

THE THEOLOGY OF FELLOWSHIP

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For those of us who lived through the doctrinal struggles of the 40's and 50's, the title of this paper has a very familiar ring. The theology of fellowship was hammered out at every level. From the intersynodical committees to the church council, Wisconsin Synod Lutherans struggled to persuade Missouri, and Wisconsin Synod people as well, that it was necessary to preserve the historical Synodical Conference position on fellowship, namely that we should not worship and pray together unless we can agree in doctrine. We went back to Scripture again and again, not only to persuade others, but also to renew our own conviction that this doctrine of fellowship must be upheld, no matter what the cost.

The cost was indeed great, as our Synod lost pastors and congregations, first those who thought that we had not separated from Missouri soon enough, and then those who thought that we had separated from Missouri too soon. The struggle was costly, not only in terms of personnel, but also in terms of time and energy consumed in defending the Scriptural doctrine of fellowship. By God's grace we did not waver in that doctrine, and when the break finally came, our Synod stood alone, but essentially stronger and better equipped to carry the Gospel banner in the 60's and 70's.

It is not the purpose of this paper to question or restate the doctrinal position that compelled us to sever fellowship ties with Missouri in 1961. We have clearly defined that area of fellowship theology which identifies those with whom we may or may not practice Christian fellowship. This paper would rather focus attention upon our Christian obligation toward those with whom we may practice fellowship. Or to put it another way, this paper will attempt to elaborate upon the significance and application of the words of Christ recorded in John 13:34-35, "A new commandment I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. All men will know that you are my disciples if you love one another."

In recent years my attention has been drawn to this particular area of Christian fellowship, and I have occasionally searched with some degree of diligence for a pronouncement from our church that would expand upon this area of Christian fellowship. It has regularly been a fruitless search. Take, for example, our Lutheran Hymnal with 660 Christian hymns selected to cover a wide variety of Christian topics. I found only one that makes a definite point of stressing love between fellow Christians: "Blest Be the Tie That Binds Our Hearts in Christian Love" (LH 464). "May We Thy Precepts, Lord, Fulfill" (LH 412) also gives at least passing notice to the subject: "Spirit of Life, of Love, and Peace,

Unite our hearts; our joy increase,
Thy gracious help supply.
To each of us the blessing give
In Christian fellowship to live,
In joyful hope to die." (stanza 3)

The third verse of hymn 231 also touches upon the subject:

"Thou sacred Love, grace on us bestow;
Set our hearts with heavenly fire aglow
That with hearts united we love each other,
Of one mind, in peace with every brother.
Lord, have mercy!

Otherwise the "Lutheran Hymnal" has been for me barren soil when searching for hymns to complement a sermon on Christian fellowship.

Another source of material on the subject might properly be a book on pastoral theology, such as "The Shepherd Under Christ" produced by our own Publishing House. The study of this volume was refreshing and profitable, but like the "Lutheran Hymnal", this book had little to say about Christian fellowship. The section on church organizations included a paragraph or two which reminded the reader that organizations provide opportunities for Christian fellowship. Love for a Christian brother or sister came up again in the section on excommunication. There the reader was reminded that excommunication is in itself an act of love designed to reclaim a falling Christian, and that it is to be carried out, not with animosity, but with Christian love and concern. Otherwise there was no mention of the love that Christians owe to Christians, nor were there any practical suggestions for nourishing such love.

My research on the subject does not cover the Lutheran Confessions, but what I have found speaks mostly of the faith that qualifies a sinner for membership in the Holy Christian Church, without saying anything of the love that should exist between those who possess such faith. One could certainly argue that the matter of love between brethren is often implied and included in more general pronouncements on sanctification. But if an outsider would study our writings, aside from Scripture itself, he would find little assurance that we are in fact, or even that we intend to be, a warm and friendly church.

There is one shining exception to this general lack of emphasis on Christian fellowship. And it is in a most prominent location, namely, the Lutheran liturgy. Yet I wonder how many would immediately recall it as a positive expression of Christian fellowship. It is found in the concluding prayer of the communion service, "and we beseech Thee, that of Thy mercy Thou wouldst strengthen us through the same, in faith towards Thee and in fervent love toward one another."

Of course, this general absence of statements on positive Christian fellowship would be amply justified if Scripture also spoke rarely of the subject, as it does, for example, of Christ's descent into hell. But such is not the case. There is an abundance of Scriptural material on this matter, and what's more, many of these passages are among the best-known verses of the Bible. If our theology is to be a reflection of Biblical teaching, and it is intended to be just that, then it should not let this prominent teaching of the Bible slip into the background from pure neglect.

This then is the justification for writing about the theology of fellowship which emphasizes the love that belongs between Christians, and hopefully it will also justify the time it takes to state that theology, and to discuss its implications and applications.

1. THE THEOLOGY OF FELLOWSHIP IS ROOTED IN THE DECALOGUE.

Our Lord Jesus interpreted the Ten Commandments as follows: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself'" St. Paul understood this and reemphasized the truth in Romans 13:10: "Love is the fulfillment of the law." and in Galatians 5:14: "The entire law is summed up in a single command: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"

Our fellow Christians, particularly those in our own congregation, would be among our closest "neighbors". It is therefore obvious that God requires that Christians love each other.

However, it is necessary to go beyond the decalogue to understand the theology of fellowship. The love requirement of the law is obviously beyond the ability

of the sinful flesh. We have never diminished the importance of this requirement in our teaching of the Law, but it is a requirement that we do not and can not expect to see fulfilled, except in specific instances. Instead of demanding the fulfillment, we have rather pointed to this as a primary evidence of our sinful nature and our guilt under the Law. Even if we accomplish outward fulfillment of the Law, we have failed to keep that Law unless our compliance is motivated by perfect love for our neighbor. Thus the love requirement of the Law clearly shows us our guilt, which we must confess and lay at the foot of the cross for forgiveness.

Since it is clearly impossible to love our neighbor as we should, there is a tendency to expect less than we should in our duty to love our fellow Christians. Thus it is necessary to point out that Scripture lays an extra requirement upon Christians, which goes beyond the love requirement of the decalogue. And therefore a higher standard of performance is to be expected and required, when it comes to loving our fellow Christians.

When the Scriptures tell husbands to love their wives, the wife is more than just another neighbor. The wife is at the heart of the family where love should and must flourish more freely than it does in the "neighborhood". The sin of not loving a wife is greater than the sin of not loving a neighbor. Similarly, when the Scriptures require that Christians love their fellow Christians, the fellow Christian is more than just another neighbor. He is a fellow believer who possesses the same standards and goals. In Jesus Christ he has found the same motivation for love and forgiveness. In the framework of the congregation, there is ample opportunity for Christian contact in which Christian love can flourish. Thus we can realistically expect a higher standard of performance in the church than in the neighborhood. Or to put it negatively, the sin of not loving a fellow Christian is greater than the sin of not loving a neighbor.

Thus the lack of love between Christians is more serious than lack of love between neighbors. While the sinful flesh makes it impossible to be perfect in either, Scripture places a higher priority upon love for fellow Christians, and the church makes such love more attainable than the love which is required toward non-Christian neighbors.

Obviously this emphasis upon love between Christians does not in any way diminish the requirement to love our neighbor. It is in no way better to steal from a neighbor than from a fellow Christian. Love for neighbors is one of the strongest motivations for sharing the Gospel with them. But Scripture places a higher priority on love for our fellow Christians. We should recognize this higher priority and make every effort to work this out in practice.

2. SCRIPTURE SPECIFICALLY REQUIRES A SPECIAL LOVE FOR THOSE WHO SHARE OUR FAITH IN CHRIST.

The priority that is to be given to love for fellow Christians is boldly stated in Galatians 6:9-10: "Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers." This passage does not absolve a Christian from the love requirement of the decalogue. He is required to do good to all people. But the priority of doing good to fellow believers is clear. This passage also states that Christian love must take action. The emphasis is not just on feeling good toward a fellow Christian, but on doing good.

In John chapter 15 Jesus is talking specifically to his disciples. "I am the vine; you are the branches." (v. 5) He tells his disciples: "My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you." (v. 12)

On the night before his death Jesus startled his disciples by washing their feet. In stooping to do a slave's work, Jesus prefigured the humiliation which his love would accept when he died for them on the shameful cross. Then he said to them: "Do you understand what I have done for you?"...."You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord', and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them." (John 13:12-17) Obviously Jesus is not speaking of the disciples' duty toward the world in general, but rather this is what he expects in their behavior toward each other.

The same demand is laid upon his disciples at the end of the same chapter: "A new commandment I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. All men will know that you are my disciples if you love one another." (John 13:34-35) Jesus might have said that all men would recognize his disciples from their love for all men, but here again he is speaking of the special love that his disciples should have for each other.

In the Upper Room Jesus was speaking to the twelve, but his words were not intended for them alone.

"You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have been clothed with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." (Galatians 3:26-28) "So In Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others." (Romans 12:5) Today the command to love one another obligates us to love all who share our faith in Christ, and in particular the members of our own congregation (or conference). As Paul told the congregation in Rome: "Be devoted to one another in brotherly love." (Romans 12:10)

Such Christian love is not merely an idealistic goal. It is a practical necessity.

3. CHRISTIANS NEED EACH OTHER TO SURVIVE IN A SINFUL WORLD.

"Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. 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 10:23-25) In the trials that precede the last day, Christians need the support of their fellow Christians. Therefore they should assemble, to hear the Word, of course, but also to learn from that Word how better to fulfill the love requirement that would enable them to strengthen each other in the days of tribulation.

Christians need the love of their fellow Christians lest they seek the love and companionship of the children of the world, which could prove disastrous to their salvation. "Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God's wrath comes on those who are disobedient. Therefore do not be partners with them. For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord. Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. For it is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret." (Ephesians 5:6-12)

The fruits of such Christian love are too numerous to mention in particular. Besides they are already well known. We take time here only to cover them in general.

4. CHRISTIAN LOVE IS EVIDENT IN WORDS AND DEEDS OF COMPASSION AND PARDON.

"Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you." (Ephesians 4:32) Again notice that these familiar words are addressed to Christians, and not to the world in general.

"Finally, all of you, live in harmony with one another; be sympathetic, love as brothers, be compassionate and humble. Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing." (I Peter 3:8-9) "Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins." (I Peter 4:8) Thus where this Christian love is active there will be peace between brothers and sisters, and a willingness to serve the needs of others.

The call for Christian love is not an appeal to the better instincts in man. It is rather addressed to the heart that has been rendered receptive by the Holy Spirit so that it can receive the love and atoning sacrifice of God the Son.

5. A CHRISTIAN LOVES HIS FELLOW CHRISTIAN BECAUSE CHRIST LOVED HIM FIRST.

St. John's first epistle amply bears this out. In chapter 3:16-18 we read: "This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. 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." It would be difficult to prove that this applies only to faith brothers, and not to brothers in the family or brothers in society. Nevertheless, the context clearly emphasizes that such love should exist in the fellowship of believers. However, the point of the passage is the motivation for Christian love. Christians owe such love to each other, not because they have earned each other's love, but because they have been loved by Christ.

The same truth is repeated in chapter 4:9-11: "This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another."

Today it might be difficult to find a congregation which could serve as a model for this theology of fellowship. But it seems that the first Christian congregation understood and practiced their Lord's will in this matter.

6. THE FIRST CHRISTIAN CHURCH IS AN EXCELLENT EXAMPLE OF CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP.

"All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts." (Acts 2:44-46)

Of course, the word "love" is not used in this passage. But without it this behavior makes no sense at all. Were these Christians so generous, so joyful to be together, only because they believed and served the same Savior? Did they feel nothing but confessional loyalty toward each other? It is much easier to visualize this behavior if we give these Christians credit for doing what Jesus had commanded them to do: "As I have loved you, so you must love one another." (John 13:34) And because they loved one another, they rejoiced in being together, and they gladly shared their possessions with each other.

However, Scripture does not give us an abundance of examples of this Christian fellowship. While there are references to it, the experience of the Jerusalem Christians seems to be the exception rather than the rule. From the many exhortations to love the brethren, we might conclude the practicing of Christian fellowship in New Testament congregations left much to be desired.

Such assumptions may not be correct, but if they are they would support the interpretation of I Corinthians 13 which makes Christian fellowship the most difficult of Christian virtues. And there is much textual support for this interpretation which declares that

7. LOVE FOR FELLOW CHRISTIANS IS THE HIGHEST WORK OF FAITH.

"If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.

"Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.....

"And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love." (I Corinthians 13:1-8, 13)

I would have thought that the greatest of the three would be faith. But Paul is not rating the three on the basis of their importance to salvation. There faith has the priority, and that is most fortunate. For if sinners needed more than this free gift from God to be eligible for heaven, ~~few, if any~~, would make it, especially if the requirement were the kind of love described above. In terms of our salvation, faith is the greatest. But in terms of our sanctification, love is the greatest. It is the most difficult, the most demanding, the most unattainable fruit of sanctification. Paul places it ahead of preaching, prophecy, miracle-working, generosity and martyrdom. Love by itself would be great, without any of these. But without love, these are worth nothing.

This love cannot qualify a person for heaven. Even the most perfect Christian love cannot make us worthy of forgiveness and life. Such perfection comes only through Christ and is received by faith. But when it comes to works that please and honor God, love is the greatest, for it is closest to the love by which Christ offered up his life for us.

The theology of fellowship, based upon the above passages, is simply this: GOD SERIOUSLY EXPECTS CHRISTIANS TO LOVE EACH OTHER AS CHRIST LOVED THEM, AND TO DISPLAY THAT LOVE IN ACTION.

The list of passages given above is by no means all-inclusive. A careful reading of the New Testament would turn up many more examples of the same truth. However, the abundance of passages cited here should amply demonstrate that this is no obscure doctrine of Scripture which can be twisted out of shape by every new sect that comes along. The call for this type of sanctification is at least as dominant as the call for sexual purity. It is a dominant teaching of Scripture and therefore deserves a dominant share of the Christian's attention and effort.

PART II THE IMPLICATIONS OF FELLOWSHIP THEOLOGY

What has been said so far should not be particularly new and exciting. Students of the Bible have long known about these passages and their meaning. What may be new, and even controversial, are the implications of this fellowship theology.

1. THE THEOLOGY OF FELLOWSHIP IS TO RECEIVE APPROPRIATE EMPHASIS IN THE TEACHING OF THE CHURCH.

This is certainly obvious from what has been stated above. Since this is a prominent teaching of God's Word, it should also be a prominent teaching of our church. Not that it should overshadow the central doctrines of salvation, but in areas of sanctification it should receive the same kind of emphasis that we put on the commandments or missions or stewardship.

Thus there should be occasional sermons on fellowship, and references to this kind of sanctification should be used in applications of sermons that are more general in nature. The theology of fellowship deserves a special place in confirmation instructions for both children and adults, perhaps in connection with the Third Article and the Holy Christian Church, the communion of saints. It should receive regular and repeated emphasis in meetings of church officers and organizations. It should not be repeated until the congregation is tired of hearing it, but it should be stated often enough so that every member knows that this duty has been laid upon him.

There is, of course, a negative side to this implication, namely, that failure to teach this theology of fellowship is a neglect of the Great Commission, "teaching them to observe all things, whatsoever I have commanded you". We will never change our opinion that Luther's Small Catechism is the "gem of the Reformation", but it can be faulted for this, that it does not mention this prominent teaching of the Bible. The omission can be explained and excused, but never justified. For if it had been too much to include it in the Third Article, it would have fit most nicely under the Table of Duties.

Similarly our Synod can be faulted for its failure to emphasize this doctrine. Especially that Synod which fought so hard to uphold the negative aspects of fellowship theology should have been equally firm in declaring its positive aspects.

There is no point in belaboring an oversight of the past which happened for all sorts of logical reasons. However, if we are persuaded that this theology of fellowship is truly a prominent teaching of God's Word, we cannot with good conscience continue to overlook it as we have in the past.

2. THE THEOLOGY OF FELLOWSHIP IS TO BE PRACTICED IN OUR CONGREGATIONS AND SYNODICAL GATHERINGS.

If our practice did not follow our teaching, we would be hypocrites indeed. So far there has been little danger of such hypocrisy. We cannot be faulted for not practicing what we have not preached. In fact, there are numerous examples of this Christian love which have occurred without any particular effort on the part of our church. And this is as it should be. The bonds of a common faith together with normal congregational contacts have created an atmosphere in which Christians have truly come to love their brothers and sisters in faith, without any special urging from their church. An increased awareness of fellowship theology would only commend such examples of Christian love and encourage others to follow that example.

But if this much is happening without any particular effort on the part of church leaders, how much more could happen if a congregation would work to provide

opportunities for Christian love to flourish. If we think of the recent history of stewardship and evangelism, we can also envision a significant growth in our congregational fellowship if we were to create situations which are particularly conducive to fellowship growth.

Obviously, it should be our goal, not only to teach Christian fellowship, but to expect a performance of the same. Some suggestions in this regard will come later.

3. THE THEOLOGY OF FELLOWSHIP IS ESSENTIAL TO HEALTHY CONGREGATIONAL LIFE.

Students of the Bible have long recognized that God did not give the Ten Commandments for his own benefit, but for ours. God needs nothing from us and gains nothing from our compliance, except the joy of seeing a living faith in his children. We are the ones who are blessed by our obedience.

It is no different with the theology of fellowship. Love between Christians is indeed an honor to the Lord who brought them into his family. But it is also an outstanding blessing for the people who practice it.

People who love each other enjoy working together. And such labor is efficient labor. We have seen too many examples of the opposite. When there is strife between pastor and teacher, when there are squabbles between families in the congregation, the work of the Lord suffers. But when people get along well, they work together well. In giving us the theology of fellowship, Jesus has given us a means to increase the Gospel work of our congregations.

Furthermore, people who love each other can stand to disagree. The Christian home is a good example of this. Arguments do not lead to divorce when husband and wife truly love each other. Likewise a disgruntled member will not leave the congregation that includes his Christian friends, no matter how hard the pastor has stepped on his toes. Again, the theology of fellowship is a blessing in the congregation where it is practiced, for it serves as a stabilizing element when the winds of hot temper blow.

The practice of Christian love in a congregation is particularly important for the new member, who feels lost and alone in his new environment. It is not so serious if his new spouse is a life-long member. But the person who has no relatives in the congregation may very well be a stranger to the entire congregation, and if he continues to feel out of place, he probably will not subject himself to such discomfort indefinitely. A congregation which recognizes its love responsibilities is not likely to let this happen. The newcomer will not only be welcomed but he will be brought into the friendship circle of the congregation, for the Lord Jesus would have it no other way. In such a congregation new members become old members in a very short time, and they remain old members for a very long time.

This applies especially when the entire congregation consists of newcomers. This happens regularly in our home missions, where Christians come together, not because they know each other, but because they know the same Savior and confess the same faith. What chance would this mission have if the members of this orthodox group remained cold and aloof from one another? We can hardly imagine this happening. I don't know that it ever does. As the little group works to establish their new congregation, Christian love grows, not because of intense teaching, but because of extended opportunity to develop the bonds of friendship between Christians of a common faith. And sometimes they wonder later where the warm feeling went, when the congregation has grown and the chapel is erected. It is generally supposed that the initial enthusiasm fades because the initial struggle is over. And if those first friendships were based only on a common effort, the analysis is probably correct. But it should never be that way. For the common faith that brought them together also teaches the fellowship principles that will keep them together, even when the congregation no longer has to struggle to survive.

The blessings of Christian fellowship are not always so apparent where the climate favors congregational stability. The perfect example of such a climate is the rural congregation where members have been members for generations, where members fellowship all week long at the same grocery store, on the same softball diamond, in the same streets and yards. Tradition alone might keep these people coming to church, no matter how low their faith may have fallen. In this case Christian fellowship is supplemented by an abundance of family and social fellowship, so that none could know where one begins and the other ends. If there were no Christian love in this congregation at all, it probably would never be missed, and the future of the congregation would never be threatened.

But picture the opposite climate, where Lutheran churches are dying like the proverbial flies, in the deteriorating neighborhoods of large metropolitan areas. This writer serves a congregation which has existed in this climate for fourteen years. Here you learn quickly what happens when the advantages of family and social fellowship are lacking. Here you see who keeps on coming after so many others have left for "more convenient" and "safer" congregations. It goes back to the days of the depression, when young people entertained themselves and their elders by putting on plays. Young Christians worked and played together and formed bonds of friendship that made that inner-city church their home church, not because of a building, though that may be precious to them too, but because they continued to find their good friends in Christ in that congregation.

And this thought leads us to speculate about another time of unfavorable climate, when Christians were persecuted to death for their faith. Was it only their relationship with Jesus that kept them faithful under such trying circumstances, or did their love for each other help strengthen their resolve? Only God knows, but the assumption that Christian fellowship strengthened these persecuted believers is neither illogical nor unscriptural.

The absence of Christian fellowship shows up quickly in another area of inner-city endeavour. In fourteen years many adults have been confirmed in our church, and most of these have no family connections in the congregation. As new members they are essentially strangers to everyone except the pastor who instructed them and the teacher who instructs their children. Some of these have become active members. Some are members in name only, and many have completely fallen away. It is not hard to discover a pattern in all of this. Those who are able to form associations with other members remain faithful to their confirmation vows. The others usually do not. It almost seems that the only ones who remain active are the ones who are able to crash through the barriers that surround the congregational cliques. That judgment probably is overly harsh, and yet it may at least in part be true. New members are not likely to become active members unless they are received into the friendship circle of the congregation. And this is especially apparent in an inner-city congregation where church membership is a challenge, not a custom.

The congregation that carries out Christ's command to love is truly blessed. It can grow and work and survive much better when its members try to love one another.

Of course, this would be true also if the fellowship were nothing more than social and family fellowship. Nearly everyone enjoys a friendly atmosphere, and that atmosphere can be created entirely apart from the work of the Spirit. Friendship for friendship's sake is not a fruit of faith. And while it is not to be discouraged, it is not the kind of friendship that the congregation should be working for. We are talking about friendship for Jesus' sake. And that is a legitimate and necessary goal for a Christian congregation. To be sure, only God knows if the friendship results from the flesh or from the Spirit, but that does not excuse us from pursuing the goal. It is no different in any area of sanctification. We can only work for the proper goals and pray for the proper results. And that we must do, not only for the sake of Christ's command, but also for the blessing that he intends to grant to our obedience.

PART III - THE APPLICATION OF FELLOWSHIP THEOLOGY

There is certainly no doubt that Christian fellowship happens all by itself, without any special effort on the part of the congregation. But the following is based on the conviction that the congregation should be doing things to promote this fruit of the Spirit.

A comparison with the development of stewardship theology seems appropriate. The 1930's and 1940's were the "dark ages" of stewardship theology. Love motivation was not unheard of, but "church dues", and "fair share", and church suppers were more common methods of raising money. As evidence of this I have in my possession a rubber stamp which I found in a long-neglected corner of our church. It reads: "As a member of the Church you are obligated to share its financial burdens. The records reveal you gave nothing up to the above date. Please seriously consider your obligation."

We have learned, or perhaps I should say "relearned", a lot about stewardship motivation since those days and we have seen God's blessing upon this effort to apply Scripture to the giving of our members. Not only has our outreach been strengthened, but our people have discovered the joy of faith-giving as opposed to duty-giving.

But this change did not take place by itself. The original Board for Information and Stewardship produced many helps for the teaching of Scriptural stewardship. It became our goal to teach the best principles of stewardship and to see those principles put into action. The same type of procedure must be followed if our congregations are to enjoy increased blessings in Christian fellowship.

The suggested applications below have for the most part been tested in our congregation, but not long enough or intensely enough to produce all the desired results. It would, of course, be much more impressive to lay before you an outstanding story of successful application of fellowship principles. On the other hand, the very fact of our survival as a viable, inner-city entity is perhaps some indication that our work in fellowship teaching has borne significant fruit.

Success stories can be found, in the annals of the "Church Growth Movement". For at least some of the methods suggested below will also be suggested in Church Growth manuals. However, please keep in mind the factor that separates this presentation from the Church Growth Movement. This is not an effort to imitate methods that have proved successful in other churches. It is only an effort to implement in an orderly way the fellowship theology that we have learned from Jesus. The Spirit, not statistics, will determine whether or not the methods are proper and beneficial.

1. PROCEED WITH CAUTION.

Extremes are almost inevitable when entering upon a new course of action. The proponents of the new action regularly hurt their cause by going too far too fast. In their enthusiasm for a noble cause, they will push their reforms to a point that turns off even the sympathetic observer. The effort to improve fellowship in the congregation is susceptible to such extremes. In order to show the need for a change, the past may be criticized too harshly, as if nothing had been done right until the newly enlightened came along.

On the other hand, a program of Christian fellowship may be thoroughly successful in producing fellowship that is not Christian. There was a time when people came to church because it was advantageous to their social life or their business life, and maybe that time is still with us in some places. We would not like to

turn our family of God into a social club that would attract the children of the world as well as the children of God. There must be friendship in the church, but it must be friendship based on faith, not on common interests or compatible personalities. The means used to develop Christian love in the congregation must always remain subservient to the Scriptural theology that calls for Christian love.

Finally, even after all precautions have been taken, any forward progress is too fast for some. But unreasonable opposition should not stifle attempts to accomplish the Lord's will. In other words, proceed with caution, but proceed!

2. BEGIN WHERE SUCCESS SEEMS MOST LIKELY.

No one would be foolish enough to establish a program for fellowship between black teen-agers and the grandmothers and great-grandmothers of the Ladies' Aid. Fellowship programs should begin where the chances for success are the greatest, with people who otherwise have much in common. It is true that our Christian love should include all of Christ's disciples. And that should be the ultimate goal. But the intermediate goals must be reached before the ultimate goal can be attained. So we start by trying to create fellowship opportunities within a homogeneous group, teen-agers with teen-agers, elderly with elderly, business with businessmen, etc. It seems wise to begin where the flesh has the least resistance.

3. LET THE SPIRIT SPEAK.

Sermons alone will probably accomplish little in the way of actual fellowship. But the Scriptural basis must be laid before faith can respond to it. To begin with, it would be good to develop a series of sermons on the subject, perhaps using texts suggested in this presentation. The initial series could be followed by occasional sermons, and hopefully the suitable texts will appear in whatever pericope the pastor is using. If not, let the pericope be interrupted once in a while by a sermon on Christian fellowship.

Since the exposition of our 1956 catechism does not treat the subject directly, find a place for it in your catechism instruction. It could fit under the teaching of the Holy Christian Church, or even as a special application of the Fifth Commandment. Similarly the subject should be treated in the instruction of adults. If the instruction manual does not mention it, find a place for it.

It is not our way to "improve" our church just for the sake of improving it. We must be sure that we are doing this because God wants it that way. And God's people will not be doing it unless they know that God wants it that way. The Spirit still works through the Means of Grace. We can expect his fruit only if we let him speak.

4. PLAN A PROGRAM TO STIMULATE CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP.

A fellowship program has decided disadvantages. First it tends to be artificial. It creates a situation that does not normally exist, and whatever happens in that situation is not likely to happen when the artificial stimulus is absent. Furthermore programs can accomplish acquaintance. They cannot accomplish love. Thus a vigorous fellowship program could be worse than no program at all, if the intended results do not materialize. The apparent failure could discourage future fellowship efforts. Thus there should be no program unless the planners are convinced that more good than harm will result.

But if we have taught the theology of fellowship, we should plan to let fellowship happen. It was not good to scold the congregation for not witnessing, when we had never shown them how to witness. We should not lay fellowship upon their conscience, unless we are planning to have fellowship happen in our congregation.

One such plan is the get-acquainted meeting. This can be a part of any congregational gathering, but a serious effort is made to teach the names of the members present, with name tags, with personal introductions, or with get-acquainted games. We have used an autograph book with some success. People seem eager to collect each other's autographs, and in so doing they learn names without having to ask for them. We have also played Bingo with names. Autographs take the place of numbers on the Bingo cards, and the cards are filled up as the names are drawn out of a hat.

Again, learning names is not practicing fellowship, but fellowship can hardly happen unless we know the names. And this type of activity needs no special event. It can happen at any gathering where some may not be known by name.

Assigning soul responsibility is another program we have tried. We assembled the most active members of the congregation and explained to them the importance of Christian fellowship. Then we asked each one to accept responsibility for several less active members (not delinquents), for the purpose of drawing them closer to the fellowship life of the congregation. They were asked specifically to speak to these people in church, to invite them to the special functions they would attend themselves, and to express concern in times of illness and bereavement. And the church secretary was asked to notify the responsible person of any such illness or bereavement.

This effort was directed toward all members. A variation is the sponsor program. In New Testament times converts had sponsors, who attested to the convert's trustworthiness and assisted in his instruction. Our adult converts have sponsors who try to introduce them to other members and lead them to full participation in the activities of the congregation. In our "Agenda" the form for the reception of converts reads: "Upon this thy promise, I, in the name of this congregation, give to thee the right hand of fellowship and love...." Sometimes that turns out to be: "I instructed you and confirmed you. Now you're on your own. Go and try to make friends with those strangers sitting in the pews, if you can." Our new members need more than this.

The same concept is applied to child confirmands in the form of faith-friends. Each confirmand selects a classmate to be his faith-friend. The two are then confirmed together and asked to keep track of each other in church. Every year a letter is sent to former confirmands, urging them to attend communion with their faith-friend on Maundy Thursday. (We confirm on Palm Sunday.)

This is not intended to be a complete list of available programs. Our fellowship training is still in its infancy. Current programs need to be maintained and refined. New programs need to be developed. And as a result we have felt the need for a fellowship committee, to stand alongside the stewardship and evangelism committees, to see to it that this important phase of congregational work is not neglected. So far the stewardship committee has handled our fellowship work, but at times we truly feel the need for the special committee.

5. THE FELLOWSHIP POTENTIAL OF ALL CONGREGATIONAL ACTIVITIES NEEDS TO BE EVALUATED.

Like it or not, most congregations have a number of auxiliary groups which offer excellent opportunities for Christian fellowship. Although these groups some times make a lot of extra work (and trouble) for the pastor, their value becomes clearer when seen in the light of the fellowship needs of the congregation. Again if their fellowship is merely social, this is no great contribution. And therefore they should learn the theology of fellowship so that they can try to practice it. But after this word from God has been heard, the organizations present opportunities for fellowship growth that may not be offered by the congregation itself, especially if the congregation is large. There is no way that one member

can know and love six hundred people. It is difficult in a group of thirty or forty. But in a smaller group the individual can know the persons whom he or she should love. And that makes the next step more feasible.

I hesitate to say it, but logic supports the notion that every member of the congregation should be a member of an organization, a smaller group within the congregation where he can know and be known by the other members of the smaller group. Such an arrangement would never be practical, because of time demands and lack of cooperation. But the ideal should not be forgotten in fellowship planning.

In this connection a word must be said about church suppers and other fund-raising efforts in the congregation. I must admit that I have come full circle on this matter; from enjoying sauerkraut and pancake suppers as a child, to discouraging the sale of tickets as a young pastor, to appreciating the fellowship opportunities of fund-raising efforts.

There was a time when church suppers needed to be criticized because they interfered with good stewardship theology, and we still need to beware, lest the Father's house become a house of merchandise. But Scripture does not condemn fund-raising as strongly as it demands love between Christians. And there can hardly be a better way of uniting Christians than the fund-raising effort that requires hours of working together for a common cause. Of course, a joint effort can occur without a fund-raising objective. An Arbor Day is just one example of this. But the disadvantages of fund-raising must be weighed very carefully against the advantages of the fellowship opportunities that result from certain fund-raising efforts. This is not a commercial for merchandizing in the church. I am still uncomfortable with it. But I now realize that toleration may be closer to God's will in this matter than strict prohibition.

6. FELLOWSHIP THEOLOGY APPLIES TO THE PROBLEM OF DELINQUENT MEMBERS.

We hear all sorts of excuses from delinquent members, and finally it always comes down to this, that something is more important than hearing God's Word on Sunday. Although the delinquent will rarely admit that unbelief is the real problem, it is logical to assume that it is. So we remove them from membership as those who have rejected God's grace. And yet we are left with the uncomfortable feeling that we don't really know for sure that they have.

When fellowship theology is applied to the problem, it is immediately apparent that the delinquent would probably not be a delinquent if he had formed bonds of Christian love with other members of the congregation. Lack of faith may indeed be the real problem, and a TAS evangelism call could help determine this with a greater degree of accuracy. But the real problem may also be the lack of fellowship. In that case the solution may be the development of fellowship ties with other members. But if this is not possible, we don't have to require an admission of unbelief or even make that assumption. The congregation is not the Holy Christian Church. We do not remove the delinquent from the Kingdom of God when we remove him from the congregation. The delinquent has rather removed himself from the fellowship of the congregation, and the congregation may acknowledge that fact by removing the delinquent from membership, after every effort to reclaim him has failed. Finally a congregation is not a list of names. It is a group of people who fellowship around the Word and Sacraments. We cannot truly claim as members the people who do not fellowship with us.

CONCLUSION

The tangible goal of Christian fellowship is that every member should have good friends who are members of his church. That is far from the ideal, but it is close enough to prevent most of the damage that results when Christian fellowship is lacking.

We might very well ask why this matter comes to our attention now, when so little has been said about it for so long. It may be that the time is right for an emphasis on this doctrine. Our American society has departed from the Scriptural standards of morality that were long a tradition in our country. Our members have friends who believe in the "new morality" and evolution and humanism. These friends are no longer excusing their unacceptable behavior. They are demanding that their behavior is right and acceptable. Such associations are a real temptation to today's children of God. The need for friends who are Christian is increasing day by day. And therefore there is an increasing need for the church to encourage such friendship.

The Lord of the Church has provided the theology to inspire such an effort. If the time is indeed right, his Church will also make the effort.

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