

# **This Blessed Fellowship: Preserving And Extending The Unity Of The Church**

*by John Brug*

There are few joys greater than Christian fellowship. “How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity! It is like precious oil poured on the head, running down on the beard, running down on Aaron’s beard, down upon the collar of his robes. It is as if the dew of Hermon were falling on Mount Zion. For there the LORD bestows his blessing, even life forevermore” (Psalms 133). Christian fellowship is a blessing to celebrate and to cherish.

## **THE FOUNDATIONS OF FELLOWSHIP**

Fellowship and the unity of the church begin with faith in Christ as our Savior. Luther once commented that as a result of the Reformation every child can now correctly explain the doctrine of the church: *The church is the 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 a name for the building in which Christians worship or as a name for a congregation or a denomination of Christians, in the Bible the word “church” always refers to a group of people who have faith in Christ or to the grand total of such believers throughout the world.

Faith is always the action of an individual. The Holy Spirit uses the gospel to bring men, women, and children to faith one by one. Even when many people are converted at one time, as happened on Pentecost, each person comes to faith as an individual. All Christians must believe for themselves; no one else can believe for them.

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)

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). All believers are joined in the fellowship of saving faith.”

## **FELLOWSHIP**

“Fellowship” refers to friendly relationships between people and to activities in which they work together to advance the goals they share.

“Christian fellowship” refers 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” (1 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 gospel preaching of churches outside our fellowship. We eagerly look forward to the time when we will enjoy the inheritance of heaven with all believers, and when all divisions in the church will be healed.

### **THE PRACTICE OF FELLOWSHIP**

But we cannot yet enjoy the full practice of fellowship with all Christians, because false teaching has divided the visible church. Since all the teachings of Scripture have been given by God, no one has a 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*). God’s Word is a unit. We must preserve it as a whole.

The various outward activities through which we express church fellowship also 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.

### **A SCRIPTURAL DESCRIPTION OF FELLOWSHIP**

Two short letters, 2 and 3 John, are the best texts for gaining a quick 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 supplies us with a beautiful definition of church fellowship when he states that his goal 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.

Some have ridiculed our position on church fellowship with statements like “The WELS-LBK position on church fellowship is simple. They are against it.” Nothing could be further from

the truth. We confess with the Scriptures that the practice of church fellowship is something positive: fellowship is “working together.” Faith produces in every Christian the desire to join together with other Christians in worship, prayer, and the Lord’s Supper. Christians will gladly use their varied gifts to support the teaching and evangelizing mission of the church with their offerings and their time. Christians’ energy and concern for church fellowship is focused first of all on finding opportunities to practice fellowship with like-minded Christians. The more we practice a lively, loving fellowship within our congregations and church, the easier it will be for people (both inside the church and outside of it) to understand the whole doctrine of church fellowship.

When we learned to drive a car, we began by learning how to drive well, but a very necessary next step in driver’s training was learning how to avoid crashes. Likewise, when we learn about church fellowship, we begin by learning how to build a strong, loving fellowship with other Christians, but we must also learn how to avoid dangers which will destroy such fellowship.

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).

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” (1 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 (1 John 4:1,5,6). Throughout his letters “the Apostle of Love” shows himself to be “the Apostle of Truth” as well. We need to follow his example by keeping love and truth together.

But even as we must separate when God’s Word commands it, we must always be on guard that we do not create separations which are contrary to God’s Word.

## AVOIDING UNNECESSARY DIVISIONS

If it is wrong to subtract from God's Word or to add to it, it is just as wrong to divide the church over questions which are not answered by God's Word as it is to divide the church by discarding teachings of Scripture. We cannot bind people to doctrinal opinions which cannot be demonstrated from Scripture.

Agreement in adiaphora (things which God has neither commanded nor forbidden) and ceremonies is not necessary for fellowship. In Romans 14 Paul says: "1Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters. 3The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not, and the man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does, for God has accepted him. 5One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. 6He who regards one day as special, does so to the Lord. He who eats meat, eats to the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who abstains, does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God. 13Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way. 19Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification." 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 third-world mission fields are often quite different than those in American or Scandinavian Lutheran congregation. Some Christians may baptize by immersion; some may baptize by pouring water on the baby. Christians are not required to have the same system of church government or all of the same forms of ministry. The WELS has a ministry of Christian elementary school teachers. Many other churches do not. Christians do not have to follow the same diet or wear the same styles in order to practice fellowship together. Some Christians may choose to abstain from alcoholic beverages; others may use them in moderation. 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). In 2 Thessalonians 2 Paul warns against a false teacher called "the man of sin" or "the man of lawlessness." In the fourth chapter of his first epistle John calls this same false teacher "the Antichrist." Even though they used different names for this false teacher, Paul and John agreed on the doctrine concerning his coming. 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.

Difference of words does not necessarily mean difference of doctrine, but we also need to be alert for the opposite danger. Use of the same words may be intended to hide differences of

doctrine. False teachers often try to disguise their false teaching by twisting the meaning of the words which the orthodox church uses to express its teaching. For example, when false teachers call the Bible “infallible,” they mean that it never fails to accomplish God’s purpose even though it contains many errors. Such a use of “infallible” is intended to fool orthodox Christians, who use the same word, “infallible,” to assert that the Bible is entirely without error. Such deception may mislead faithful Christians into thinking that the false teachers are proclaimers of the truth, who deserve their help and support. For this reason, the church has sometimes found it necessary to insist on specific, unambiguous terminology to “smoke out” false teachers. The need for such clear terminology is one reason that the church has composed creeds and confessions. The false teachers’ refusal to accept these creeds exposed their deception and warned people to avoid them.

It is wrong, however, to divide the church on the basis of personal preference for a particular leader (1 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).

### **PRESERVING OUR FELLOWSHIP**

Working together with those who hold to the truth and turning away from those who persist in error does not exhaust our responsibility for this blessed fellowship. We must also work hard to preserve this fellowship whenever it is threatened by the intrusion of sin, strife, or error. “Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3).

There are many ways we work to preserve the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.

### **SHARING THE MEANS OF GRACE**

Christians express their fellowship when they encourage each other by worshipping together (Hebrews 10:24-25, Colossians 3:16). We are united by the Lord’s Supper: “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).

### **PRAYING FOR EACH OTHER**

Paul’s letters are filled with prayers for his readers (Ephesians 3:14-21, Philippians 1:3-11) and with his requests for their prayers (Romans 15:30-32, 2 Corinthians 1:11). We need to be praying for each other daily “that our love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight so that we may be able to discern what is best and be pure and blameless until the day of Christ.”

## **EXPRESSING OUR LOVE**

We strengthen existing ties of fellowship when our words and deeds display that love for fellow Christians which we feel in our hearts. “Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, love one another deeply, from the heart” (1 Peter 1:22).

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). We don’t need to keep our love for our fellow Christians hidden in our hearts, but should express it in appropriate ways.

## **HELPING WITH THE NEEDS OF OUR BROTHERS AND SISTERS**

One way of showing this love is by helping our fellow Christians with their bodily needs. “Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers” (Galatians 6:10). “If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth. This then is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence” (1 John 3:17-19). We strive to live so that Jesus’ description will be true of us: “By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:35).

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.

For Christians who live in great prosperity as all of us do, this duty may be fulfilled primarily toward Christians in foreign lands.

## **BUILDING UP THE CHURCH’S DEFENSES**

We strengthen our ties with fellow believers when we build up the church’s defenses against error. It is the duty of our pastors and teachers to carefully instruct all the members of the congregation in all of the truths of God’s Word so that they are strengthened in their ability to detect and oppose false teaching: “[Christ] 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 who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work” (Ephesians 4:11-16).

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 also build up the defenses of the church by preparing and publishing sound instructional materials and publications which spread scriptural truth.

### **TRAINING SOUND TEACHERS**

Paul told Timothy, "The things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others (2 Timothy 2:2). Every generation is challenged by the task of training sound teachers for the next generation.

### **SUPPORTING ORTHODOX PASTORS**

We strengthen the unity of the church by respecting and supporting faithful teachers of the Word. Paul commanded, "Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing. Now we ask you, brothers, to respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you. Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work. Live in peace with each other" (1 Thessalonians 5:11-13). "The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching" (1 Timothy 5:17). John said, "I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth. Dear friend, you are faithful in what you are doing for the brothers, even though they are strangers to you. They have told the church about your love. You will do well to send them on their way in a manner worthy of God. It was for the sake of the Name that they went out, receiving no help from the pagans. We ought therefore to show hospitality to such men so that we may work together for the truth" (3 John 1:4-8).

The Philippians had become partners in Paul's work through the financial support which they sent him (Philippians 1:5, 4:15). 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. Christians who support a pastor have not entered a business transaction with him, but into a mutual sharing of material and spiritual blessings. "Anyone who receives instruction in the word must share all good things with his instructor" (Galatians 6:6). The pastor shares with his congregation the spiritual treasures which he has received through his training in the Word. The members in turn share their material treasures with the pastor. Paul says, "If we have sown spiritual seed among you, is it too much if we reap a material harvest from you? ... The Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel" (1 Corinthians 9:11,14).

### **WARNING AGAINST SIN**

We preserve fellowship by gently warning a brother or sister who has fallen into error. "The Lord's servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will" (2 Timothy 2:24-26).

We remember how patiently Jesus dealt with the weakness of his disciples as he patiently instructed them. Our WELS theses on fellowship emphasize our responsibility to the weak: “Weakness of faith is in itself not a reason for terminating church fellowship, but rather an inducement for practicing it vigorously to help one another overcome our individual weaknesses. In precept and example Scripture abounds with exhortations to pay our full debt of love toward the weak” (WELS *Theses, B,4*)

### **AVOIDING FALSE TEACHERS AND IMPENITENT SINNERS**

We turn away from the adherents of error only after they have rejected our admonition: “Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him” (Titus 3:10). The same principle also applies when a fellow believer is persisting in a sin. “If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’ If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector” (Matthew 18:15-17).

We must protect the church from the yeast of error which can infect the whole batch of dough. The WELS theses say, “Persistent adherence to false doctrine and practice calls for termination of fellowship. Persistent errorists are those “who in spite of patient admonition persistently adhere to an error in doctrine or practice, demand recognition for their error, and make propaganda for it” (WELS *Theses, B, )* .

### **WORKING TO WIN THE THOSE WHO HAVE SEPARATED FROM US**

Even when efforts to preserve a fellowship have failed, we are still ready to make every effort to restore the broken fellowship with a lost brother or sister. “In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers, to keep away from every brother who ... does not live according to the teaching you received from us.... Brothers, never tire of doing what is right. If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of him. Do not associate with him, in order that he may feel ashamed. Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother” (2 Thessalonians 3:6, 13-15). As the loving father in Jesus’ parable was eager to regain his lost, prodigal son (Luke 15), so we are eager to regain a lost brother. In fact, our separation from him is part of our attempt to regain him. We hope this drastic warning will bring him to his senses so that he returns to the family of faith.

When we deliver warnings against false teaching, we distinguish weak Christians who have been victimized by false teachers from the persistent promoters of false doctrine: “In the last times there will be *scoffers* who will follow their own ungodly desires. These are the men who divide you, who follow mere natural instincts and do not have the Spirit....Be merciful to *those who doubt*; snatch others from the fire and save them; to others show mercy, mixed with fear—hating even the clothing stained by corrupted flesh” (Jude 1:18-19, 22-23). Jesus reserved his harshest tone for the false teachers; he sympathized with their victims (Matthew 23). Paul spoke more harshly of the false teachers than of their victims in Galatia and Corinth. Nevertheless, if those who have been taken in by the false teachers continue to support them even after they have been warned against them, we can no longer consider them to be weak brothers and sisters. We must recognize them as supporters of error and avoid them.



## **WELCOMING BACK THE REPENTANT**

We sinfully divide the church if we fail to restore a repentant sinner to the fellowship of the church (2 Corinthians 2:5-11). As there is joy among the angels over one sinner who repents, so there should be among God's people too (Luke 15).

## **AVOIDING PERSONAL STRIFE**

We preserve the unity of the church when we work to avoid personal strife with fellow believers. Paul says, "I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle. Be patient, dealing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:1-3). "Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you" (Ephesians 4:31-32).

We work for the unity of the church when we attempt to reconcile brothers and sisters who are divided by strife (Philippians 4:2). Sometimes disagreement divides even coworkers (Acts 15:37-39), but sometimes even long-lasting divisions can be healed (2 Timothy 4:11).

## **SPREADING THE GOSPEL**

We also work to create new ties of fellowship whenever we preach the gospel to Christians and non-Christians. "The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ" (1 John 1:2-3).

## **CONCLUSION**

Our spiritual fellowship with God and with all believers is a gift which God has given us. Our outward fellowship with other Christians is likewise a gift, but it is also a responsibility. We must work hard to expand and preserve it, so that we may continue to "work together for the truth" with all of those who hold to the truth.