

“Working Together for the Truth” The Biblical Concept of Fellowship

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When you think of the Wisconsin Synod, what doctrine do you think of as its special emphasis? If a group of Lutherans were asked that question, we hope that they would answer, “The doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith, especially the truth of objective justification that God has declared the sins of the whole world forgiven for Christ’s sake—that is the special emphasis of the Wisconsin Synod.” However, even though the doctrine of justification is the doctrine that holds first place in our hearts and in our preaching, justification is probably not the doctrine which most people would mention as our synod’s special trademark. Some people might mention our emphasis on the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture as a conspicuous characteristic of the Wisconsin Synod within the spectrum of Lutheranism today. Because of the great importance of the doctrine of inspiration for preserving all other doctrines of Scripture, we do not object to being closely identified with this doctrine. We would, in fact, be very happy to have inerrancy listed second among our doctrinal priorities. Nevertheless, when most people think of the Wisconsin Synod, the first doctrine that comes to their mind is not justification or inspiration, but the doctrine of church fellowship or some aspect of it, such as closed communion or our position on lodges and scouting. For better or worse, this is the image that most people have of the Wisconsin Synod.

Although we certainly do not place the doctrine of fellowship ahead of justification or inspiration as some have imagined, we are not disappointed or embarrassed to have our name associated with the doctrine of church fellowship in the mind of the public. The doctrine of church fellowship is a Scriptural doctrine, and it is an important doctrine for preserving all other doctrines of Scripture. In our recent history the struggle over this doctrine had a profound impact in shaping the character of our synod. Deep concern for this doctrine nearly monopolized the attention of our synod conventions for more than a decade. The struggle over this doctrine led to disagreement in our synod, to the departure of a seminary president, to the loss of pastors and congregations both in the direction of the Missouri Synod and the CLC, to the end of a working partnership with the Missouri Synod which had endured for nearly a century, and even to the division of families. The most traumatic events of this long dispute lie more than twenty years in the past, but today the doctrine of fellowship still forms one of the most striking contrasts between our synod and almost all of the rest of Lutheranism. It also stands as an imposing obstacle in the way of any effort toward re-establishing fellowship with the Missouri Synod, in spite of a recent narrowing of differences in such areas as the doctrine of Scripture.

I believe that your conference has requested a study of the doctrine of church fellowship primarily for two reasons. Since the division of the Synodical Conference over the doctrine of church fellowship occurred before the beginning of the ministry of the majority of the pastors serving in our synod today, an occasional review of the decisive events of that struggle is very much in place. Secondly, the pain caused by the separation from the Missouri Synod continues to be felt twenty years after the break, especially by families and friends that are divided by it. Many are wondering if the time is drawing near when this breach can be healed.

In your invitation to present this paper you requested a special emphasis on the “unit concept” of church fellowship. The practice of church fellowship must be dealt with as a unit in two different respects. First, when the doctrines of Scripture are being discussed as a basis for the practice of fellowship, they must be dealt with as a unit. Since all the teachings of Scripture have the same divine authority, and we have no right to add anything to them or subtract anything from them, the practice of church fellowship must be based on agreement in *all* of the doctrines of Scripture. Secondly, the various activities which may express church fellowship must be dealt with as a unit. Since various ways of expressing church fellowship (such as joint mission work, celebration of the Lord’s Supper, exchange of pulpits, transfers of membership and joint prayer) are merely

different ways of expressing the same fellowship of faith, all expressions of church fellowship require the same degree of doctrinal agreement, namely, agreement in all of the doctrines of Scripture. Although the term “unit concept” of church fellowship has usually been used to refer to the second of these “unit concepts”, namely, the unity of all ways of expressing church fellowship, in this paper we will be discussing both “unit concepts” mentioned above. We will do this in three sections: I. The Scriptural basis for treating fellowship as a unit concept, II. The differences concerning fellowship principles which led to the break-up of the Synodical Conference, and III. The differences concerning fellowship which continue to separate us from the Missouri Synod today.

The Scriptural Basis For Fellowship

Any attempt to give the Scriptural basis for the doctrine of church fellowship is faced with an immediate difficulty. The abundance of material makes it impossible to begin to cover it adequately in one paper. At least half of the letters of the New Testament were written primarily to preserve a fellowship that was in jeopardy. Galatians, I and II Corinthians, and the letters of John would be prime examples of this category. Several other letters were written to celebrate or strengthen an existing fellowship. Romans and Philippians fall into this category. The pastoral epistles emphasize directions for strengthening and preserving fellowship. We see that the biblical doctrine of church fellowship is not based only on a few proof texts such as Romans 16:17, but it is expressed in virtually every letter of the New Testament. For this reason our discussion of Scriptural evidence will have to be incomplete.

We will begin with the letters of John. II and III John are two of the finest texts for a Bible class study on the doctrine of church fellowship, because they provide a concrete example of the application of the principles of church fellowship in the New Testament church. John gives one of the most beautiful definitions of church fellowship when he states that the goal of his letters is that he and his readers may “work together for the truth.” (ἵνα συνεργοὶ γινώμεθα τῇ ἀληθείᾳ) (III John 8) John’s description of church fellowship is especially important because it shows that church fellowship is first of all a positive concept. Church fellowship is “working together.” The primary goal of church fellowship is to work together with fellow Christians, not to separate from them. In II and III John the specific form of “working together” which is being discussed is joint support of missionaries. Among the ways in which John and his readers work together in this undertaking are sending out missionaries, recommending them and their message to others, and offering these men financial support and a fraternal welcome. (II John 10, III John 5, 6, 8, 12)

Some have ridiculed our position on church fellowship with statements like “The Wisconsin Synod position on church fellowship is simple. They are against it.” Nothing could be further from the truth. We confess with the Scriptures that the outward expression of church fellowship is first of all something positive, a “working together.” Such church fellowship can be defined as every expression of faith in which Christians join together because their respective confessions have led them to recognize that they are agreed in the doctrines of Scripture. We are here speaking of fellowship as any activity which expresses a shared faith.¹ Since we cannot see the faith in a person’s heart, such fellowship must be established on the basis of the conformity of the person’s confession with Scripture.

Although fellowship is “working together,” God-pleasing church fellowship is not every sort of working together. It is working together *for the truth*. John has often been called the Apostle of Love. The name is appropriate, but he could better be called the Apostle of Truth and Love. In these short letters he mentions “truth” a dozen times. He warns that those who work together with teachers of falsehood, either by giving them financial support or wishing them well, are guilty of sharing (κοινωνεῖ) in their wicked work. (II John 9-11)

¹ “Fellowship” can, of course, also refer to the fellowship which we have with God through faith in Christ and to the invisible spiritual fellowship which we have with all believers. We cherish these fellowships as a great blessing, but they should not be confused with outward confessional fellowship, which is the subject of our discussion here.

Working together for the truth excludes working together for falsehood or toleration of falsehood. Supporters of truth and supporters of falsehood cannot work together. (I John 2:19, 4:1, 6, III John 9, 10)

John (really Christ speaking through him) shows the same concern for separating truth from falsehood in the seven letters to the churches in Revelation. These letters beautifully reflect the balance which Jesus wants in the church between contending for the truth and acting in love. The church at Ephesus is warned that it is losing its first love, but it is commended for testing and identifying false apostles and for refusing to tolerate them. (Revelations 2:2, 3) The churches at Pergamum and Thyatira are rebuked for tolerating antinomian false teachers. (Revelations 2:14-16, 20-21)

Paul's concern for true doctrine shows itself throughout the pastorals. He urges Timothy to oppose false teachers. The goal of this command is love which comes from a pure heart, a good conscience, and a sincere faith. (I Timothy 1:3-5) Paul warns against the false teachers who will come and bring doctrines of the devil such as forbidding marriage and prohibiting certain foods. It is the duty of a good minister to warn against such teachings. (I Timothy 4:1-6) Faithful ministers are to guard both their life and their doctrine. (I Timothy 4:16) Christians are to be careful about whom they put into church office lest they become guilty of sponsoring the sins of others. (I Timothy 4:22) Anyone who teaches differently than the sound words of the Lord Jesus Christ is conceited and knows nothing. (I Timothy 6:3) Although God's workmen are to oppose falsehood, they are to beware of disputes which are mere word battles. Because their primary aim is not to win arguments but to win people, they are to gently instruct those who have fallen into error in hopes of regaining them for the truth. (II Timothy 2:14-26) In spite of the efforts of faithful teachers, false teachers will flourish in the last days, because they will tell people what they want to hear. (II Timothy 3:1-9, 4:3-4) If such divisive false teachers reject the warnings against their teaching, they themselves are to be rejected by those who love the truth. (Titus 3:10)

Hopefully, these two examples are adequate to demonstrate the claim that a concern for doctrinal unity as the basis for the expression of church fellowship is not a matter of passing interest to the writers of the New Testament, but permeates all their work. Time does not permit us to examine other books of the New Testament in detail. We must limit ourselves to examining some of the passages from various New Testament books which answer the two questions which are our main concern in this paper: Does Scripture require agreement in all doctrines as a basis for the practice of church fellowship? Do some expressions of fellowship, such as joint prayer or co-operation in charitable work, require a lesser degree of doctrinal agreement than sharing the Lord's Supper or exchanging pulpits?

There is nothing in the Scriptures to suggest that the unity of faith which is required as the basis for the outward expression of church fellowship is limited to agreement only in the doctrine of justification or a few fundamental doctrines. It is true that many of the doctrinal disputes referred to in the New Testament involved fundamental doctrines. In Galatians Paul is battling a denial of the doctrine of justification by grace. In his epistles John appears to be battling a docetic Christological heresy. Other causes of doctrinal division specifically referred to in the New Testament include denial of the resurrection of the body (II Timothy 2:18), antinomian practices (Revelations 2 & 3, Jude 3-10, 2 Peter 2:1-4, 13-20), forbidding marriage and prohibiting certain foods (I Timothy 4:3), and quarrels about genealogies and the law. (Titus 3:9) Agreement in adiaphora or ceremonies is not necessary for fellowship (Romans 14), but nothing in the New Testament offers any basis for excluding any doctrine from the unity needed for fellowship. The New Testament admonitions to doctrinal unity and its warnings against false doctrine are all inclusive general statements which in no way imply that there are some Scriptural doctrines which can safely be omitted or that there are some false teachings which can safely be tolerated. "Teach them to obey (τηρεῖν) everything which I have commanded you." (Matthew 28:20) "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples." (John 8:31) "If any one speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God." (I Peter 4:11) "May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." (Romans 15:5) "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. ... We will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves and blown here and there by every wind of teaching... Instead speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into

him that is the head, that is, Christ.” (Ephesians 4:3-15) “Command certain men not to teach false doctrines (ἑτεροδιδασκαλεῖν) any longer nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies.” (I Timothy 1:3,4) “If anyone teaches false doctrines and does not agree to the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and to godly teaching, he is conceited and understands nothing.” (I Timothy 6:3,4) “Watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way, contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them.” (Romans 16:17) “If anyone takes words away from this book of prophecy, God will take away from him his share in the tree of life.” (Revelation 22:19) None of these passages nor any of the many similar passages in the New Testament offer even a hint of support for the idea that any doctrines of Scripture can be dispensed with or that any doctrinal errors can be accepted as harmless.

In the same way there is nothing in Scripture to suggest that some expressions of fellowship require different degrees of doctrinal unity. In the New Testament all expressions of fellowship are treated as a unit. They are all ways of expressing the same faith. All Lutherans would agree that the joint use of the means of grace is an expression of fellowship, even though they do not agree on the degree of doctrinal unity needed for such fellowship. Christians are expressing fellowship when they encourage one another by their church attendance and worship together. (Hebrews 10:24-25, Colossians 3:16) Quite clearly, sharing the Lord’s Supper is an expression of fellowship between the participants. (I Corinthians 10:17) It is clear that anyone providing financial support to a teacher of religion is expressing fellowship with him. This is true whether this teacher is their own pastor or someone whose work is being done elsewhere. Christians who support a pastor have not entered a business relationship with him, but into a mutual sharing of blessings from God. (Galatians 6:6, I Corinthians 9:11) The Philippians were partners in Paul’s work through the financial support which they sent him. (Philippians 1:5, 4:15) On the other hand those who support or encourage false teachers are partners in their evil deeds. (II John 11) We have already considered the command to separate from false teachers in the preceding section of this paper. Anyone who supports a false teacher is certainly not separating from him, but is practicing fellowship with him. Fellowship can also be expressed by mutual consultations to resolve doctrinal questions, by mutual recognition of each other’s ministries and by an agreed-on division of fields of labor. (Acts 15 and Galatians 2:1-10) Such mutual recognition may be expressed by a handshake (Galatians 2:9), by a kiss (Romans 16:16), or by the exchange of fraternal greetings which is so common in Paul’s letters. Fellowship is also expressed by the “letters of recommendation” which are common in the New Testament. (Romans 16:1-3, II Corinthians 8:16-23, III John 12) Present day practices which are parallel to these Biblical customs are the handshake at ordination, confirmation or a colloquy, the exchange of fraternal greetings at anniversaries and conventions, and letters of transfer.

Today co-operation in Christian charity work is sometimes regarded as mere “co-operation in externals,” but it was not so regarded in the New Testament. The Macedonians urgently pleaded with Paul for the privilege of sharing (χάριτι καὶ κοινωνίαν) in the service to the saints. (II Corinthians 8:4) The goal of this charitable work was not merely to relieve human need, but to glorify God. “This service that you perform is not only for supplying the needs of God’s people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. Because of the service by which you proved yourself, men will praise God for your obedience which accompanies your confession of the Gospel of Christ.” (II Corinthians 9:12-13) The spiritual motivation and the fellowship which is an essential part of Christian charitable work are emphasized throughout these chapters.

There are times when praying for a person is an expression of fellowship, for example, praying for the success of his ministry. (Romans 15:30-32, II Corinthians 1:11) There are, of course, other circumstances when praying for a person is not an expression of fellowship, as when Christians pray for the enemies of the church. The dispute concerning the doctrine of fellowship in American Lutheranism has focused on prayer with those with whom we are not in doctrinal agreement. There is little specific treatment of the subject of prayer fellowship in the New Testament. Prayer as an expression of fellowship is simply treated as one element among many others. The early Christians “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.” (Acts 2:42) However, there is nothing in Scripture to suggest that prayer should be treated any differently from any other expression of fellowship. Since God-pleasing prayer always

flows from faith, every prayer is either an expression of faith (and therefore an act of worship), or it is an abomination. There is no middle ground. If true prayer is always an act of worship, joint prayer calls for the same unity of doctrine as any other act of worship. In some regards the issue of joint prayer is similar to the issue of infant baptism. Just as the command “Baptize all nations” includes children unless valid Scriptural reasons can be cited for excluding them, the commands to “keep away” from false teachers and to “have nothing to do with them” certainly prohibit all expressions of fellowship with them including prayer unless there is a Scriptural basis for concluding otherwise. “Have nothing to do with them” (παραιτοῦ) and “keep away from them” (ἐκκλίνετε) can hardly mean pray with them.

There is no Scriptural basis for dividing the various expressions of fellowship into different levels requiring different degrees of doctrinal agreement. They are simply different ways of expressing one and the same unity of faith. The only distinction between them is that some of these acts, such as any use of the means of grace and prayer, are by their very nature always expressions of faith, but other acts such as a handshake, a kiss, or giving to charity may also be done in a secular context and are, therefore, not always expressions of religious fellowship.

On the basis of these and other Scripture passages it is our conviction that outward expressions of church fellowship should be practiced only among those who are in agreement in *all doctrines* of Scripture. Since this principle applies to church bodies, to congregations, and to individuals, it sometimes has been called the principle of “confessional fellowship” in order to make it clear that its application is not limited to formal relationships at the church-body level. However, in this paper the term “church fellowship,” which is more familiar to us, has been retained. It is also our conviction that agreement in all the doctrines of Scripture forms the necessary basis for the joint practice of *all expressions* of church fellowship, whether altar and pulpit fellowship, joint prayer, or any other expression of fellowship. Unfortunately, this belief has not been shared by the majority of American Lutheranism.

The Divergence On The Doctrine Of Fellowship

Throughout the history of the Synodical Conference both the Wisconsin Synod and the Missouri Synod taught that agreement in all doctrines was necessary for church fellowship. This shared belief is reflected in Thesis 7 of Walther’s “Theses on Open Questions” on the basis of which the Wisconsin Synod and Missouri Synod established fellowship in 1869. It reads,

No man has the privilege, and to no man can the privilege be granted to believe and to teach otherwise than God has revealed in his Word, no matter whether it pertains to primary or secondary fundamental articles of faith, or fundamental or non-fundamental doctrines, to matters of faith or of practice, to historical items or other matters subject to reason, to important or seemingly unimportant matters.

This position was opposed by the churches which formed the LCA and ALC. They maintained that agreement in all doctrines is not needed as a basis for the practice of church fellowship. This latter view also became the position of the “moderates” in the Missouri Synod.

During the early years of the Synodical Conference both the Missouri Synod and Wisconsin Synod agreed that unity of doctrine was a prerequisite for joint prayer.² This belief was practiced at the Free Conferences with Ohio and Iowa in the early 1900’s when the Synodical Conference participants objected to joint prayer. Their position is spelled out in Gerhard Bente’s 1904 essay “Why Can’t We Establish and Maintain Common Prayer Services With Iowa and Ohio?” Missouri’s shift away from this position in the 1940’s was a significant factor in the divergence which led to the dissolution of the Synodical Conference.

This divergence became apparent already in the 1930’s when the Missouri Synod entered fellowship discussions with the old ALC. By 1938 the ALC was ready to declare full fellowship with Missouri in spite of remaining differences in “non-fundamental doctrines” since “it is neither necessary nor possible to agree in all

² See “Fellowship Then and Now,” p. 18-21.

non-fundamental doctrines.”³ In the same year the Missouri Synod declared that they sought *full* doctrinal agreement and that more time and effort were needed before fellowship could be established, but they did so in a way which minimized the seriousness of the doctrinal differences which remained between the ALC and Missouri.⁴ In 1939 the Wisconsin Synod warned that genuine doctrinal agreement between the ALC and Missouri could not be reached without a single joint statement which treated the disputed doctrines thetically and antithetically in clear unequivocal terms, and that fellowship discussions with the ALC should be suspended since there was no genuine agreement between the Missouri Synod and ALC.⁵ Nevertheless, the Missouri Synod continued to seek agreement with the ALC. In 1940 the Missouri Synod declared that “Ordinarily prayer fellowship involves church fellowship.” The ALC responded, “We are convinced that prayer fellowship is wider than church fellowship, but we do not consider this difference as church-divisive.”⁶ The 1940 “Pittsburgh Agreement” of the ULCA and ALC also should have been a clear warning to Missouri of the true position of the ALC.⁷ The 1941 and 1944 conventions of the Missouri Synod declared that no altar, pulpit or prayer fellowship had been declared with the ALC and that none should be practiced by individuals or congregations of the synod, but the 1944 convention undermined this resolution when it also resolved that joint prayer at intersynodical conferences does not violate the earlier resolution against joint prayer provided that such prayer does not imply denial of truth or support of error.⁸ This was a crucial turning point. Although the resolution tried to limit the circumstances in which such prayer was allowed, the Missouri Synod had in effect adopted the ALC position on prayer fellowship by its distinction of “prayer fellowship” and “joint prayer.” Although the resolution was intended to have a limited effect, it was an omen of things to come, and it paved the way for a wholesale erosion of Missouri’s fellowship practices. “The Statement” of 44 prominent Missourians in 1945 was a virtual endorsement of the ALC fellowship principles and gave additional evidence of the change underway in Missouri.⁹ Especially ominous was the failure to discipline the signers. In 1947 the Missouri Synod declared it was not ready to enter fellowship with the ALC unless there was doctrinal agreement on the basis of single clear document. In spite of this declaration unionistic services and joint church work were becoming more and more prevalent in the Missouri Synod, and the participants remained undisciplined. The Common Confession (1949-1952) was designed to be the one document which resolved the remaining doctrinal differences between Missouri and the ALC, but it was unsatisfactory, since it did not specifically deal with the disputed points. Although this document stated that “a full and common obedience to the Holy Scriptures is an indispensable requisite for church fellowship,” it did not show that such agreement really existed between Missouri and the ALC. There was no specific mention of prayer fellowship, and the document stressed that co-operation in proclaiming the Gospel should not be confused or identified with co-operation in externals.¹⁰ “Co-operation in externals” permitted the Missouri Synod to enter joint armed forces and welfare work with the National Lutheran Council. Throughout the 1950’s many additional examples of unionistic practices in the Missouri Synod became apparent.¹¹ The dispute over the Scharlemann papers on Scripture (1959-1962) and other presentations of seminary professors made it clear that there was growing divergence on this doctrine also. The ELS had declared a suspension of fellowship with Missouri in 1955. The Wisconsin Synod continued to protest what was happening in Missouri and tried to reach a resolution of the growing differences through discussions of the Joint Union Committee. In 1960 an impasse was declared. At this time the Wisconsin Synod position was “There is only complete fellowship or none at all. The same

³ Wolf, p. 401.

⁴ Wolf, p. 399.

⁵ Wolf, p. 402.

⁶ Both on Wolf, p. 406.

⁷ Wolf, p. 378.

⁸ Wolf, p. 428.

⁹ Aaberg, p. 160.

¹⁰ Wolf, p. 424-426.

¹¹ See the pamphlet “Entrenched Unionistic Practices.”

Scriptural principles cover every manifestation of a common faith.”¹² The Missouri Synod position was that some expressions of fellowship are not determined by these Scriptural principles, but the propriety of joint prayer must be based on a consideration of the situation in which such prayer is offered, the character of the prayer itself, its purpose, and its probable effect on those who unite in the prayer.”¹³ The Wisconsin Synod broke fellowship with Missouri in 1961, and the Synodical Conference was in effect dissolved in 1963 by the withdrawal of the ELS and Wisconsin Synod. The Missouri Synod continued on its established course which led to approval of membership in LCUSA in 1965 and in the 1969 declaration of fellowship with the enlarged ALC.

The Divergence Remains

Events in the Missouri Synod in the last 15 years, such as the departure of the Seiminex group in 1974, the breaking of fellowship with the, ALC in 1981, and the unwillingness of Missouri to join the New Lutheran Church, have led some to ask whether the gap between the Missouri Synod and Wisconsin Synod can now be healed. Is the Missouri Synod returning to the position on church fellowship which once was the joint stand of all the synods of the Synodical Conference?

To their credit, it can be said that in continued discussions with other Lutheran bodies spokesmen of the Missouri Synod have defended the Scriptural principle that agreement in all doctrines is necessary for the practice of church fellowship. The LCUSA Division of Theological Studies held a series of study conferences between 1972 and 1977 on the function of doctrine and theology in the unity of the church. In these conferences most ALC and LCA representatives maintained that Article VII of the Augsburg Confession requires only “unity in the Gospel” as a basis for unity in the church and that “Gospel” is here to be understood in the narrow sense, namely, the promise of the forgiveness of sins. LCMS representatives correctly maintained that the required “unity in the Gospel” must be understood in the wider sense of all doctrines, as is clearly indicated by the context of Article VII of the Augsburg Confession which contrasts doctrines with adiaphora and by the elaboration in the Formula of Concord, Thorough Declaration, X, 31, which refers to agreement in “doctrine and all its articles.”

The report of a colloquium on “Unity in the Context of Theological Pluralism” held at Luther and Northwestern Seminaries in St. Paul, Minnesota, provides another example of the approach to fellowship which can be expected in the New Lutheran Church. “We do not strive for Lutheran unity only by means of organizational union, although this may come in its own way, but primarily by means of pulpit and altar fellowship, including common witnessing and working. Thus we arrive at this Lutheran fellowship not only by doctrinal discussions and statements, but also by living in fellowship.” According to this view pulpit and altar fellowship are not a result of doctrinal unity, but a stepping stone toward a vague doctrinal consensus.

In 1978 the ALC demonstrated the widening gap between itself and Missouri on fellowship matters when it abandoned the Galesburg Rule, “Lutheran altars for Lutherans only,” by its adoption of a new “Statement on Communion Practices.” This document approved open communion and participation by Lutherans as visitors at non-Lutheran communion services on the basis of the universal nature of the church. The present movement toward intercommunion with Episcopalians, other Reformed, and even Rome are simply further steps in the same process. The natural outcome of the approach to fellowship which can be expected from the New Lutheran Church is indicated by the recent “convergence” on the doctrine of justification in which the Lutheran participants discovered enough “unity in the Gospel” with Rome to recommend fellowship and at least limited sharing of the Lord’s Supper.¹⁴

To its credit, official Missouri has attempted to disassociate itself from these extremes of its LCUSA partners in fellowship matters. Occasionally, some other Lutherans have expressed bitterness over Missouri’s

¹² See “Statement On Fellowship,” Part B.

¹³ See “Theology Of Fellowship,” II.

¹⁴ “Joint Statement On Justification,” *Origins*, Oct. 1983, p. 297.

pointed refusal to practice full altar and pulpit fellowship with them. However, Missouri has not made notable progress toward returning to the Scriptural position of treating all expressions of fellowship as a unit, all requiring agreement in all doctrines of Scripture.

In 1981 the Missouri Synod's Commission on Theology and Church Relations issued a document called "The Nature and Implications of the Concept of Fellowship." This document maintained that declarations of pulpit and altar fellowship by church bodies which are agreed in doctrine and practice is the proper way of establishing church fellowship. Three other approaches to church fellowship were rejected: 1) the conciliar model of church fellowship promoted by the World Council of Churches, in which local churches work toward organic unity without fixed criteria for establishing unity, 2) the reconciled diversity of the Lutheran World Federation, and 3) the selective fellowship to be determined at congregational level, which has been suggested by many in the Missouri Synod. Unfortunately, this stand is immediately weakened by the statement,

Through the use of the word 'fellowship' almost exclusively to refer to a formal altar and pulpit fellowship relationship established between two church bodies on the basis of agreement in the confession of the faith, some have been given the impression that no fellowship relationship other than the spiritual unity in the body of Christ can or should exist among members of Christian churches not in altar and pulpit fellowship. The fact that the LCMS is closer doctrinally to a church body which at least formally accepts Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions than to those denominations which do not is often obscured by the "all or nothing" approach that frequently accompanies ecclesiastical declarations of altar and pulpit fellowship.¹⁵

This statement and the rest of the document leave the door wide open to the understanding that complete doctrinal agreement is needed for altar and pulpit fellowship, but may not be necessary for other expressions of fellowship such as joint prayer. That this is indeed the intention of the statement seems to be indicated by other recent actions of the leadership of the Missouri Synod.

In response to the decision to form the New Lutheran Church President Ralph Bohlmann of the LCMS delivered a message to the conventions of the AELC, ALC, and LCA. In it Bohlmann repeated the Missouri Synod's position that "fellowship and external unity in the church must be based on agreement in doctrine and all its articles, as well as the right use of the Holy Sacraments" and cited this conviction as the reason that the LCMS would not be entering the new church, nor would it enter official sharing of the Eucharist with it. Nevertheless, Bohlmann went on to say, "We in the LCMS congratulate you on your efforts to form a new church body, and we pray God's blessing upon you as you carry out the arduous tasks associated with its formation. Whether you are structured in one church body or in several, we look forward to continuing fellowship and co-operation in inter-Lutheran agencies and in other civic and churchly activities and associations."¹⁶ No altar and pulpit fellowship without doctrinal agreement, but fellowship in "externals" seems to be the official policy. The tendency toward specious distinctions, such as differentiating between "prayer fellowship" and "joint prayer" appears to be getting worse rather than better, as can be seen in the practice of differentiating between "worship services" which require full fellowship and "convocations" or "rallies" which do not, even if they include many elements of worship. In 1983 the Missouri Synod's Council of Presidents approved a set of guidelines on joint worship.¹⁷ This document requires all members of the Missouri Synod to practice joint worship only with those with whom the LCMS has declared pulpit and altar fellowship. They may, however, join in joint celebrations, concerts, convocations, rallies, and conferences, if there is no sermon or sacrament and the clergy are not vested. Among the valid reasons for such events are thanksgiving for the doctrinal heritage of Lutheranism, prayer for greater doctrinal unity, and encouragement of appropriate cooperative efforts in externals. Thanksgiving, prayer, and encouragement are certainly expressions of faith and

¹⁵ "Concepts Of Fellowship," p. 42.

¹⁶ *Lutheran Witness*, October 1982, p. 34.

¹⁷ *Lutheran Witness*, May 2, 1983, p. 4.

fellowship. To make matters worse, the document appeals to synod positions and policies, rather than to Scripture. Thus, in spite of recent overtures toward the Wisconsin Synod and ELS, there is no evidence that official Missouri is ready to deal seriously with the differences on fellowship principles which continue to separate our synods. To make matters worse, many in Missouri go far beyond the degree of unionistic practice which the official position condones. They do this knowingly and persistently, in deliberate defiance of the Synod's position, and yet they remain undisciplined. Christians do have a responsibility to admonish weak brethren, but those who publicly defy the synod's position and declare that their own position is the correct Scriptural position can no longer be considered weak brethren. In a confessional fellowship where diversity of doctrine and practice is tolerated and abounds, it becomes impossible to fulfill our duty to admonish weak brethren. Where pluralism abounds, each divergent position considers itself to be the strong one and all other positions to be the weak ones. The ability to deal Scripturally both with weak brethren and with those who prove themselves to be persistent errorists is lost. This is the problem in Missouri today. Until this situation is corrected, it will loom as a huge barrier to any possibility of re-establishing fellowship between our two synods. That there are still concerned voices speaking out in the Missouri Synod is demonstrated by the reprinting of Franz Pieper's 1924 essay against unionism in the latest issue of the *Concordia Journal*. Nevertheless, humanly speaking, it does not appear likely that Missouri will soon return to the position on fellowship which we once shared with them in the Synodical Conference, either in theory or in practice. We can only continue to give our testimony and to pray that through the power of his Word and Spirit the Lord will restore the common Scriptural position our synods once shared.

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