

Selections from the Fathers on Fellowship

by John F. Brug

The following quotations from the church fathers were selected to give a sample of their views on church fellowship. They recognized fellowship as a great blessing.

The Need for Fellowship

Truly, from our own bodily constitution, the Lord has taught us the necessity of fellowship. When I look to these my limbs and see that not one of them is self-sufficient, how can I reckon myself competent to discharge the duties of life? One foot could not walk securely without the support of the other; one eye could not see well, were it not for the alliance of the other and for its being able to look at objects in conjunction with it. Hearing is more exact when sound is received through both channels, and the grasp is made firmer by the fellowship of the fingers. In a word, of all that is done by nature and by the will, I see nothing done without the concord of fellow forces. Even prayer, when it is not united prayer, loses its natural strength and the Lord has told us that He will be in the midst where two or three call on Him in concord. The Lord Himself undertook the economy, that by the blood of His cross He might make peace between things in earth and things in heaven. (Basil, *Letter 97, Post-Nicene Fathers II, Vol 8, p 448*) (Bk. p 181).

A Call to Harmony

For be it so, that we have one Church, or one doctrine - yet this is not the (main) consideration: no, the evil is, that in these we have not fellowship - "living peaceably," as the Apostle says, "with all men" (Romans 12:18), on the contrary, we are at variance one with another. For be it that we are not having fights every day, yet look not thou to this, but (to this), that neither have we charity, genuine and unswerving. There is need of bandages and oil. Let us bear it in mind, that charity is the cognizance of the disciples of Christ: that without this, all else avails nothing: that it is an easy task if we will. Yes, say you, we know all this, but how (to go to work) that it may be achieved? What (to do), that it may be effected? in what way, that we may love one another? First, let us put away the things which are subversive of charity, and then we shall establish this. Let none be resentful, none be envious, none rejoicing in (others') misfortunes: these are the things that hinder love; well then, the things that make it are of the other sort. For it is not enough to put away the things that hinder; the things that establish must also be forthcoming. (Chrysostum, *Homilies on Acts, Homily 40, Post-Nicene Fathers I, Vol. 11, p 430.*) (Bk. p 248)

Principles of Fellowship

The Church fathers practiced a principle of strict separation from false teachers and also from those who associated with false teachers. Termination of fellowship applied to all expressions of fellowship.

Stand Aloof from the Preacher of Falsehood

Brothers, be not deceived. If any man follows him that separates from the truth, he shall not inherit the kingdom of God-, and if any man does not stand aloof from the preacher of falsehood, he shall be condemned to hell. For it is obligatory not to separate from the godly, nor to associate with the ungodly. If any one walks according to a strange opinion, he is not of Christ, nor a partaker of His passion; but is a fox, a destroyer of the vineyard of Christ. Have no fellowship with such a man, lest you perish along with him, even should he be your father, your son, your brother, or a member of your family. For [the Scripture] says, "Your eye shall not spare him." You ought therefore to "hate those that hate God, and to waste away [with grief] on account of His enemies." I do not mean that you should beat them or persecute them, as do the Gentiles "that know not the Lord and God," but that you should regard them as your enemies and separate yourselves from them, while yet you admonish them and exhort them to repentance, if it may be they will hear, if it may be they will submit themselves. For our God is a lover of mankind, and "will have all men to be saved, and to come to the knowledge of the truth." Wherefore "He makes His sun to rise upon the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust." The Lord, wishing us also to be imitators of his kindness, says, "Be perfect, even as also your Father that is in heaven is perfect. (Ignatius, *To the Philadelphians, Ch 3. Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 1, p 164*) (Bk. p 80)

Reject Heretics

But if we consider what the apostles thought about heretics, we shall find that they, in all their epistles, execrated and detested the sacrilegious wickedness of heretics. For when they say that "their word creeps as a canker," how is such a word as that able to give remission of sins, which creeps like a canker to the ears of the hearers? And when they say that there can be no fellowship between righteousness and unrighteousness, no communion between light and darkness, how can either darkness illuminate, or unrighteousness justify? And when they say that "they are not of God, but are of the spirit of Antichrist," how can they transact spiritual and divine matters, who are the enemies of God, and whose hearts the spirit of Antichrist has possessed? Wherefore, if, laying aside the errors of human dispute, we return with a sincere and religious faith to the evangelical authority and to the apostolic tradition, we shall perceive that they may do nothing towards conferring the ecclesiastical and saving grace, who, scattering and attacking the Church of Christ, are called adversaries by Christ Himself, but by His apostles, Antichrists. (Cyprian, *Letter LXXII, Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 5, p 829.*) (Bk. p 383)

No Fellowship with Heretics

Therefore, although wicked men press forward to keep the feast and, as at a feast, praise God and intrude into the Church of the saints, yet God protests, saying to the sinner, "Why do you talk of My ordinances?" And the gentle Spirit rebukes them, saying, "Praise is not comely in the mouth of sinners." Neither has sin any place in common with the praise of God; for the sinner has a mouth speaking perverse things, as the Proverb says, "The mouth of the wicked answers evil things." For how is it possible for us to praise God with an impure mouth, since things which are contrary to each other cannot coexist? For what communion has righteousness

with iniquity? or, what fellowship is there between light and darkness? So exclaims Paul, a minister of the Gospel. Thus it is that sinners, and all those who are aliens from the Catholic Church, heretics, and schismatics, since they are excluded from glorifying God with the saints, cannot properly even continue observers of the feast. (Athanasius, *Letter 7-4, PostNicene Fathers II, Vol 4, p 1252*) (Bk. p 524)

No Fellowship with Heretics Even in Death

Whenever those who have been called to martyrdom for the true faith by the Church happen to fall in with any of those so-called martyrs of the Phrygian heresy, they always separate from them and die without having fellowship with them, because they do not choose to give their assent to the spirit of Montanus and the women. And that this is truly the case, and that it has actually taken place in our own times at Apamea, a town on the Maeander, in the case of those who suffered martyrdom with Caius and Alexander, natives of Eumenia, is clear to all. (Asterius Urbanus, *Frag. VII, Ante-Aricene Fathers, Vol 7, p 705*) (Bk. p 33 7)

No Fellowship with Heretics Even after Death: No Toilet Fellowship with Arius

But the end of Arius was so singular that it seems worthy of some remark. The partisans of Eusebius threatened to reinstate him in the church, and Alexander, bishop of Constantinople, opposed their intention; Arius placed his confidence in the power and menaces of Eusebius; for it was the Sabbath, and he expected the next day to be readmitted. The dispute ran high; the partisans of Eusebius were loud in their menaces, while Alexander had recourse to prayer. The Lord was the judge, and declared himself against the unjust. A little before sunset Arius was compelled by a want of nature to enter the place appointed for such emergencies, and here he lost at once both restoration to communion and his life. The most blessed Constantine was amazed when he heard of this occurrence, and regarded it as the proof of perjury. It then became evident to every one that the menaces of Eusebius were absolutely futile, and that the expectations of Arius were vain. It also became manifest that the Arian madness could not be fellowshiped by the Savior both here and in the church of the Firstborn. Is it not then astonishing that some are still found who seek to exculpate him whom the Lord condemned, and to defend that heresy which the Lord proved to be unworthy of fellowship, by not permitting its author to enter the church? We have been duly informed that this was the mode of the death of Arius." It is said that for a long period subsequently no one would make use of the seat on which he died. Those who were compelled by necessities of nature, as is wont to be the case in a crowd, to visit the public place, when they entered, spoke to one another to avoid the seat, and the place was shunned afterwards, because Arius had there received the punishment of his impiety. At a later time a certain rich and powerful man, who had embraced the Arian tenets, bought the place of the public, and built a house on the spot, in order that the occurrence might fall into oblivion, and that there might be no perpetual memorial of the death of Arius. (Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History, Bk. 2, Ch. 30, Post-Nicene Fathers II, Vol. 2, p 618-619*) (Bk. p 279-280)..

Fellowship Includes Prayer

The fathers recognized that fellowship was a unit that included all expressions of faith.

If the ungodly possess the place, avoid it because it is profaned by them. For as holy priests sanctify a place, so do the profane ones defile it. If it be not possible to assemble either in the church or in a house, let every one by himself sing, and read, and pray, or two or three together. For "where two or three are gathered together in my name, there all I in the midst of them." Let not one of the faithful pray with a catechumen, no, not in the house: for it is not reasonable that he who is admitted should be polluted with one not admitted. Let not one of the godly pray with an heretic, no, not in the house. For "what fellowship has light with darkness?" Let Christians, whether men or women, who have connections with slaves, either leave them off, or let them be rejected. (*Constitutions of the Holy Apostles, Bk. VIII, Sect IV, At What Hours to Pray, Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 7, p 1017.*) (Bk. p 496)

No Prayer with the Suspended

Further, if one of them has been suspended from prayer for some fault which he has committed, no one has any liberty of praying with him before he performs his penance on the ground, and reconciliation and pardon for his offense has been publicly granted to him by the Abbot before all the brethren. For by a plan of this kind they separate and cut themselves off from fellowship with him in prayer for this reason - because they believe that one who is suspended from prayer is, as the Apostle says, "delivered unto Satan:" and if any one, moved by an ill-considered affection, dares to hold communion with him in prayer before he has been received by the Elder, he makes himself partaker of his damnation, and delivers himself up of his own free will to Satan, to whom the other had been consigned for the correction of his guilt. And in this he fans into a more grievous offense because, by uniting with him in fellowship either in talk or in prayer, he gives him grounds for still greater arrogance, and only encourages and makes worse the obstinacy of the offender. For, by giving him a consolation that is only hurtful, he will make his heart still harder, and not let him humble himself for the fault for which he was excommunicated; and through this he will make him hold the Elder's rebuke as of no consequence, and harbor deceitful thoughts about satisfaction and absolution. (Cassian, *The Twelve Books of Coenobia, 11, 16, Post-Aricene Fathers II, Vol. I], p 435.*) Bk. p 211)

Those Who Associate with Excommunicated Persons

Those, too, who are excommunicated by the priests, let no one receive previous to the just examination of both sides; nor let him have any intercourse with such in speech, or in eating or drinking, or in the salutation with the kiss, nor let him greet such; because, whosoever wittingly holds intercourse with the excommunicated in these or other prohibited matters, will subject himself, according to the ordinance of the apostles, to like excommunication. From these, therefore, let clergy and laity keep themselves if they would not have the same penalty to endure. Also do not join the unbelievers, neither have any fellowship with them. They who do such things, indeed, are judged not as believers, but as unbelievers. Whence the apostle says: "What part has he that believes with an infidel? or what fellowship has righteousness with unrighteousness?" (2nd *Epistle of Calixtus, Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 8, p 1262*) (Bk. p 615).

The Duty of Having No Fellowship with the Excommunicated.

To the dearly-beloved brethren in the ministry of the Church Catholic in all regions,

We exhort you also, according to the word of the apostle, to be "steadfast and immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord; for as much as you know that your labor is not vain in the Lord." And in another place: "Watch and pray, and stand fast in the faith. Quit you like men, and be strong. Let all things be done with charity." Furthermore, we desire you to know this, that in our times, as our sins embarrassed us, and that ancient enemy who always goes about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour, instigated him, Novatus came up out of Africa, and separated Novatianus and certain other confessors of Christ from the Church of Christ, and persuaded them into the acceptance of evil doctrine. From such persons, brethren, keep yourselves aloof, and beware of all who hold a faith and doctrine different from that which the apostles and their successors have held and taught, lest (which may God forbid) going after him you fall into the toils of Satan, and be bound with his fetters. Wherefore with most earnest prayers we beg it of your brotherly love, that you may deem it fit to remember our insignificance in your holy prayers, beseeching and entreating the Lord of heaven that we, as well as our holy mother the Church of Christ, redeemed with His precious blood, may be delivered from the toils of Satan, who lieth in wait for us; and from troublesome and wicked men, and that the Word of God may have free course and be glorified, and that the evil doctrine of them, and of all who teach things contrary to the truth, may be overthrown and perish. We beseech you also to be zealous in praying in your pious supplications, that our God and Lord Jesus Christ, who will have all men to be saved, and no one to perish, may, by His vast omnipotence, cause their hearts to turn again to sound doctrine and to the Catholic faith, in order that they may be recovered from the toils of the devil who are held captive by him, and be united with the children of our mother the Church. Be mindful also of your brethren and have pity upon them, and labor for them by all means in your power, that they be not lost, but be saved unto the Lord by your prayers, and other efforts of your goodness. So act therefore in these matters that you may approve yourselves as obedient and faithful children of the holy Church of God, and that you may obtain the recompense of reward....

Accordingly, the believing ought always to be kept distinct from the unbelieving, and the righteous from the unrighteous; since the unbelieving and evil-minded, by every means in their power, are always troubling the believing, and striving to undo them; and consequently they are not to be received, but rejected and kept entirely at a distance, lest they may undo or defame the believing. For this reason, dearly beloved, beware of the pit of such persons, into which we know many have fallen. Beware of the snares (or darts) of such persons, and of the efforts of the ancient enemy, by which we have seen even those closely connected with us fall wounded before us. Watch the nooses of the liars in wait, by which they are wont to strangle associates and comrades. Follow not such, but keep them far off from you. Be you, according to the voice of Truth, wise as serpents and harmless as doves. See to it that you neither run nor labor in vain; but, sustained by each other's prayers and supplications, strive you to do the will of God; and from those persons whom I have mentioned, if they show themselves incorrigible, keep yourselves separate in all things.

In like manner keep yourselves separate from all those of whom the apostle makes mention when he says, "with such persons, no, not to eat;" since these latter, as well as the former, are to be rejected, and are not to be admitted before they have given satisfaction to the

Church. For those with whom it is not lawful to eat are manifestly separated from all intercourse with the rest of the brethren until such satisfaction is given....

With the excommunicated no fellowship is to be held. And if any one, setting aside the rules wittingly, sings with the excommunicated in his house, or speaks or prays in company with them, that man is to be deprived of the privilege of communion. Such persons, therefore, are in all things to be guarded against, and are not to be received, because, according to the apostle, not only those who commit such things are condemned, but also those who consent with those who do them....

And such a one is a much more dangerous enemy than those who are without, and who are openly hostile. For this man under the guise of friendship acts the part of an enemy, and scatters and ruins the church. And therefore, dearly beloved, in these apostolic institutes we warn and teach you, that your charity, being instructed therein (*effecta certior*), may hereafter study to act with greater care and prudence, so that perverse and unbelieving men may not have the power of injuring the faithful and well-disposed; for the hope of such, and of all the ungodly, is like dust that is blown away with the wind; and like a thin froth that is driven away with the storm; and like as the smoke which is dispersed here and there with a tempest, and as the remembrance of a guest of a single day that passes away. With the utmost care, dearly beloved, are such persons to be guarded against, and avoided, and rejected, if they show themselves injurious. For the laws of the world, no less than those of the Church, do not admit: the injurious, but reject them. Whence it is written, "The mouth of the wicked devours iniquity." And the Lord, speaking by the prophet, says, "With the holy you will show yourself holy; and with the froward you will show yourself froward; and with the excellent thou will show yourself excellent (*electus*); and with the innocent man you will show yourself innocent." And the apostle says, "Evil communications corrupt good manners." Wherefore, as has already been indicated, the wicked are always to be avoided and shunned, and the good and rightly-disposed are to be steadfastly followed....

Fare you well in the Lord, dearly beloved, and with the Lord's help strive to fulfill to the best of your ability the things before mentioned. (*The Epistles of Pope Fabian, The First Epistle, Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 8, p 1291-1295.*) (Bk. p 630-632).

Examples of Evangelical Practice

Receiving the Lapsed to Repentance

Christ, who is the good Shepherd, goes in quest of one who wanders, lost among the mountains, calls him back when he flees from Him, and is at pains to take him up on His shoulders when He has found him. We, on the contrary, harshly spurn such a one even when He approaches us. Yet let us not consult so miserably for ourselves, and let us not in this way be driving the sword against ourselves. For when people set themselves either to do evil or to do good to others, what they do is certainly not confined to the carrying out of their will on those others; but just as they attach themselves to iniquity or to goodness, they will themselves become possessed either by divine virtues or by unbridled passions. And the former will become the followers and comrades of the good angels; and both in this world and in the other, with the

enjoyment of perfect peace and immunity from all ills, they will fulfill the most blessed destinies unto all eternity, and in God's fellowship they will be for ever (in possession of) the supremest good. But these latter will fall away at once from the peace of God and from peace with themselves, and both in this world and after death they will abide with the spirits of blood-guiltiness. Wherefore let us not thrust from us those who seek a penitent return; but let us receive them gladly, and number them once more with the steadfast, and make up again what is defective in them. (Dionysius, *Exegetical Fragment VII, On The Reception Of The Lapsed, Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol 6, p 261*) (Bk. p 120)

Paul's Example of Restoring Sinners

Ambrose explains what is the meaning of St. Paul where he speaks of coming "with a rod or in the spirit of meekness. " One who has grievously fallen is to be separated, but to be again restored to religious privileges when he has sufficiently repented The old leaven is purged out when the hardness of the letter is tempered by the meal of a milder interpretation. All should be sprinkled with the Church's meal and fed with the food of charity, lest they become like that envious elder brother, whose example is followed by the Novatians.

THAT faithful teacher, having promised one of two things, gave each. He came with a rod, for he separated the guilty man from the holy fellowship. And well is he said to be delivered to Satan who is separated from the body of Christ. But he came in love and with the spirit of meekness, whether because he so delivered him up as to save his soul, or because he afterwards restored to the sacraments him whom he had before separated.

For it is needful to separate one who has grievously fallen, lest a little leaven corrupt the whole lump. And the old leaven must be purged out, or the old man in each person; that is, the outward man and his deeds, he who among the people has grown old in sin and hardened in vices. And well did he say purged, not cast forth, for what is purged is not considered wholly valueless, for to this end is it purged, that what is of value be separated from the worthless, but that which is cast forth is considered to have in itself nothing of value.

The Apostle then judged that the sinner should then at once be restored to the heavenly sacraments if he himself wished to be cleansed. And well is it said "Purge," for he is - purged as by certain things done by the whole people, and is washed in the tears of the multitude, and redeemed from sin by the weeping of the multitude, and is purged in the inner man. For Christ granted to His Church that one should be redeemed. (Ambrose, *Repentance, Bk. 1, 78-80, Ch 15. Post-Nicene Fathers II, Vol 10, p 801*) (Bk. p 342)

Schismatic Withdrawal Condemned

Attend now a little while to the letters of Cyprian, that you may see how he proves the man to be inexcusable who desires ostensibly on the ground of his own righteousness to withdraw himself from the unity of the Church (which God promised and has fulfilled in all nations), and that you may more clearly apprehend the truth of the text quoted by me shortly before: "There is a generation that esteem themselves righteous, and have not cleansed

themselves from the guilt of their going forth." In a letter which he wrote to Antonianus he discusses a matter very closely akin to that which we are now debating; but it is better for us to give his very words: "Some of our predecessors," he says, "in the episcopal office in this province were of opinion that the peace of the Church should not be given to fornicators, and finally closed the door of repentance against those who had been guilty of adultery. They did not, however, withdraw themselves from fellowship with their colleagues in the episcopate; nor did they rend asunder the unity of the Catholic Church, by such harshness and obstinate perseverance in their censure as to separate themselves from the Church because others granted while they themselves refused to adulterers the peace of the Church. The bond of concord remaining unbroken, and the sacrament of the Church continuing undivided, each bishop arranges and orders his own conduct as one who shall give account of his procedure to his Lord." What say you to that, brother Vincentius? Surely you must see that this great man, this peace-loving bishop and dauntless martyr, made nothing more earnestly his care than to prevent the sundering of the bond of unity. You see him travailing in birth for the souls of men, not only that they might, when conceived, be born in Christ, but also that, when born, they might not perish through their being shaken out of their mother's bosom.

Now give attention, I pray you, farther to this thing which he has mentioned in protesting against impious schismatics. If those who granted peace to adulterers, who repented of their sin, shared the guilt of adulterers, were those who did not so act defiled by fellowship with them as colleagues in office? If, again, it was a right thing, as truth asserts and the Church maintains, that peace should be given to adulterers who repented of their sin, those who utterly closed against adulterers the door of reconciliation through repentance were unquestionably guilty of impiety in refusing healing to the members of Christ, in taking away the keys of the Church from those who knocked for admission, and in opposing with heartless cruelty God's most compassionate forbearance, which permitted them to live in order that, repenting, they might be healed by the sacrifice of a contrite spirit and broken heart. Nevertheless this their heartless error and impiety did not defile the others, compassionate and peace-loving men, when these shared with them in the Christian sacraments, and tolerated them within the net of unity, until the time when, brought to the shore, they should be separated from each other; or if this error and impiety of others did defile them, then the Church was already at that time destroyed, and there was no Church to give Cyprian birth. But if, as is beyond question, the Church continued in existence, it is also beyond question that no man in the unity of Christ can be stained by the guilt of the sins of other men if he be not consenting to the deeds of the wicked, and thus defiled by actual participation in their crimes, but only, for the sake of the fellowship of the good, tolerating the wicked, as the chaff which lies until the final purging of the Lord's threshing-floor. These things being so, where is the pretext for your schism? Are you not an "evil generation, esteeming yourselves righteous, yet not washed from the guilt of your going forth" (from the Church)? (Augustine, *Letter 93-10-41,42, 2nd Group, Post-Nicene Fathers I, Vol. 1, p 576*). (Bk. p 396)

The Ministry of Schismatics Is Valid

Or is it possible for one not to be against Him, although he may be against His disciples? Nay; for what shall we make then of words like these: "He that despises you, despises me;" and, "Inasmuch as you did it not unto the least of mine, you did it not unto me;" and, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me," - although it was His disciples that Saul was persecuting? But, in good

truth, the sense intended to be conveyed is just this, that, so far as a man is not with Him, so far is he against Him; and again, that, so far as a man is not against Him, so far is he with Him. For example, take this very case of the individual who was working miracles in the name of Christ, and yet was not in the company of Christ's disciples: so far as this man was working miracles in His name, so far was he with them, and so far he was not against them. But, inasmuch as they had prohibited the man from doing a thing in which, so far forth, he was really with them, the Lord said to them, "Forbid him not." For what they ought to have forbidden was what was outside their fellowship, so that they might bring him over to the unity of the Church, and not a thing like this, in which he was at one with them, that is to say, so far as he commended the name of their Master and Lord in the casting out of devils. And this is the principle on which the Catholic Church acts, not condemning common sacraments among heretics; for in these they are with us, and they are not against us. But she condemns and forbids division and separation, or any sentiment adverse to peace and truth. For therein they are against us, just because they are not with us in that, and because, not gathering with us, they are consequently scattering. (Augustine, *Harmony of the Gospels*, Bk. IV, Ch. 5-6, *Post-Nicene Fathers I*, Vol. 6, p 483) (Bk. p 228)

The Baptism of Heretics Is Valid

Again, you are wont to say that we have not the baptism of Christ, and that beyond your communion it is not to be found. On this I would enter into a more lengthened argument; but in dealing with you this is not necessary, seeing that, along with Felicianus and Praetextatus, you admitted also the baptism of the Maximianists as valid. For all whom these bishops baptized so long as they were in communion with Maximianus, while you were doing your utmost in a protracted contest in the civil courts to expel these very men [Felicianus and Praetextatus] from their churches, as the Acts testify, - all those, I say, whom they baptized during that time, they now have in fellowship with them and with you; and though these were baptized by them when excommunicated and in the guilt of schism, not only in cases of extremity through dangerous sickness, but also at the Easter services, in the large number of churches belonging to their cities, and in these important cities themselves, - in the case of none of them has the rite of baptism been repeated. And I wish you could prove that those whom Felicianus and Praetextatus had baptized, as it were, in vain, when they were excommunicated and in the guilt of schism, were satisfactorily baptized again by them when they were restored. For if the renewal of baptism was necessary for the people, the renewal of ordination was not less necessary for the bishops. For they had forfeited their episcopal office by leaving you, if they could not baptize beyond your communion; because, if they had not forfeited their episcopal office by leaving you, they could still baptize. But if they had forfeited their episcopal office, they should have received ordination when they returned, so that what they had lost might be restored. Let not this, however, alarm you. As it is certain that they returned with the same standing as bishops with which they had gone forth from you, so is it also certain that they brought back with themselves to your communion, without any repetition of their baptism, all those whom they had baptized in the schism of Maximianus. (Augustine, *Letter 51-4*, 2nd Group, *Post-Nicene Fathers I*, Vol. 1, p 571) (Bk. p 297).

Fellowship of Peter and Paul: Unity of Doctrine, Difference of Mission

Afterwards, as Paul himself narrates, he "went up to Jerusalem for the purpose of seeing Peter," because of his office, no doubt, and by right of a common belief and preaching. Now they certainly would not have been surprised at his having become a preacher instead of a persecutor, if his preaching were of something contrary; nor, moreover, would they have "glorified the Lord," because Paul had presented himself as an adversary to Him. They accordingly even gave him "the right hand of fellowship," as a sign of their agreement with him, and arranged amongst themselves a distribution of office, not a diversity of gospel, so that they should each preach not a different gospel, but (the same), to different persons, Peter to the circumcision, Paul to the Gentiles. For as much, then, as Peter was rebuked because, after he had lived with the Gentiles, he proceeded to separate himself from their company out of respect for persons, the fault surely was one of behavior, not of preaching. For it does not appear from this, that any other God than the Creator, or any other Christ than (the son) of Mary, or any other hope than the resurrection was (by him) announced. (Tertullian, *Prescription Against Heretics, Ch 23, Ante-Aricene Fathers, Vol 3, p 475.*) (Bk. p 253)

Paul and Barnabas: Wise Separation

(So) Barnabas "departed, and went not with (him)." (b) The point to be considered, is not that they differed in their opinions, but that they accommodated themselves the one to the other (seeing), that thus it was a greater good their being parted: and the matter took a pretext from this. What then? did they withdraw in enmity? God forbid! In fact you see after this Barnabas receiving many encomiums from Paul in the Epistles. There was "sharp contention," it says, not enmity nor quarreling. The contention availed so far as to part them. "And Barnabas took Mark," etc. And with reason: for what each supposed to be profitable, he did not forego thereafter, because of the fellowship with the other. Nay, it seems to me that the parting took place advisedly (*κατα συνεσιν*), and that they said one to another "As I wish not, and you wish, therefore that we may not fight, let us distribute the places." So that in fact they did this, altogether yielding each to the other: for Barnabas wished Paul's plan to stand, therefore withdrew; on the other hand, Paul wished the other's plan to stand, therefore he withdrew. Would to God we too made such separations, as to go forth for preaching. A wonderful man this is; and exceedingly great! To Mark this contest was exceedingly beneficial. For the awe inspired by Paul converted him, while the kindness of Barnabas caused that he was not left behind: so that they contend indeed, but the gain comes to one and the same end. For indeed, seeing Paul choosing to leave him, he would be exceedingly awed, and would condemn himself, and seeing Barnabas so taking his part, he would love him exceedingly: and so the disciple was corrected by the contention of the teachers: so far was he from being offended thereby. For if indeed they did this with a view to their own honor, he might well be offended: but if for his salvation, and they contend for one and the same object, to show that he who honored him had well determined what is there amiss in it? (Chryostom, *Homilies on Acts, Homily 34, Post-Nicene Fathers I, Vol. H, p 374*) (Bk. p 213-214).

False Brothers Within the Church: True Fellowship Is More Than Outward Membership

There is therefore "no fellowship between righteousness and unrighteousness," not only without, but also within the Church; for "the Lord knows them that are His," and "Let every one

that names the name of Christ depart from iniquity." There is also "no communion between light and darkness," not only without, but also within the Church; for "he that hates his brother is still in darkness." And they at any rate hated Paul, who, preaching Christ of envy and malicious strife, supposed that they added affliction to his bonds; and yet the same Cyprian understands these still to have been within the Church. Since, therefore, "neither darkness can enlighten, nor unrighteousness justify," as Cyprian again says, I ask, how could those men baptize within the very Church herself? I ask, how could those vessels which the large house contains not to honor, but to dishonor, administer what is holy for the sanctifying of men within the great house itself, unless because that holiness of the sacrament cannot be polluted even by the unclean, either when it is given at their hands, or when it is received by those who in heart and life are not changed for the better? of whom, as situated within the Church, Cyprian himself says, "Renouncing the world in word only, and not in deed." (Augustine, *Baptism: Against the Donatists, IV 13-20, Post-Nicene Fathers I, Vol 4, p 859*) (*Bk. p 455*).

Differences of Adiaphora are not Divisive.

Although the pope divided the church over the Easter question, the wiser of the church fathers recognized that adiaphora should not be divisive.

Differences of Fasting Are Not Divisive.

For the controversy is not merely regarding the day of fasting, but also regarding the form of the fast. For some consider themselves bound to fast one day, others two days, others still more, while others do so during forty: the diurnal and the nocturnal hours they measure out together as their fasting day. And this variety among the observers of the fasts had its origin not in our time, but long before in that of our predecessors, some of whom probably, being not very accurate in their observance of it, handed down to posterity the custom as it had, through simplicity or private fancy, been introduced among them. And yet nevertheless all these lived in peace one with another, and we also keep peace together. Thus, in fact, the difference in observing the fast establishes the harmony of our common faith. And the presbyters preceding Soter in the government of the Church which you now rule - I mean, Anicetus and Pius, Hyginus and Telesphorus, and Sixtus - did neither themselves observe it after that fashion, nor permit those with them to do so. Notwithstanding this, those who did not keep the feast in this way were peacefully disposed towards those who came to them from other dioceses in which it was so observed ... and none were ever cast out of the Church for this matter. On the contrary, those presbyters who preceded you, and who did not observe this custom, sent the Eucharist to those of other dioceses who did observe it. And when the blessed Polycarp was sojourning in Rome in the time of Anicetus, although a slight controversy had arisen among them as to certain other points, they were at once well inclined towards each other [with regard to the matter in hand], not willing that any quarrel should arise between them upon this head. For neither could Anicetus persuade Polycarp to forego the observance in his own way, inasmuch as these things had been always so observed by John the disciple of our Lord and by other apostles with whom he had been conversant; nor, on the other hand, could Polycarp succeed in persuading Anicetus to keep the observance in his way], for he maintained that he was bound to adhere to the usage of the presbyters who preceded him. And in this state of affairs they held fellowship with each other; and Anicetus conceded to Polycarp in the Church the celebration of the Eucharist, by way

of showing him respect; so that they parted in peace one from the other, maintaining peace with the whole Church, both those who did observe this custom] and those who did not. (Ireneus, *Fragment 3, Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol 1, p 1177*) (Bk. p 568).

Differences of the Fast

There are other things, however, which are different in different places and countries: *e.g.*, some fast on Saturday, others do not; some partake daily of the body and blood of Christ, others receive it on stated days: in some places no day passes without the sacrifice being offered; in others it is only on Saturday and the Lord's day, or it may be only on the Lord's day. In regard to these and all other variable observances which may be met anywhere, one is at liberty to comply with them or not as he chooses; and there is no better rule for the wise and serious Christian in this matter, than to conform to the practice which he finds prevailing in the Church to which it may be his lot to come. For such a custom, if it is clearly not contrary to the faith nor to sound morality, is to be held as a thing indifferent, and ought to be observed for the sake of fellowship with those among whom we live. (Augustine, *Letter 54-2, 2nd Group, Post-Nicene Fathers I, Vol 1, p 579*) (Bk. p 300)

Unscriptural Extremes

Some of the fathers went to unscriptural extremes in the practice of discipline by refusing to restore the penitent without a lengthy period of probation and by rejecting the validity of the sacraments of errorists or schismatics. We have already seen traces of this in some of the quotations above.

Severity

Rejection of heretical baptism

There is to us one, and only one, baptism; both according to the Lord's gospel and according to the apostle's letters, inasmuch as he says, "One God, and one baptism, and one church in the heavens." But it must be admitted that the question, "What rules are to be observed with regard to heretics?" is worthy of being treated. For it is to us that that assertion of one baptism refers. Heretics, however, have no fellowship in our discipline, whom the mere fact of their excommunication testifies to be outsiders. I am not bound to recognize in *them* a thing which is enjoined on *me*, because they and we have not the same God, nor one - that is, *the same* - *Christ*. And therefore their baptism is not one *with ours* either, because it is not *the same*; a baptism which, since they have it not duly, doubtless they have *not at all*; nor is that capable of being *counted* which is not *had*. Thus they cannot *receive* it either, because they *have it not*. (Tertullian, *On Baptism, Ch. 15, Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol 3, p 1269*) (Bk. p 676)

Limited Restoration of the Repentant

For who has a doubt that a heretic, deceived by a spurious baptismal rite, upon discovering his mistake and expiating it by repentance, both attains pardon and is restored to the bosom of the Church? Whence even among us, as being on a par with a heathen, nay even *more*

than heathen, a heretic likewise, (such *an one*) is purged through the baptism of truth from the character of heathen and heretic and admitted to the Church. Or else, if you are certain that that woman had, after a living faith, subsequently expired, and turned heretic, in order that you may claim pardon as the result of repentance, not as it were for an heretical, but as it were for a believing, sinner: let her, I grant, repent; but with the view of ceasing from adultery, not however in the prospect of restoration to Church-fellowship as well. For this will be a repentance which we, too, acknowledge to be due much more than you do, but which we reserve, for pardon, to God. (Tertullian, *On Modesty, Ch. 19, Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 4, p 197.*) (Bk. p 96)

Fellowship Restored with the Fallen, But Grudgingly

Those sainted martyrs, who were once with us, but who now are seated with Christ and are sharers in His kingdom and partakers with Him in His judgment and who act as His judicial assessors, received certain of the brethren who had fallen away, and who had become chargeable with sacrificing to the idols. And as they saw that the conversion and repentance of such might be acceptable to Him who desires not at all the death of the sinner, but rather his repentance, they proved their sincerity, received them, brought them together again, assembled with them, and had fellowship with them in their prayers and at their festivals. What advice then, brethren, do you give us as regards these? What should we do? Are we to stand forth and act with the decision and judgment which those (martyrs) formed, and to observe the same graciousness with them, and to deal so kindly with those toward whom they showed such compassion? Or are we to treat their decision as an unrighteous one, and to constitute ourselves judges of their opinion on such subjects, and to throw clemency into tears, and to overturn the established order?

But I shall give a more particular account of one case which occurred among us: There was with us a certain Serapion, an aged believer. He had spent his long life blamelessly, but had fallen in the time of trial (the persecution). Often did this man pray for absolution, but no one gave heed to him; for he had sacrificed to the idols. Falling sick, he continued three successive days dumb and senseless. Recovering a little on the fourth day, he called to him his grandchild, and said, "My son, how long do you detain me? Hasten, I entreat you, and absolve me quickly. Summon one of the presbyters to me." And when he had said this, he became speechless again. The boy ran for the presbyter; but it was night, and the man was sick, and was consequently unable to come. But as an injunction had been issued by me, that persons at the point of death, if they requested it then, and especially if they had earnestly sought it before, should be absolved, in order that they might depart this life in cheerful hope, he gave the boy a small portion of the Eucharist, telling him to steep it in water and drop it into the old man's mouth. The boy returned bearing the portion; and as he came near, and before he had yet entered, Serapion again recovered, and said, "You have come, my child, and the presbyter was unable to come; but do quickly what you were instructed to do, and so let me depart." The boy steeped the morsel in water, and at once dropped it into the old man's mouth; and after he had swallowed a little of it, he forthwith gave up the ghost. Was he not then manifestly preserved? and did he not continue in life just until he could be absolved, and until through the wiping away of his sins he could be acknowledged for the many good acts he had done? (Dionysius, *Epistle III, Ch. 10. Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 6, p 218.*) (Bk. p100)

Laxity

Minimizing Doctrinal Error

The historian Eusebius attributes the following minimizing of the Arian error to Constantine. This may reflect a stage of the controversy when Constantine was not yet adequately informed about the issue, since he later took strong action against the Arians. He did, nevertheless, remain confused about the issues.

I understand, then, that the origin of the present controversy is this. When you, Alexander, demanded of the presbyters what opinion they severally maintained respecting a certain passage in the Divine law, or rather, I should say, that you asked them something connected with an unprofitable question, then you, Arius, inconsiderately insisted on what ought never to have been conceived at all, or if conceived, should have been buried in profound silence. Hence it was that a dissension arose between you, fellowship was withdrawn, and the holy people, rent into diverse parties, no longer preserved the unity of the one body. Now, therefore, do you both exhibit an equal degree of forbearance, and receive the advice which your fellow-servant righteously gives. What then is this advice? It was wrong in the first instance to propose such questions as these, or to reply to them when propounded. For those points of discussion which are enjoined by the authority of no law, but rather suggested by the contentious spirit which is fostered by misused leisure, even though they may be intended merely as an intellectual exercise, ought certainly to be confined to the region of our own thoughts, and not hastily produced in the popular assemblies, nor unadvisedly entrusted to the general ear....

"Let therefore both the unguarded question and the inconsiderate answer receive your mutual forgiveness. For the cause of your difference has not been any of the leading doctrines or precepts of the Divine law, nor has any new heresy respecting the worship of God arisen among you. You are in truth of one and the same judgment: you may therefore well join in communion and fellowship

"For as long as you continue to contend about these small and very insignificant questions, it is not fitting that so large a portion of God's people should be under the direction of your judgment, since you are thus divided between yourselves. I believe it indeed to be not merely unbecoming, but positively evil, that such should be the case....

Permit me, who am his servant, to bring my task to a successful issue, under the direction of his Providence, that I may be enabled, through my exhortations, and diligence, and earnest admonition, to recall his people to communion and fellowship. For since you have, as I said, but one faith, and one sentiment respecting our religion, and since the Divine commandment in all its parts enjoins on us all the duty of maintaining a spirit of concord, let not the circumstance which has led to a slight difference between you, since it does not affect the validity of the whole, cause any division or schism among you. And this I say without in any way desiring to force you to entire unity of judgement in regard to this truly idle question, whatever its real nature may be. For the dignity of your synod may be preserved, and the communion of your whole body maintained unbroken, however wide a difference may exist among you as to unimportant matters. For we are not all of us like-minded on every subject, nor is there such a thing as one disposition and judgement common to all alike. As far, then, as regards the Divine Providence,

let there be one faith, and one understanding among you, one united judgment in reference to God. But as to your subtle disputations on questions of little or no significance, though you may be unable to harmonize in sentiment, such differences should be consigned to the secret custody of your own minds and thoughts. And now, let the preciousness of common affection, let faith in the truth, let the honor due to God and to the observance of his law continue immovably among you. Resume, then, your mutual feelings of friendship, love, and regard: restore to the people their wonted embracings; and do you yourselves, having purified your souls, as it were, once more acknowledge one another. For it often happens that when reconciliation is effected by the removal of the causes of enmity, friendship becomes even sweeter than it was before. (Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, Bk. II, Ch. 69- 71. *Post-Nicene Fathers H, Vol 1, p 904-906.*) (Bk. 516-517)

Advice for Hard Cases

The wisest of the church fathers recognized "hard cases" for which they were reluctant to give advice.

As to ordaining a man who was baptized in the Donatist sect, I cannot take the responsibility of recommending you to do this. It is one thing for you to do it if you are left without alternative; it is another thing for me to advise that you should do it. (Augustine, *Letter 245, 4th Group, Post-Nicene Fathers I, Vol 1, p 1197*) (Bk. p 588)

The quotations are taken from the Sage Computer Library edition of the Roberts and Donaldson edition of the Ante-Nicene, Nicene, and Post Nicene Fathers. The first page reference is to the computer edition, the second reference to the printed books. There has been some modernization of wording and punctuation.

Calvin's View of Fellowship

From the *Institutes* p 1169. (*Fourth Book Ch. 1, 12-13*)

12. When we say that the pure ministry of the word and pure celebration of the sacraments is a fit pledge and earnest, so that we may safely recognize a church in every society in which both exist, our meaning is, that we are never to discard it so long as these remain, though it may otherwise teem with numerous faults. Nay, even in the administration of word and sacraments defects may creep in which ought not to alienate us from its communion. For all the heads of true doctrine are not in the same position. Some are so necessary to be known, that all must hold them to be fixed and undoubted as the proper essentials of religion: for instance that God is one, that Christ is God, and the Son of God, that our salvation depends on the mercy of God, and the like. Others, again, which are the subject of controversy among the churches, do not destroy the unity of the faith; for why should it be regarded as a ground of dissension between churches, if one, without any spirit of contention or perverseness in dogmatizing, hold that the soul on quitting the body flies to heaven, and another, without venturing to speak

positively as to the abode without it for certain that it lives with the Lord? 1 The words of the Apostle are, "Let us therefore, as many as be perfect, be thus minded: and if in anything, you be otherwise minded, God shall reveal even this unto you" (Philemon 3:15). Does he not sufficiently intimate that a difference of opinion as to these matters which are not absolutely necessary, ought not to be a ground of dissension among Christians? The best thing, indeed, is to be perfectly agreed, but seeing there is no man who is not involved in some mist of ignorance, we must either have no church at all, or pardon delusion in those things of which once may be ignorant, without violating the substance of religion and forfeiting salvation. Here, however, I have no wish to patronize even the minutest errors, as if I thought it right to foster them by flattery or connivance; what I say is, that we are not on account of every minute difference to abandon a church, provided it retain sound and unimpaired that doctrine in which the safety of piety consists, 2 and keep the use of the sacraments instituted by the Lord- Meanwhile, if we strive to reform what is offensive, we act in the discharge of duty. To this effect are the words of Paul, "If anything be revealed to another that sits by, let the first hold his peace" (I Corinthians 14:30). From this it is evident that to each member of the Church, according to his measure of grace, the study of public edification has been assigned, provided it be done decently and in order. In other words, we must neither renounce the communion of the Church, nor, continuing in it, disturb peace and discipline when duly arranged

Our indulgence ought to extend much farther in tolerating imperfection of conduct. Here there is great danger of falling, and Satan employs all his machinations to ensnare us. For there always have been persons who, imbued with a false persuasion of absolute holiness, as if they had already become a kind of aerial spirits, 4 spurn the society of all in whom they see that something human still remains. Such of old were the Cathari and the Donatists, who were similarly infatuated. Such in the present day are some of the Anabaptists, who would be thought to have made superior progress. Others, again, sin in this respect, not so much from that insane pride as from inconsiderate zeal. Seeing that among those to whom the gospel is preached, the fruit produced is not in accordance with the doctrine, they forthwith conclude that there no church exists. The offense is indeed well founded, and it is one to which in this most unhappy age we give far too much occasion. It is impossible to excuse our accursed sluggishness, which the Lord will not leave unpunished, as he is already beginning sharply to chastise us. Woe then to us who, by our dissolute license of wickedness, cause weak consciences to be wounded! Still those of whom we have spoken sin in their turn, by not knowing how to set bounds to their offense. For where the Lord requires mercy they omit it, and give themselves up to immoderate severity. Thinking there is no church where there is not complete purity and integrity of conduct, they, through hatred of wickedness, withdraw from a genuine church, which they think they are shunning the company of the ungodly. They allege that the Church of God is holy. But that they may at the same time understand that it contains a mixture of good and bad, let them hear from the lips of our Savior that parable in which he compares the Church to a net in which all kinds of fishes are taken, but not separated until they are brought ashore. Let them hear it compared to a field which, planted with good seed, is by the fraud of an enemy mingled with tares, and is not freed of them until the harvest is brought into the barn. Let them hear, in fine, that it is a thrashing floor in which the collected wheat lies concealed under the chaff, until, cleansed by the fanners and the sieve, it is at length laid up in the granary. If the Lord declares that the Church will labor under the defect of being burdened with a multitude of wicked until the Day of Judgment, it is in vain to look for a church altogether free from blemish (Matthew 13).