring contempt upon ourselves by the way we go about things? Do we stress the "negative" aspects of fellowship principles more than we broadcast the positive benefits and blessings derived through them? Do we actually slander many that are heterodox by assuming they cannot be weak brothers and by ignoring or disregarding genuinely Christian aspects of their confession? Again, these questions invite self-examination in the light of Scripture and our high calling in Christ. They also invite daily repentance and renewal by God's power and to his glory.

Those most likely to succumb to slander in these matters are predictably the less mature and less secure. When less sure of my own position I tend to overstate the weakness of someone else's. And if we don't feel confident addressing fellowship issues with or concerning the heterodox, we are tempted to avoid them altogether. Simple laziness may also be a recurring factor in dismissing all the heterodox without a kind or helpful thought. It is demonstrably easier simply to avoid errorists than to make an effort to diagnose the reason for errors in their confession. It is also easier to cite church or synodical "rules" than to patiently explain possible causes for differing confessions and train people to approach the erring with equal measures of love and truth and an unwillingness to sacrifice either one. All this is to say we are wise to acknowledge our continuing need for internal discipline, encouragement and instruction to accompany daily repentance.

In pledging ourselves to this kind of self-appraisal, let us also remember that we labor from a position of strength. We are more than conquerors through him who loved us. The fury of the Evil One is linked to his knowledge that his time is short. May our joy and endurance reflect the fact that the one who does God's will lives forever. So let us not grow weary in doing good. Let our primary concern remain this, that our beliefs and behavior are truly godly. Then we may cheerfully commend all external, observable consequences of this—the good, the bad and the ugly—to divine providence on behalf of his saints. Be of good cheer; Christ has overcome the world.

The start of this essay made brief mention to the allurements of unionism, the attraction of false ecumenism, and pressures that strive to keep us from faithful applications of the biblical fellowship principles. How, then, may we strengthen ourselves to remain firm in and for the truth? Let us go back to the Word,

specifically and especially to the gospel. The gospel of free and full justification makes new people out of us. Assured of our new status before God we are also given new perspectives on all things. New birth, new life and expressions of new life are gracious gifts from God through the gospel. As forgiven sinners we have peace and joy in the Holy Spirit—and a zeal for the entire word of God. The same word that conveyed the gospel of salvation to us is trustworthy in all other matters as well. We cherish it, delight in it, resist any attempt to change or ignore it, and cannot tolerate attitudes of indifference toward it. The God who justified us speaks to us in the Scriptures. And he wishes to speak to many others through us. By the grace of God these are issues that are perpetually on our personal and synodical agendas.

Recommended for Further Study:

1. *Essays On Church Fellowship*, Curtis A. Jahn, editor. Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1996. Included in this volume are essays previously published in the *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* and as pamphlets during the past half-century as well as two previously unpublished essays.
2. *Church Fellowship: Working Together for the Truth*, by John F. Brug. Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1996. This is part of the new People's Bible Teachings series. It clearly sets forth, in three sections of almost equal length, the Bible basis of our fellowship doctrine, a brief history of the doctrine, and applications of the principles to everyday situations.
3. *Church Fellowship: A Bible Class Course for Adults*, by John F. Brug. Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1996. This Bible class course is a companion to the volume just mentioned and assumes that the student has access to the book. Pastors will find these resources to be excellent tools to lead members of our congregations to ponder and appreciate this largely misunderstood teaching.