

THE BIBLICAL DOCTRINE OF THE CHURCH

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The Church

Luther once commented that as a result of the Reformation every child can now correctly explain the doctrine of the church. The biblical word "church" refers to the spiritual assembly of all people who believe in Christ as their Savior from sin. Although we sometimes use the word "church" in a loose sense as the name for the building in which we worship or as a name for a congregation or a denomination of Christians, in biblical usage "church" always refers to an assembly of people who have faith in Christ or to the sum total of such believers.

Saving faith is always the personal attitude of one individual. The Holy Spirit works through the gospel to bring individual men, women, and children to faith. Even on days when many people come to faith simultaneously, such as on Pentecost, each person comes to faith as an individual. Each person must believe for himself; no one else can believe for him.

But individual Christians do not remain alone. Everyone who is joined to Christ by faith is also joined to every other believer. "If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin" (1 John 1:7). Through faith in Christ believers are adopted as members of the family of God (Galatians 3:26).

Just as many bricks are cemented together to form one building, so many believers are joined together to build one church of God. "As you come to [Christ], the living Stone, ...you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ ...You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light" (1 Peter 2:4,5,9).

It Is One, Holy, Catholic, Apostolic Church:

One Church

Christians are joined together into one body regardless of their sex, age, wealth, or nationality. Whether they are male or female, young or old, rich or poor, white or black, Lutheran, Baptist, or Catholic, all who truly believe in Jesus as their Savior from sin are members of one family, the holy Christian Church. How wonderful to know that "there is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all" (Ephesians 4:5-6).

Because there is only one way to heaven, namely, faith in Christ, there is only one holy Christian Church. All who believe in Jesus Christ as Savior are members of this one church. No unbelievers or hypocrites, however, are members of this church. On Judgment Day we may find that some people who were life-long members of a Christian congregation were never members of the holy Christian Church, because they never had faith. In unusual circumstances believers may have no opportunity to belong to an organized Christian congregation. They are, nevertheless, members of the holy Christian Church.

Ephesians 4:3-6 Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit--just as you were called to one hope when you were called--one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

A Holy Church

The church is holy, not by its own actions or characteristics, but because its members are saints who have been declared holy because of Christ's payment for their sins.

Ephesians 5:26-27 [Christ made] her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, 27 and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.

An Apostolic Church

The church is apostolic because it is founded on the confession that Christ is the only Savior from sin. This teaching was confessed by Peter and recorded in the apostolic Scriptures.

Matthew 16:18 And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.

Ephesians 2:20 [The church is] built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.

John 8:31 To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples.

A Catholic Church

In the English version of the Nicene Creed we follow the tradition of translating *calholicam ecclesiam* as "Christian church" just as the Book of Concord does (*christliche Kirche*). Properly understood, "catholic" does not mean anything more than "one, Christian, and apostolic." The one church of throughout the world is made up of all believers in Christ who have been brought to faith through the means of grace which Christ delivered to the church through the apostles.

The Invisible Church

We call this one true church the "invisible church" because only God knows with certainty who its members are. This is because membership in the church is determined solely by the presence or absence of faith in a person's heart, and only God can read the heart (1 Samuel 16:7). We cannot detect the hypocrites and impostors in the church, but God recognizes every member of his church: "God's solid foundation stands firm, sealed with this inscription: "The Lord knows those who are his"" (2 Timothy 2:19). On Judgment Day God will separate the true Christians from the pretenders (Matthew 7:21-23, Matthew 25:31-46).

The Visible Church

Certain "marks of the church" enable us to detect its presence

Although the church is invisible in the sense described above, we can recognize where the church is present. Wherever there are believers, the church is present, and there will be believers present wherever the tools which God uses to create saving faith in Christ are being used (Isaiah 55: 10-11, Matthew 28:19-20, 1 Peter 1:23, Titus 3:5). We can, therefore, assume that believers are present wherever the truth of the gospel is being preached and people are receiving baptism and the Lord's Supper as Christ instituted them.

Individual Christians who have been brought to faith by these means of grace will make public confession of the faith which is hidden in their hearts. "It is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved" (Romans 10: 10). Wherever we find Christians

confessing the faith which has been worked in them by the means of grace, we can assume the presence of true believers, that is, the presence of the church.

The Activities of the Church

Because they are God's children, Christians want to worship God. They want to study God's Word. They want to proclaim the gospel to others. And they want to do these things with other Christians. Whenever Christians meet other believers who confess the same faith which they confess, they want to join together with them in worshipping God and sharing the gospel with others. They want to encourage these fellow Christians and to receive admonition and encouragement from them. They want to partake of the Lord's Supper together to receive assurance of forgiveness and to express their unity in Christ. They want to pool their talents and their offerings in joint efforts of Christian education and evangelism. They want to pray for each other. They want to enjoy the company of fellow Christians. For all these reasons Christians join together in congregations.

In doing this they also obey God's commands: "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God" (Colossians 3:16) and "Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another--and all the more as you see the Day approaching" (Hebrews 10:24-25).

Visible Churches

We call such organizations of Christians who gather in obedience to Christ's command "visible churches," because we can recognize the members of such groups by their public acceptance of the confession of that church and by their participation in the activities of that church. We can even count the members of the visible church who publicly confess their faith (Acts 2:41 Acts 4:44).

Such local congregations of Christians may join together in larger groupings called synods, denominations, or church bodies. Such larger groups of congregations and pastors are often the most efficient form of organization for carrying out such assignments of the church as training pastors and teachers, supporting missions, and guarding doctrinal purity. (Individual Christians may also join together in groups such as mission societies to carry out certain aspects of the work of the church.)

When visible churches teach the Word of God purely, without adding to it or subtracting from it, we call them "orthodox churches," that is, churches which teach the straight Word of God. When visible churches do not teach the Word of God purely, but mix false teaching with it, we call them "heterodox churches," that is, churches which teach differently than God's Word teaches. We call even such a false teaching group a "church" because of the presence of believers in it. If the gospel which presents Christ's death as the way to salvation is still being taught in a heterodox church, there will still be believers there, since the gospel has the power to bring people to faith in spite of the error present along side of it.

Nevertheless, the false teaching which is tolerated in a heterodox church is always dangerous to people's faith. Christians have a duty to separate themselves from such error in order to protect themselves from it and to warn others against it.

The biblical doctrine of the church pulls us in two different but complementary directions: we are eager to work together with fellow Christians, but we must avoid working with those who teach and tolerate error.

Church Fellowship

The Definition Of Church Fellowship

"Fellowship" refers to friendly relationships between people and to activities in which they work together to advance their common goals.

We may use the term "fellowship" to refer first of all to the spiritual relationship which we have with God through faith in Christ. With John we confess, "Our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ" (I John 1:3). "Christian fellowship" may also refer to the spiritual ties which we have with all believers as members of the invisible church. Each Sunday we confess, "I believe in the holy Christian Church, the communion [that is, the fellowship] of saints" or "We believe in one holy Christian and apostolic Church." We cherish this fellowship with God and all believers as a great blessing. We recognize every baptism performed in the name of the Triune God and according to Christ's institution as a valid baptism which makes the recipient a child of God. We do not rebaptize people who come to us from another Christian church. We rejoice when people are brought to saving faith also through the evangelism of churches outside our fellowship. We eagerly look forward to the time when we will enjoy the inheritance of heaven with all believers, and all divisions in the church will be healed.

But when we speak about "church fellowship" in this paper, we are referring to all activities in which Christians join together as members of visible churches. "Church fellowship" is every expression of faith in which Christians join together because they are united by their acceptance and confession of all of the teachings of Scripture. We are practicing "church fellowship" whenever we declare that we are united in doctrine with other Christians and whenever we join with them in activities which express such a shared faith in God's Word.

Since we cannot judge the presence or absence of faith in Christ from a person's heart, we must determine whether we can practice church fellowship with an individual by examining his or her confession of faith. If individuals or groups agree with all of the teachings of Scripture, they should practice church fellowship together. If they disagree in doctrine, they should not practice church fellowship with each other.

It is important then to distinguish three aspects of fellowship: 1) the spiritual fellowship which all believers have with God and with each other through faith in Christ, 2) the doctrinal fellowship which is recognized by a shared confession of the truth, and 3) the church fellowship which is expressed by joint religious activities. These three aspects may be summarized by three words: faith, confession, and action. Faith is worked in us and known with certainty only by God. Judging the existence of this fellowship of faith remains the responsibility of God alone. Although our confession and actions too are worked in us by God, confession and actions can be recognized by us and carried out by us. We are responsible for judging the confession of all fellow Christians according to Scripture. We are to work together only with those whose confession agrees with all of the truths of Scripture.

Definition of the "Unit Concept" of Church Fellowship

The biblical concept of church fellowship as taught and practiced by the Wisconsin Synod has sometimes been called the "unit concept" of church fellowship. Although this expression never occurs in Scripture, it is an appropriate name, since the Bible teaches that the practice of church fellowship must be treated as a unit in two different respects.

First, when the doctrines of Scripture are being discussed to determine if we can practice fellowship with other Christians, these doctrines must be dealt with as an indivisible unit. Since all the teachings of Scripture have been given by God, we have no right to add anything to them nor to subtract anything from them (Deuteronomy 4:2). The practice of church fellowship must, therefore, be based on agreement in all of the doctrines of Scripture. Persistent rejection of even one teaching of Scripture breaks church fellowship between Christians. Some doctrines, such as the doctrines of justification or the means of grace, are more critical for our salvation than others but we have no right to reject any teaching of Scripture, including its historical statements and its description of creation.

This truth is expressed in the WELS theses on fellowship which say: "A Christian confession of faith is in principle always a confession to the entire Word of God. The denial, alteration, or suppression of any word of God does not stem from faith but from unbelief" *WELS Theses, B, 2*

Second, the various activities through which we express church fellowship must be dealt with as a unit. Various ways of expressing church fellowship (such as doing mission work together, celebrating the Lord's Supper together, exchanging pastors, transferring members from one congregation to another, and praying together) are merely different ways of expressing the same fellowship of faith. All forms of church fellowship, therefore, require the same level of doctrinal agreement, namely, agreement in all of the doctrines of Scripture. Partial agreement in doctrine does not permit partial practice of fellowship. For example, if Christians cannot partake of the Lord's Supper together, they cannot do mission work together either.

We now turn to a brief survey of the Scripture passages which establish these two principles.

The Scriptural Doctrine Of Church Fellowship

Any attempt to summarize the scriptural basis for the doctrine of church fellowship is faced with an immediate difficulty. The abundance of the biblical material makes it impossible to begin to cover the topic adequately in a short paper. At least half of the letters of the New Testament were written primarily to preserve a fellowship that was in jeopardy. Galatians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, and the three 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 Paul's directions to young pastors for strengthening and preserving fellowship. The biblical doctrine of church fellowship is not based only on a few scattered proof texts, such as Romans 16:17, but it is expressed in virtually every letter of the New Testament, as well as in the Gospels and the Old Testament. For this reason our study of the scriptural evidence will have to be partial.

John's Letters

Two short letters, 2 and 3 John, are the best texts for gaining an overview of the doctrine of church fellowship, because they provide a concrete example of the application of the principles of church fellowship to a real-life situation in the New Testament church. John provides us with 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" (3 John 1:8). This definition 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 the doctrine of church fellowship is to lead us to work together with fellow Christians, not to separate from them. In 2 and 3 John the specific form of "working together" which is under consideration is joint support of missionaries. John and his readers worked together by sending out missionaries, by recommending these missionaries and their message to others, by offering these men financial support, and by welcoming them as Christian brothers (2 John 1: 10; 3 John 1:5,6,8,12).

How can we identify those Christians with whom we may safely practice fellowship? Since we cannot judge the faith in a person's heart, our outward fellowship with another Christian must be based on whether or not that person's confession agrees with apostolic doctrine. John says, "We are from God, and whoever knows God listens to us; but whoever is not from God does not listen to us. This is how we recognize the Spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood" (1 John 4:6). Although church fellowship is defined as "working together," not every sort of working together is God-pleasing church fellowship. John defines God-pleasing fellowship as "working together for the truth" (3 John 1:8). We, therefore, cannot work together with anyone who departs from the true teachings of Scripture.

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 two short letters John mentions "truth" a dozen times. He warns that

those who work together with false teachers, either by giving them financial support or by wishing them well, are enemies of the truth, who are guilty of sharing in the false teachers' sin: "Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God; whoever continues in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take him into your house or welcome him. Anyone who welcomes him shares in his wicked work" (2 John 9-11). Supporters of the truth cannot work together with supporters of falsehood, "for we cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth" (2 Corinthians 13:8).

John, therefore, warns against Diotrophes, the leader of the false teachers, by name so that his readers can avoid him (3 John 1:9-10). Working together for the truth excludes working together with false teachers and their supporters. Of the false teachers John says, "They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us" (I John 2:19). John urges his readers and us, "Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world ...They are from the world and therefore speak from the viewpoint of the world, and the world listens to them. We are from God, and whoever knows God listens to us; but whoever is not from God does not listen to us. This is how we recognize the Spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood (I John 4:1,5,6).

The Letters in Revelation 2 and 3

In his letters to the seven churches the apostle John (really Christ speaking through him) shows the same concern for separating truth from falsehood which we have seen in John's earlier letters. These letters to the seven churches beautifully reflect that balance between contending for the truth and acting in love which Jesus wants to find in his church.

Jesus warns the church at Ephesus that it is losing its first love, but he commends it for testing and identifying false apostles and for refusing to tolerate them (Revelation 2:2,3). Jesus rebukes the churches at Pergamum and Thyatira for tolerating false teachers who encouraged people to ignore God's law (Revelation 2:14-16, 20-21).

Today some people claim that the church needs more love and less zeal for doctrinal truth, but neither truth nor love can serve its purpose unless both are kept together. If we really want to help our neighbor, but in ignorance we are telling him falsehoods which will lead him to hell, such "love" is really a deadly device of Satan. If we know the truth, but we proclaim it in an arrogant, self-righteous way, we place a stumbling block in the way of our neighbor. "Love" without knowledge of the truth is misguided zeal which leads souls away from God (Romans 10: 1-3). On the other hand, if we know the truth but do not have enough love to share it with others, the truth cannot accomplish its purpose. If we know God's law but refuse to correct a neighbor who is caught in error, this is not "love" but sinful selfishness. If we know the gospel but withhold it from those crushed by the burden of sin, the gospel cannot accomplish its healing purpose.

We must share the truth in a gentle, tactful way, but to withhold the truth from someone is never love. If one night you saw that your neighbors' house was on fire but you failed to scream warnings to them because you did not want to disturb their sleep, everyone would call you stupid and uncaring. But when false teaching is placing people's souls in danger of the eternal fires of hell, we are urged to keep quiet about it and to call such silence "love." What is more unloving--to fail to warn people against a fire which can destroy their bodies or to fail to warn them against false doctrine which can destroy their souls? Failure to warn of danger is never love.

The church needs to keep truth and love in balance just as much as an airplane needs two wings to fly. If either wing is lost, the plane will crash. If either truth or love is lost, the church cannot carry out its mission. Truth and love are not opposites. They are not rivals. They are partners which dare not be separated.

When we are told that we must choose between truth and love, we must remember God's definition of love. Real love is above all else that we love all of God's truth: "If you love me, you will obey what I command. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever--the Spirit of truth.

The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you" (John 14:15-17). We must frankly ask whether the reluctance of people today to speak against false teaching is due to greater love for other people or to less love for God's Word. If we love God's truth, we will share all of it with our neighbors, especially when they are in danger of being led astray by false teachers. Telling the truth is the highest expression of love.

Paul urged young pastor Timothy: "Stay there in Ephesus so that you may command certain men not to teach false doctrines any longer. The goal of this command is love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith" (1 Timothy 13-5). The greatest love we can show for anyone is to guard them against the soul-destroying poison of false doctrine by telling them the truth.

Paul's Pastoral Letters

Paul's concern for true doctrine shows itself throughout his three pastoral letters to Timothy and Titus. He piles one admonition on another as he urges Timothy to oppose false teachers (1 Timothy 1:35). Like John, Paul identifies such false teachers by name so that people can be on the lookout against them (1 Timothy 1:20, 2 Timothy 2:17, 4:14). Paul delivers a strong warning against false teachers who will come bringing 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 and the teachers who bring them (1 Timothy 4:1-6).

Paul warns that, in spite of the efforts of faithful teachers, false teachers will flourish in the last days. They will be popular because they will tell people what they want to hear, even condoning people's immoral life-styles (2 Timothy 3:1-9, 4:3-4).

Anyone who teaches differently than the sound words of the Lord Jesus Christ is conceited and knows nothing (1 Timothy 6:3). If such false teachers reject the warnings against their teaching, they themselves are to be rejected by those who love God's truth: "Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him" (Titus 3: 10).

Although God's workmen are to oppose falsehood, they are to avoid 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 (2 Timothy 2:14-26).

Christians are to be careful about whom they put into positions of leadership in the church lest they become guilty of sponsoring the sins of others (1 Timothy 5:22).

Romans 16:17,18

Since Romans 16:17 is undoubtedly the passage most often quoted on this topic, we will single it out for special attention. "I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way, contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them. For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people" (Romans 16:17,18).

Romans 16:17 and 18 follow immediately after a long expression of church fellowship, the Christian greetings and commendations which Paul extends in Romans 16:1-16. In contrast to the command "greet" which dominates verses 1-16, Paul introduces a very different command in verse 17--"keep away." Both commands are addressed to the same people, to Paul's brothers and sisters in the faith, the members of the congregation at Rome. The two commands, however, govern their relationship with two different groups of people.

The Roman Christians were in spiritual fellowship with Paul because they were united with him by their faith in Christ. They were also in church fellowship with Paul since they accepted all of the doctrine which Paul had taught throughout his letter and which he taught in all his mission fields. For this reason Paul is confident

that they will want to be taught by him when he passes through Rome and that they will want to support his new mission project in Spain (Romans 15:23-24). He, therefore, urges them to greet all those at Rome who share their common faith. But in verse 17 he warns them to keep away from all those who do not share that faith.

He says "watch out" for them. Because false teachers disguise themselves, the Roman Christians must continually be on the look-out so that they will not be deceived by the smooth talk of false teachers.

Who are the people the Romans are to keep away from? They are described as people who "are causing divisions and setting up traps which cause people to fall into sin, contrary to the teaching you have learned." The Greek verb rendered "are causing divisions" describes an action which is continuous and habitual. The people to be avoided are not teachers who inadvertently misspeak. They are not naive or uninformed victims who unknowingly follow false doctrine. They are teachers who persist in their false doctrine and their sinful conduct in spite of warnings against it. They are serving "their own appetites," that is, they are not serving Christ, but their own egos, desires, lusts, intellect, and reason. They may look like servants of Christ to the casual observer, but no one ever serves Christ by any false teaching. Since their man-made teachings appeal to human reason and to sinful desires, the false teachers find willing followers who join in their sin. Both the teachers and their supporters are to be avoided.

There is no indication in the text that Paul is limiting his condemnation to specific false teachers who were present in Rome. He is stating a general principle which has a universal application. Anytime Christians recognize false teachers who continue in their error in spite of admonition, they are to keep away from them, that is, they are to make a clean break from them. "Divisions and traps which cause people to fall into sin" is a phrase broad enough to apply to any false teaching, whether it involves doctrine or morality. "The doctrine which you have learned" is a comprehensive phrase which includes everything which the Roman Christians had been taught by the apostles and their assistants.

It should be noted in passing that Paul labels the false teachers as people "who cause divisions" in the church. It has always been the style of false teachers to blame the divisions in the church on the true teachers who oppose their false teaching and separate from them. The ungodly king Ahab labeled the prophet Elijah as the "troubler of Israel." But Elijah's denunciation of the wicked idolatry of Ahab and Jezebel was not the cause of the division in Israel. Ahab and Jezebel had divided Israel by installing the worship of Baal along side the worship of the Lord as it had been taught by Moses (I Kings 18:17-19). Ahab and Jezebel were the real "troublers of Israel."

Luther did not divide the church by steadfastly opposing the false teachings of the Pope at Rome. The Pope and his adherents had divided the church by introducing new doctrines contrary to the doctrines the apostles had taught. Luther was trying to re-unite the church on the basis of a return to apostolic doctrine. False teachers always try to blame the divisions in the church on the true teachers who oppose them and who separate from them, but Scripture places the blame for division in the church where it belongs--on the false teachers who depart from the unity produced by obedience to God's Word.

Conclusion

This survey of the New Testament has shown that a concern for doctrinal unity as the basis for the practice of church fellowship is not an incidental matter for the writers of the New Testament, but runs through all their work. The space limitations of this paper do not permit us to survey this doctrine throughout all the books of the Bible in the same detail. We must, therefore, limit ourselves to the study of representative passages from other New Testament books. We will focus on passages which address the two questions which are the main disputed issues in connection with this doctrine: 1) Does Scripture require agreement in all doctrines as a basis for the practice of church fellowship? 2) 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?

Agreement in *All* Doctrine

Nothing in Scripture suggests that the unity of faith which is required 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. When he wrote to the Galatians, Paul was battling a denial of the doctrine of justification through faith alone, by grace alone. In his epistles John appears to be battling a heresy that denied Jesus' humanity. But the New Testament cites many other types of doctrinal error as divisive of fellowship, including denial of the resurrection of the body (2 Timothy 2:18), teaching Christians that they could disregard God's commandments since the forgiveness of sins was free (Revelation 2 & 3, Jude 1:310, 2 Peter 2:14, 1 33-20), forbidding marriage and prohibiting certain foods (I Timothy 4:3), and quarrels about genealogies and the law (Titus 3:9). This list is comprehensive enough to demonstrate that the apostles' concern for doctrinal purity was not limited to a few key doctrines. The Bible closes with the solemn warning that a curse rests on anyone who adds *anything* to the Bible or who subtracts *anything* from it: "I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds anything to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book. And if anyone takes words away from this book of prophecy, God will take away from him his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book" (Revelation 22:18-19). Since no one has the right to add to or subtract anything from the Bible, we cannot work together with those who persistently reject any teachings of the Bible.

It is true that, just as some doses of poison are more deadly than others, the loss of certain doctrines, such as the doctrines of justification or the deity of Christ, is more deadly to faith than the loss of other doctrines, such as a correct understanding of the doctrine of the Antichrist. But just as we want no poison in our food, not even the unintentional inclusion of small amounts of cancer-causing substances, so we can tolerate no poison in our spiritual food, that is, the teachings of Scripture which feed our faith. We must separate ourselves from everyone who clings to false teaching in spite of warnings and admonition.

Agreement in adiaphora (things which God has neither commanded nor forbidden) and ceremonies is not necessary for fellowship (Romans 14). On another occasion Paul said, "Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day" (Colossians 2:16).

Christians do not have to use the same liturgy or enjoy the same style of worship to be in fellowship with each other. Worship styles in our world mission fields are often quite different than those in an American suburban WELS congregation. Such differences of opinion and practice are not divisive of church fellowship unless one party insists that its way is the only right way (Galatians 5: 1). There is room for much diversity of custom in the church, but nothing in the New Testament offers any basis for excluding any doctrine from the unity needed for fellowship.

Our Lutheran Confessions state this principle in Article VII of the Augsburg Confession which says, "To the true unity of the Church it is enough to agree concerning the doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments. Nor is it necessary that human traditions, that is rites or ceremonies, instituted by men, should be everywhere alike."

Complete agreement in doctrinal terminology is not necessary for church fellowship. We should not battle about mere words (2 Timothy 2:14-26). It, therefore, would not be right to deny fellowship to someone who had the same teaching which we have, but who used different words to express it. It is, however, desirable to agree on common terminology within a church body to avoid confusing people who are receiving instruction.

It would be wrong to divide the church on the basis of loyalty to a particular person (I Cor 1: 11 13, 3:21-23) or to refuse fellowship to anyone on the basis of race, sex, or economic status (Galatians 3:28, James 2:1-5).

Although agreement in adiaphora, ceremonies, and wording is not necessary for fellowship, complete agreement in doctrine is necessary. 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 *everything* which I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:20).

"Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace It was [Christ] who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach *unity in the faith* and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to *the whole measure of the fullness of Christ*. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. 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).

"I have not hesitated to proclaim to you *the whole will of God*. Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard!" (Acts 20:27-31).

"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 other similar passages in the New Testament offers even a hint of support for the idea that any doctrines of Scripture can be dispensed with or that any doctrinal error can be accepted as harmless. In Article X of the Formula of Concord our Lutheran Confessions state: "We believe, teach, and confess also that no Church should condemn another because one has less or more external ceremonies not commanded by God than the other, if otherwise there is agreement among them in *doctrine and all its articles*."

All Ways of Expressing Fellowship Are a Unit

Nothing in Scripture suggests that some ways of practicing church fellowship require less agreement in doctrine than others. In the New Testament all expressions of fellowship are treated as a unit. They are all ways of expressing the same oneness of faith.

Christians express fellowship with one another when they encourage each other by worshipping together (Hebrews 10:24-25, Colossians 3:16). Quite clearly, sharing the Lord's Supper is an expression of fellowship between the participants: "is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf (1 Corinthians 10:17). We, therefore, should worship and commune only with Christians with whom we are in doctrinal agreement. We should not invite pastors who do not agree with our doctrine to preach in our churches, nor should our pastors preach in theirs. We should not attend communion with people who persistently reject any of the teachings of the Bible.

Anyone who provides 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 far away. The Philippians had become 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. "If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take him into your house or welcome him. Anyone who

welcomes him shares in his wicked work" (2 John 1: 10- 11). Those who support false teachers are accomplices of an evil act just as much as the individual who drives the getaway car for a bank robber or the person who hides a fleeing murderer. Anyone who gives money to a false teacher is certainly not obeying Scripture's command to separate from him.

Fellowship may also be expressed by brotherly consultations to resolve doctrinal questions, by joint doctrinal resolutions, by mutual recognition of each other's ministries, and by agreement to divide mission fields (Acts 15:1-32 and Galatians 2:1-10). We, therefore, should not issue joint doctrinal studies with heterodox churches (except in efforts to eliminate the errors that separate them from us), nor do we agree to divide responsibility for mission fields with them.

Church fellowship 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 (Romans 16:1-16). Fellowship is also expressed by the "letters of recommendation" which are common in the New Testament (Romans 16:1-3; 2 Corinthians 8:16-23; 3 John 12). Present-day practices which are parallel to these biblical customs are the handshake given at an ordination, a confirmation, or a colloquy; the exchange of congratulations and greetings offered at church anniversaries and conventions; and letters of transfer. We, therefore, should not transfer members to heterodox churches, nor should we send heterodox churches congratulations and best wishes for their work.

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 in (that is, having fellowship in) the charitable service to the saints in Jerusalem (2 Corinthians 8:4). The goal of this charitable work was not merely to relieve human need, but to join together in glorifying 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" (2 Corinthians 9:12-13). The spiritual motivation and the fellowship which are an essential part of Christian charity are emphasized throughout 2 Corinthians 8 and 9.

There are times when praying for a person is an expression of fellowship with him, for example, when we pray for the success of his ministry (Romans 15:30-32, 2 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. Joining together in public prayer with a person, however, is always an expression of fellowship since it is always an act of religious worship.

The New Testament does not treat prayer fellowship separately from other forms of fellowship. 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). There is, therefore, 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 ways the issue of joint prayer is similar to the issue of infant baptism. The Bible does not specifically say, "baptize babies," but the unrestricted command "baptize all nations" includes children unless valid scriptural reasons can be cited for excluding them. In the same way, the unrestricted commands to "keep away" from false teachers (Romans 16:17) and to "have nothing to do with them" (Titus 3:10) certainly prohibit all expressions of fellowship with them, including prayer. "Have nothing to do with them" and "keep away from them" cannot mean "worship with them."

There is no scriptural basis for dividing the various expressions of fellowship into different levels which require different degrees of doctrinal agreement. Different forms of fellowship 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. It depends on the context in which they are done.

Conclusion

On the basis of the Scripture passages we have studied it is our conviction that all outward expressions of church fellowship should be practiced only among those who agree 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 between church-bodies.

It is also our conviction that agreement in all the doctrines of Scripture forms the necessary prerequisite for the joint practice of all expressions of church fellowship, whether altar and pulpit fellowship, joint prayer, or any other expression of fellowship.

Appendix: Matthew 7

We have seen that Scripture commands us to judge the doctrine of all teachers of religion so that we may avoid those whose teaching departs from God's Word. It also warns us not to do this in a harsh or self-righteous spirit. Jesus brings both of these concerns together in the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 7:1-23. Jesus warns believers:

"Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize themNot everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'" (Matthew 7:15-23).

False teachers are hard to detect since they disguise themselves as true teachers (2 Corinthians 11: 13). We must, therefore, carefully study all of God's Word so that we can judge every teacher of religion, as well as every teaching which comes our way, so that we will be able to avoid those which are contrary to God's Word. The Bereans, who checked Paul's teaching by going to the Scriptures are a model of such Bible study (Acts 17: 11). We must judge every teacher by the fruit he produces, that is, by his teaching.

But in the same chapter in which Jesus commands us to judge teachers, he warns us against self-righteous judging of either the lives or beliefs of others:

"Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye" (Matthew 7:1-5).

We must first be judged by God's Word so that we recognize our own sins and errors. Then we will see clearly to warn others against their sin.

Immediately following this command not to judge self-righteously, Jesus uses shocking language as he commands us to separate ourselves from those who cling to error: "Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and then turn and tear you to pieces" (Matthew 7:6). We cannot share the means of grace with those who despise God and his Word. We

cannot practice fellowship with those who support error or live in immorality. Scripture commands us to make strong judgments, but it warns us to make them with humility and patient love.

When we separate from false teachers, we are not judging the faith of their hearts which no human can judge. That judgment we leave to Christ (Matthew 7:23). But we are to judge their teaching and their conduct, which can be judged on the basis of Scripture. From such false teaching and from those who cling to it, we must separate ourselves as Jesus commands (Matthew 7:15).

Jesus' strong opposition to false teachers within the church is not limited to Matthew 7, but is found throughout the gospels (Matthew 15:1-14, 16:5-12, 23:1-36, 24:4-14). When the apostles issued strong warnings to avoid false teachers, they were simply following in their Master's footsteps.