

Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Conference
Seventh Triennial Convention
June 4-6, 2011—New Ulm, Minnesota USA

Unity of Spirit—Bond of Peace

Essay #4—

**Fellowship at Jesus' Feet:
Challenges and Opportunities for Confessional Lutherans in
the 21st Century**

**Andreas Drechsler
Germany**

Greater scholars and pastors more experienced than I have written on the doctrine and practice of church fellowship from a confessional Lutheran perspective. I have learned from them. I have benefited from their insights and I am indebted to them.¹ But most of all I want to remain a student of the one who taught Mary and Martha the “one thing needful.” I invite you to join me to sit at Jesus’ feet to hear, learn, and reflect on the practical challenges and opportunities of a crucial biblical doctrine for us as confessional Lutherans as we confidently step forward into this 21st century.

Let us be assured that our risen Lord Jesus Christ, who holds the past, present, and future in his all powerful and loving hands, is with us. He has promised (Matthew 28:20): “Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” I would like us to start our study by prayerfully singing hymn #290 from *Christian Worship*:

One thing’s needful; Lord, this treasure
Teach me highly to regard.
All else, though it first give pleasure,
Is a yoke that presses hard.
Beneath it the heart is still fretting and striving,
No true, lasting happiness ever deriving.
This one thing is needful; all others are vain—
I count all but loss that I Christ may obtain.

¹ For a list of authors from whom I have benefited the most see the bibliography at the end.

How were Mary's thoughts devoted
Her eternal joy to find
as intent each word she noted,
At her Savior's feet reclined.
How kindled her heart, how devout was its feeling,
While hearing the lessons that Christ was revealing;
All earthly concerns she forgot for her Lord
And found her contentment in hearing his Word.

Wisdom's highest, noblest treasure,
Jesus, can be found in you.
Let me find in you my pleasure;
Make my will and actions true,
Humility there and simplicity reigning,
In paths of true wisdom my steps ever training.
If I learn from Jesus this knowledge divine,
The blessing of heavenly wisdom is mine.²

1. Introduction: Our Blessed Fellowship

So let us sit at Jesus' feet and start to discover *our blessed fellowship*. The doctrine of church fellowship has been the object of much in-depth study, strife, and emotional debate among confessional Lutherans during the last century. It was hardly an academic exercise in a theological ivory tower. Often it was directly connected to a specific and troublesome piece of church history. The dissolution of the Synodical Conference (1872–1967) in North America impacted confessional Lutheran churches all over the globe. It resulted in triangular relations, i.e. churches being in fellowship with both WELS and LCMS. It was followed by mergers (e.g. SELK in Germany, 1972), formations of new confessional church bodies (e.g. LBK in Scandinavia, 1974) as well as splits for confessional reasons (e.g. ELFK–Old Lutheran Church, 1984). The biblical doctrine of church fellowship has *shaped the landscape of Lutheranism* not only in Europe. It led to the formation of a new organization of confessional Lutherans in 1993—the Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Conference (CELC).

The study of the doctrine and practice of church fellowship has always been of very practical nature as it has a direct impact on the life of the church and its members. It is one of the key issues for confessional Lutherans in each generation. The future and well-being of confessional Lutheranism is directly connected to the question of how well we are equipped to teach and put into practice the biblical doctrine of church fellowship.

Not a burden. From a superficial point of view it could seem that this doctrine is more of a burden and obstacle for the mission of the church. Sometimes it may seem that our views on church fellowship stand in the way of what the term itself suggests, namely fellowship. How should we answer when we meet Christians from congregations not in our fellowship, and they

² Cf. *Lutherisches Kirchengesangbuch*, #254. According to the German text, the hymn by Johann Heinrich Schröder has ten stanzas. For an English translation of the entire hymn cf. *Evangelical Lutheran Hymnary*, #182.

express the desire to work together with us as Christians: in prayer, worship, communion, and joint church work to advance the gospel?

It is the goal of this essay to study the biblical doctrine of church fellowship at Jesus' feet and to present its evangelical application in the light of the gospel, i.e. in light of justification of the sinner by grace alone through faith alone in Christ Jesus, our perfect Savior. During this study, we will discover *challenges and opportunities* that call for an ongoing study and discussion of biblical principles. It is our earnest prayer that this precious piece of doctrine may shine anew for us and those who join us and listen to Jesus. It is our hope that we will see again what a *blessing it is to have true unity*, to appreciate it and to join in from the bottom of our heart with what God inspired king David to write (Psalm 133:1): "How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity!"

The purpose of studying and practicing God's principles of church fellowship is to keep the gospel pure not only for ourselves but ultimately to share it with others. Purity of doctrine (i.e. orthodoxy) is not an end in itself. Surely we have enough reason to give God glory for our salvation by keeping his Word pure. Yet, God wants us to give glory to his name by sharing the good news with others (Matthew 5:16; 1 Peter 2:9) to win over people from darkness to light, from error to truth, and to strengthen God's people in the one true faith. That is why God wants us to protect others and ourselves from the danger of false doctrine. That is why our Savior encourages us to help and strengthen one another on our journey through this vale of tears in joyful anticipation of the glories of heaven.

The apostle Paul encourages us to equip 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" (Ephesians 4:12-14).

Truth and Love. To accomplish this noble goal, two things are of equal importance as we study the doctrine of church fellowship: *love* which does not deny or withhold the saving truth of God's Word and *truth* which is confessed and lived out in love for those we want to reach with the gospel. In other words: it is our privilege as redeemed and beloved sons and daughters of our heavenly Father to live and share God's thoughts and plans for a dying world with our fellow believers and those we want to lead to Christ and his truth. Paul continues to admonish the church (Ephesians 4:15,16) to speak "the truth in love" so that we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of "him who is the Head, that is, Christ."

Church fellowship is *not a side issue* in the Scriptures. It runs through the Bible like a red thread from the first to the last page, Old and New Testament. Think of *Abraham*, who left his heathen home after being called by JHWH with the promise to become the father of a multitude of nations and a blessing to all families on the face of the earth through the one special future offspring whom God promised to come (Genesis 12:3). "I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."

Think of *Moses* and how God used this strong leader of Israel to instruct his chosen nation to be well equipped for the mission he had assigned to them. Think of how God always had in mind to protect his people from harmful influences through Canaanite religious practices (Leviticus 18:3,4): “You must not do as they do in Egypt, where you used to live, and you must not do as they do in the land of Canaan, where I am bringing you. Do not follow their practices. You must obey my laws and be careful to follow my decrees. I am the LORD your God.” The reason is clearly named in Leviticus 20:26: “You are to be holy to me because I, the LORD, am holy, and I have set you apart from the nations to be my own,” and also in Exodus 19:6: “You will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (cf. Leviticus 19:2; 20:26).

We see in the Old Testament *prophets* over and over again their zeal to protect the fellowship in their admonitions and calls to the people to repent (Isaiah 1:2ff; Jeremiah 2:13). Similarly we see in the *apostolic writings* of the New Testament how God’s spokesmen were sent to protect, foster, and keep the fellowship which always was in danger. Paul writes to the Christians in Corinth (1 Corinthians 1:10): “I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought.” He also wrestled with the spiritual dangers threatening to destroy the church in Galatia (Galatians 1:6): “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ.”

And is this not a danger *in our times* as well? We need the encouragement of the apostle Paul still today. Think of how often the apostles thanked and praised God for the existing bond uniting them with their fellow believers near and far (Philippians 1:3-6): “I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus” (cf. Romans 1:12; 1 John 1:3ff).

The practice of church fellowship is by no means a side issue but rather essential to the spiritual life and the fellowship of believers throughout the ages. Now what does this fellowship consist of? Where is it to be found? How is it put into practice according to the will of God and the well-being of precious souls redeemed by the atoning blood of Christ?

2. Invisible Fellowship Appreciated

The theme for this conference “Unity of Spirit—Bond of Peace” gives us the proper focus to begin our discussion. It is God who has called us to life both physically and spiritually. In his letter to the Ephesians, the apostle Paul urges us to recognize and treasure the unity of the Spirit God has created (Ephesians 4:1-3): “As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.”

Unity of the Spirit. God, the Holy Spirit, creates saving faith through the preaching of the gospel³ where and when he wills to do so. Through the message of salvation in Christ he calls people out of the darkness of sin and death into the wonderful light of peace with God and life everlasting through the forgiveness of sins in Jesus (1 Peter 2:9-10). He unites all believers in an intimate bond with the Father, the Son, and with each other into one body, the body of Christ (Ephesians 1:22,23). He does so in spite of all barriers of culture, time, and geography as the apostle John tells us (1 John 1:3,4): “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. We write this to make our joy complete.” The “communion of saints” or invisible church (*una sancta ecclesia*) is hidden from our sight because it extends over time and space and because we cannot see who has saving faith in Christ in his heart. However, we do not doubt the reality of the one, true, Christian church because we learn from the words of the prophet Isaiah that God’s Word does not return empty (Isaiah 55:10). God promises that “the gates of Hades will not overcome” his church (Matthew 16:18).

However, we need to distinguish the *spiritual fellowship* of all believers from our practice of church fellowship because we cannot make the spiritual fellowship of the invisible church visible. There can be both hypocrites within our own fellowship as well as true believers in churches who hold to false doctrine but still have the gospel. It can be a great comfort for us to know that God knows and protects those who belong to him. He does that in spite of the *pitiabile state of the visible church* in this world, which because of weakness, false doctrine, and sin is split up in countless numbers of congregations and groups of believers of all confessions, denominations, and synods. The apostle Paul writes (1 Corinthians 11:19): “No doubt there have to be differences⁴ among you to show which of you have God’s approval.” But he reminds us for our comfort (2 Timothy 2:19): “Nevertheless, God’s solid foundation stands firm, sealed with this inscription: “The Lord knows those who are his.”

Because we cannot see into the human heart, we must *test the spirits* on the basis of Jesus’ words: “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” (1 John 4:1). “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). To be able to test the spirits we need to be well equipped with the Word to find out if something is in accordance with biblical doctrine or not. The apostle Paul reminds us: “For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light . . . and find out what pleases the Lord. Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them” (Ephesians 5:8-11).

Unity—our goal. Jesus asks the Father in his High Priestly Prayer for the *unity of all believers* “that they may be one as we are one” (John 17:11). We as confessional Lutherans do well not to

³ Augsburg Confession, Article V:1-3: “That we may obtain this faith, the Ministry of Teaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments was instituted. For through the Word and Sacraments, as through instruments, the Holy Ghost is given, who works faith, where and when it pleases God, in them that hear the Gospel, to wit, that God, not for our own merits, but for Christ’s sake, justifies those who believe that they are received into grace for Christ’s sake.” *Concordia Triglotta* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921), p. 45.

⁴ Paul uses the term ἀϋρέσεις which can mean religious parties, divisions, factions as well as false teachings (cf. 2 Peter 2:1).

forget the true universality (ecumenicity) of the church, so that we are on our guard against unbiblical pluralism as well as a false elitism and a harmful separatist spirit. The church is one, and so we want to do everything to built and strengthen those who confess Christ and his Word in true fellowship based on the Word of God. The apostle John helps us bring this good ecumenical view back into our focus when he gives us a glimpse of church fellowship in perfection, i.e. in the church triumphant (Revelation 7:9): “After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb” (cf. Revelation 5:9; 11:9).

3. Where To Look for Fellowship

To our physical eyes, faith in Jesus is invisible. But the men and women, young and old, who carry this saving faith in their hearts are not. Earlier we said that God’s Word does not return empty. Through the prophet Isaiah God comforts his people (Isaiah 55:10-11): “As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.”

Therefore our Lutheran Confessions rightly name the gospel in Word and sacrament as the *marks of the church*.⁵ Where the gospel is being preached and the sacraments are rightly administered there the church is present. There believers will be present. Luther often used the expression “*Wo das Wort im Schwange geht*”⁶ (where the Word is in use or at work). There we can assume that the Holy Spirit has been working. Martin Hoffmann put it this way:

The “*una sancta ecclesia*” itself is hidden from human eyes, because no one can look in anyone else’s heart to note his faith with certainty. This only God can do. But we may well know, where the church of Christ is to be found: where Word and sacrament are in use (lit. “*im Schwange gehen*”). Because the Word of God does not return empty, but accomplishes that for which God has sent it (Isaiah 55:10,11). Therefore, whenever people gather around the means of grace and confess Christ, there we can be certain, that the Holy Spirit has been and is at work having created faith. However, it cannot be said with certainty, that all who

⁵ Augsburg Confession, Article VII:1-4: “Also they teach that one holy Church is to continue forever. The Church is the congregation of saints, in which the Gospel is rightly taught and the Sacraments are rightly administered. And 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. As Paul says: One faith, one Baptism, one God and Father of all, etc. Eph. 4, 5. 6.” *Concordia Triglotta*, p. 47.

⁶ For the expression “*Im Schwange gehen*” in Luther, cf. St. Louis Edition, Vol. 18, 1466 (57). C.F.W. Walther quotes this passage in his book on Church and Ministry, Thesis V: “*Nun fragst du, bei welchem Zeichen muss ich denn die Kirche erkennen? Es muss je etwa ein sichtbar Zeichen gegeben werden, dadurch wir zu Hauße versammelt werden, Gottes Wort zu hören. Antwort: Ja, es ist ein solch Zeichen vonnöthen, das haben wir auch; nämlich die Taufe, das Brod und allermeist das Evangelium. Diese drei sind der Christen Losung und Wahrzeichen. Wo du diese siehst im Schwange gehen, das ist, die Taufe, das Brod und das Evangelium, [es] sei gleich wo oder bei wem es wolle, zweifele nicht, es sei eine Kirche da.*”

are gathered are truly standing in the saving faith (cf. hypocrites, false believers). But we may well call those fellow believers, who confess the same faith as we.⁷

So how can individual believers be identified? How can we know where God the Holy Spirit has worked saving faith in a person's heart by the power of the gospel (Romans 1:16)? *By their fruit you will recognize them.* What Jesus tells his disciples as a warning against false teachers we can apply accordingly to the good fruits produced by believers (Matthew 7:16-18): "Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit." James wrote to admonish believers who knew their catechism well but were not living up to their doctrine. They were denying their creeds by their deeds. So James instructs them about "living faith" vs. "dead orthodoxy"—reminding us as well (James 2:17,18): "Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. . . . Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do." Faith in Christ is a living, active thing which can hardly remain hidden. Its presence will be noticed by the fruits of faith, i.e. by the confession of faith in word and action as Paul says (2 Corinthians 4:13; cf. Romans 10:9-17): "It is written: 'I believed; therefore I have spoken.' With that same spirit of faith we also believe and therefore speak."

Christians seek out one another. It is a natural fruit of faith to seek fellowship with other believers in Christ as Paul did when he wrote (Romans 1:11,12): "I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong—that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith." Believers want to confess and rejoice in their common faith, encourage one another, and share in the means of grace to built up one another in their faith. They want to use the spiritual gifts the Holy Spirit has granted them to benefit their fellow believers and to give glory of God. About the Jerusalem congregation we read (Acts 4:32,33): "All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all."

Christians can be recognized by the *fruits of faith*. But is not our judgment from fruits to faith always somewhat tentative? How can we base our fellowship practice on the fruits of faith alone if often there are mixed fruits? Sometimes we may not see any fruits at all within those of our fellowship. On the other hand there may be genuine Christian love and a zeal to spread the gospel also outside our own fellowship. In both cases there could be seeming fruits although there is no saving faith at all. People may hear the Word and act like Christians. But in reality they could be hypocrites. Therefore we will have to base our practice of church fellowship not alone on our subjective observation whether or not we think a person has saving faith (*fides qua*). We will base our practice of church fellowship on his or her objective *confession of faith* in word and action. Faith always wants to confess the full truth of God's Word (*fides quae*) and keep away from error. By this objective standard we can determine whether or not one's confession is in accordance with the doctrine of Christ and whether we can practice fellowship with a person or a group of believers. In other words, we seek to practice Christian fellowship with those who believe, teach, and confess the whole truth of God's Word in word and action.⁸

⁷ Martin Hoffmann, "Evangelische Kirchengenossenschaft," unpublished essay.

⁸ It is not enough that a church body has a sound biblical confession of faith written down in its constitution. This confession must also be the only standard and norm by which everything in the life of the church is governed (*de*

This being said, we still hold that where the marks of the church (*notae ecclesiae*) are still present in spite of false doctrine (heterodox churches), there we can assume that true believers are present as long as the gospel is there. But we cannot practice *selective fellowship* with the believers there because we cannot see faith in the heart of an individual. To each individual who confesses the full truth of God's Word but still is a member in an erring church body (because of weakness or ignorance), we want to give a clear testimony to help him or her in a loving way to take a clear confessional stand in word and action. Where the marks of the church are present purely (*notae purae*), i.e. where in spite of all weakness the Word of God is the only norm and rule for doctrine and practice (orthodox churches, truly confessional churches), there we can and should practice church fellowship.

4. The Unit Concept of Fellowship in Light of the Gospel

Confessional Lutheran doctrine and practice of church fellowship in the last century has been termed as the *unit concept*. This term captures well biblical teaching and practice throughout the centuries. John Brug gives this helpful definition:

According to Scripture, church fellowship must be dealt with as an undivided whole in two different respects.

First, when the doctrines of Scripture are being discussed to determine if groups or individuals may practice fellowship together, all doctrine must be dealt with as a unit. Since all the teachings of Scripture have the same divine authority, we have no right to add anything to them nor to subtract anything from them. The practice of church fellowship, therefore, must be based on agreement in *all* of the doctrines of Scripture.

Second, the various activities which express church fellowship must be dealt with as a unit. Since various ways of expressing church fellowship (such as joint mission work, celebration of the Lord's Supper, exchange of pulpits, transfers of membership, and joint prayer) are merely different ways of expressing the same fellowship of faith, *all* expressions of church fellowship require the same degree of doctrinal agreement, namely, agreement in *all* of the doctrines of Scripture.

In short, the basic principles are that we "work together for the truth," but that we avoid all joint expressions of Christian fellowship with those who persist in error, that is, in any departure from revealed truth.⁹

Christian fellowship according to the will of God as revealed in the Bible will always be fellowship at Jesus' feet. It is gathering, listening, and working together in his name with the

iure and *de facto*). This means for example that there is an earnest desire to practice church discipline if doctrine or practice is compromised against the clear Word of God (Matthew 18:15ff; Titus 3:10).

⁹ John F. Brug. "Can There Ever Be Exceptions To Our Regular Fellowship Practices That Do Not Violate Scripture's Fellowship Principles?" *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, 99:3 (Spring 2002), pp. 163,164. See also John F. Brug: *Church Fellowship—Working Together for the Truth*, (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1996), pp. 21,106.

purpose of being strengthened in his truth and love, to cling to his Word fully and to share his saving message with others. Jesus said to his disciples (Matthew 18:19,20): “Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.”

The closer we are to the center and object of our faith, i.e. Jesus and the message of salvation, the closer we will be to one another. Does that mean that we can practice Christian fellowship with all who consider themselves Christians, as long as they confess faith in Christ as the *ecumenical movement* once claimed? Or should we envision church fellowship relations like so many steps of a ladder (i.e. the closer we are doctrinally with a church or group of believers, the more our fellowship activities could increase; *levels of fellowship*)? Is there something like fraternal relations between church bodies or church officials *below the level of church fellowship*¹⁰ (joint mission work, occasional joint prayer and worship)? What do we mean by cooperation in externals?

To answer these questions we again need to listen carefully to what Jesus has to say and not to our feelings or the opinion of our time and age. Trusting that Jesus will not ask us to do anything harmful to our souls, we cling to every single one of his words. And what he says is very clear. He tells his disciples: “to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:20). He reminds us (John 8:31,32): “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

To be united in his truth is not limited to only certain doctrines. The doctrine of Christ (cf. 1 Timothy 6:3; 2 John 9) includes all he has revealed in his Word. And this is not ours to change or adjust to our tastes. Jesus makes this very clear when he tells the church through his apostle John (Revelation 22:18,19): “If anyone adds anything to them [the words of this book], 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.”

In his commentary on Galatians 5:9, “A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough,” Martin Luther compared biblical doctrine with an unbroken “round golden circle.” All biblical doctrine is from God and so we have no right to add or subtract anything. He wrote:

Therefore doctrine must be one eternal and round golden circle, in which there is no crack; if even the tiniest crack appears, the circle is no longer perfect. What good does it do the Jews to believe that there is one God and that He is the Creator of all, to believe all the doctrines, and to accept all of Holy Scripture, when they deny Christ? . . . If they [the sectarians] believed that it [the Bible] is the Word of God, . . . they would know that one Word of God is all and that all

¹⁰ E.g. “Die SELK . . . pflegt auch unterhalb der Ebene von offiziell festgestellter Kanzel- und Abendmahls-gemeinschaft zwischen verfaßten Kirchenkörpern lebendige Beziehungen zu lutherischen Kirchen in aller Welt. Das gilt in letzter Zeit besonders für lutherische Kirchen in Osteuropa, z.B. Lettland und Tschechien. Unterschieden werden muß zwischen „offiziell festgestellter Kanzel- und Abendmahlsgemeinschaft zwischen verfaßten Kirchenkörpern“ und der „innerlutherischen ökumenischen Praxis” http://www.selk.de/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=224&Itemid=108.

are one, that one doctrine is all doctrines and all are one, so that when one is lost all are eventually lost, because they belong together and are held together by a common bond. . . . Therefore if you deny God in one article of faith, you have denied Him in all; for God is not divided into many articles of faith, but He is everything in each article and He is one in all the articles of faith.¹¹

On the other hand, unity in doctrine does not require uniformity in *terminology*. We should not battle about mere words (2 Timothy 2:14-26). It is, however, desirable to agree on common terminology at least to a certain degree within our church fellowship to avoid confusion and unnecessary strife and tension.¹² Also unity in doctrine does not mean that all believers will have the same *level of understanding* of biblical doctrine or the same level of sanctification. Never in this life will any sinner-saint or group of believers match up perfectly to the doctrine of Christ—neither in knowledge nor practical application of biblical doctrine. But there will always be willingness on the part of the Christian to be corrected by the Word and grow in his faith. Martin Luther was right when he admitted:

Doctrine and life must be distinguished. Life is bad among us, as it is among the papists, but we don't fight about life and condemn the papists on that account.¹³

If only the doctrine remains pure, there is always the hope that life would also be straightened out through the power of the Word. If the Word was missing, there would be no hope for a changed life.¹⁴ It is therefore wrong to deny fellowship for reasons other than false doctrine or practice unless an individual or church body refuses to accept biblical admonition. To declare and practice church fellowship, it is *not a prerequisite* to agree in things not commanded in Scripture (adiaphora, cf. Romans 14:5,6). We do not have to use the same liturgy or enjoy the same style of worship. There can be and has been a variety of forms and traditions among fellow believers in different times and places throughout the history of the Christian church. Our Lutheran Confessions state:

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. As Paul says: One faith, one Baptism, one God and Father of all, etc. Eph. 4, 5, 6.¹⁵

¹¹ *Luther's Works*, American Edition, Vol. 27 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1964), pp. 38,39. Cf. St. Louis Edition, Vol. 9, pp. 644ff. See also Brug, *Church Fellowship*, pp. 63ff.

¹² Cf. Brug, *Church Fellowship*, pp. 36ff.

¹³ *Luther's Works*, American Edition vol. 54 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), p. 110. Veit Dietrich, Fall, 1533; WAT, 1, 294.

¹⁴ Luther put it this way: "If the teaching (*doctrina*) remains pure there is hope that life could easily be improved. The rays of the sun remain pure and shine brightly even if they fall on excrement. Thus God maintains something pure among us through which we readily condemn the error committed. The Lord magnifies this word and loves it." WA, 13, 688, *Proph. Mm*, 1524; quoted in George Wolfgang Forell, "Justification and Eschatology in Luther's Thought," www.presenttruthmag.com/archive/XLIV/44-4.htm.

¹⁵ Augsburg Confession, Article VII: 2-4, *Concordia Triglotta*, p. 47.

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, as also in the right use of the holy Sacraments, according to the well-known saying: . . . Disagreement in fasting does not destroy agreement in faith.¹⁶

We sum up the one side of the main biblical principle of church fellowship: To practice church fellowship it is both *necessary* and *sufficient* to agree in all biblical doctrines (*de iure* and *de facto*¹⁷). We base our practice of church fellowship on *fundamental agreement*, i.e. agreement in the foundation of faith and acceptance of instruction in all biblical doctrines.¹⁸ We cannot base our practice of church fellowship on mere *agreement in fundamentals* as the fundamentalists teach who hold only some doctrines as divisive of fellowship.

But there is *another side*. What does church fellowship consist of? Does this term apply only to formal activities of believers joining together in the use of the means of grace such as altar and pulpit fellowship? Does the doctrine of church fellowship apply only to formal relations between church bodies and synods? While formal activities between churches and joint use of the means of grace surely call for full unity of faith, church fellowship, i.e. Christian fellowship is much more. We can define it as:

every joint expression, manifestation, and demonstration of the common faith in which Christians on the basis of their confession find themselves to be united with one another.¹⁹

In other words, *all expressions of Christian fellowship* call for the same measure of agreement, namely full unity in all biblical doctrines. The belief that there are *levels in our fellowship* relations with other Christians (joint expressions of faith that demand lesser or greater unity) is foreign to the Bible. We read about the believers in Jerusalem (Acts 2:42) that they “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.” On the other hand, Paul urges us “to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned.” He tells us: “Keep away from them” (Romans 16:17). The apostle John puts it even stronger when he writes (2 John 8-11): “Watch out that you do not lose what you have worked for, but that you may be rewarded fully. 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.” To “keep away” cannot mean: “It’s OK at least to pray with them.”

¹⁶ Formula of Concord, Epitome, Article X:7, *Concordia Triglotta*, p. 831.

¹⁷ See footnote 8.

¹⁸ For the term “fundamental agreement” cf. J. P. Meyer, “Unionism,” in *Essays on Church Fellowship*, edited by Curtis A. Jahn (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1996), p. 64. Also Theodore A. Aaberg, “The Doctrine of Church Fellowship,” 1977 ELS General Pastoral Conference, in www.wlssays.net, p. 8.

¹⁹ “WELS Statement on Church Fellowship” (1970), quoted in Brug, *Church Fellowship*, p. 164.

Surely there is a distinction between the *means of grace* (God comes to us in the gospel in Word and sacrament), *prayer* (we come before God with praise and petition), and *social activities*. But when we consider them as joint expressions of faith, they all lie on the same plane. This means that all of these expressions of faith such as joint prayer, exchange of pastors and teachers, joint use of the sacraments, joint education, joint work in spreading the gospel, joint exercise of love and charity require the same prerequisites, i.e. full agreement.

There may be things which could be only social in nature and would not necessarily be understood as expressions of faith. Those things would not necessarily be *expressions of Christian fellowship* (e.g. being present in a church, greeting one another, showing hospitality). But prayer and the use of the means of grace are never only social activities. Performed together with other Christians they are, therefore, always expressions of fellowship. Even things which could be understood as merely social activities often will become expressions of fellowship for Christians who join in them as a fruit of their common faith (e.g. the handshake in Galatians 2:9, the holy kiss in 1 Corinthians 16:20 and 1 Thessalonians 5:26, and other forms of encouragement for fellow believers).

5. Church Fellowship in Everyday Life Situations

When we now discuss how to practice church fellowship in everyday life situations, we do well to remember two things: First, our fellowship principles are not an end in and of themselves. We will follow them out of love for God and our neighbor and do so in an evangelical spirit to give a clear testimony and to win people for the truth. Second, God's principles do not apply only to official relations between church bodies. Instead we will be led by them in all activities in which we join together expressing our faith. But when and where do we have a scriptural basis to practice fellowship? John Brug writes:

Since we cannot see the faith in people's hearts, outward fellowship must be established on the basis of the individuals' outward confession. If individuals or groups agree on the doctrines of Scripture, they should practice church fellowship together. If they are not in agreement in doctrine, they should not practice church fellowship with each other.²⁰

Trusting in the power of our Savior's words, we need not be afraid to put his Word into practice. The principles we know from his Word are his principles not ours. We know that what God tells us is always good. To remain faithful to his Word will never be harmful to us or the people around us. This is true also when we face lack of understanding or even ridicule for our confessional stand. We know from Jesus' words that the disciple is not above his teacher (Matthew 10:24,25). People will not necessarily understand our practice. If they question us about our fellowship practice, this hopefully gives us an opportunity to study God's Word together with them. If they reject to listen or if we even have to suffer for our confession, this will give us reason to rejoice to bear the cross in Jesus' footsteps.

²⁰ John Brug, "Applications of the Principles of Church Fellowship," Metro Conference, November 1994, in www.wlssays.net, p. 1.

So how do we decide when to practice fellowship as a group or individually? Where can we express our faith together in different ways such as joint prayer? Again we quote John Brug:

Our basic principle is that we cannot practice any form of fellowship with a persistent errorist. We can practice fellowship only with those who confess the whole truth. But how do we determine a person's confession?

The key evidence for determining a Christian's confession is that person's church membership. Normally our fellowship relations with a person are determined by whether or not we are in fellowship with his or her church.²¹

But is church membership the only evidence which we consider in all such decisions? It will occur frequently that somebody confesses faith in Christ and all his words. But he might be a member of a church body not in our fellowship. Under what circumstances could we pray together? Imagine there is somebody in our Bible information class. But before he completes the course and becomes a member of our church, the Lord calls him to his eternal home? Could a confessional Lutheran pastor conduct the funeral? Pastor John Vieths in his essay "Biblical Principles that Impact Christian Fellowship Practices" takes up cases like those and discusses situations where two or more biblical principles apply, and we struggle how to best put them to practice in an evangelical way.²² He reminds us that the disunity of the visible church often makes our relationships with Christians of other denominations uncomfortable or even painful. If you were physically wounded, you would hurt. The spiritual wound of disunity between Christians of different denominations hurts. It does not feel good. And it should not. It will not surprise us that we feel uncomfortable when we realize that there are doctrinal differences which stand in the way of our fellowship or make us unsure how to deal with other Christians.

What to do? Situations and circumstances will vary. But the principles remain the same. We might be in a situation where we deviate from our regular practice. But we should be careful not to deviate from God's principles. *Prayer* is always an act of worship. To be in harmony with God's Word, joint prayer therefore requires the same agreement in all doctrines as all other expressions of fellowship. In difficult cases concerning prayer fellowship it is good to start with some questions. In the case of someone belonging to another church such questions could be: Do we know anything more about that person besides church membership? Does he defend the false beliefs of his church? Has he expressed a desire to follow whatever God's Word says? Is he willing to accept biblical correction of the false beliefs taught by his church? Is he even familiar with the false beliefs of his church?

Praying with somebody outside of our fellowship could strengthen him in his false beliefs that doctrine does not matter. This would be the case if we prayed with a person who is a knowledgeable and devoted follower of the teachings of a heterodox church. On the other hand, if a person merely suffers from a weakness in faith but is open to instruction, praying with him may be appropriate as part of your efforts to reach him with the truth. John Vieths gives another helpful insight:

²¹ Brug, "Can There Ever Be Exceptions?" p. 173.

²² The following paragraphs are adapted from John Vieths' paper presented at the annual gathering of the Lutheran Confessional Church in Sweden (LBK) in 2009, Swedish translation published in *Biblicum* 3/2009.

So long as your church memberships divide you publicly, it would not be appropriate to pray with her in a public setting. That might give other people the impression that you and your church don't really care about the false teachings of her church. In private, prayer may be permissible, depending upon the answers to the earlier questions we asked about her personal beliefs.²³

Another factor is the question whether the situation has some sense of emergency. Is there any reason to believe the faith of that person could suffer harm or be lost without someone else to help support it at this very moment? If not, we need to determine that we are dealing with a weak brother before proceeding with joint prayer. *Attending services* of another church does not necessarily communicate agreement with the teachings of that church. We could attend services at a church as a way of investigating its teachings. However, joining in the worship, praying and singing hymns, confessing the creed etc. would suggest that we accept the message of that church body. Vieths writes:

When attending weddings, funerals, and baptisms in the churches of another denomination for the sake of friends or family, we are there as observers. We don't want to disrupt the other worshipers or create a distraction. We don't want to participate in the worship, either. We watch what is happening quietly and politely. We might stand and sit when the congregation stands or sits only so that we do not distract the other worshipers.²⁴

A similar situation arose in the Old Testament, when Elisha had cured Naaman of his leprosy (2 Kings 5). Naaman asked Elisha if he could still accompany his master when he would pray in the temple of Rimmon. Elisha did not confront Naaman about this practice or correct him. He simply told him, "Go in peace." Under these circumstances, it was understood that Naaman was not there to worship. He was there only to honor and attend his king. The same would apply if we might participate in some of the non-spiritual features of a wedding or at a funeral. That might include standing up as attendants to the bride and groom.

What if someone would ask you to give a *devotion* or a lecture or to lead in prayer, and you know that not all of the people present are in fellowship with you? A similar situation might occur when we meet for our regular worship services at our church or conduct family devotions in our home when guests are present.

In that setting it is clear that we are not giving approval to the false beliefs of guests who may be present. We are there to promote the truth, and our guests probably understand this. In our own homes, we do not hesitate to have devotions and lead prayers even when guests of another faith are present. It is a good way for us to witness to them. In other settings, the impression people receive may not be so clear. Vieths writes:

We have generally declined the invitation to lead prayers at official government functions, or to open the meetings of various organizations in the community with

²³ Vieths *op.cit.*

²⁴ Vieths, *op.cit.*

prayer. These tend to reinforce in people's minds that the differences between churches aren't very important, and they suggest that we don't have serious objections to the false teachings in other churches.²⁵

We may not in all cases come to exactly the same conclusions about what to do. The details of the situation and the context in which we have to apply the principles, help us decide how to best give a clear testimony for the truth and in this way show both love for God and our neighbor. How then should we deal with those who joyfully confess to be Christian but we know they still hold to false doctrine? How can we best serve them in truth and love? John Vieths has this helpful comment:

It gives me joy to know that other people profess faith in Jesus, in spite of their false doctrine. The joyful comment of the other person does not give us an immediate basis for fellowship. There is likely no pressure in such a situation to practice some kind of fellowship. However, this joyful reaction may indicate that this person would be willing to talk about Scripture with me. I think that I would take an interest in such a person, ask questions about his or her beliefs, and try to develop some sort of friendship. I would look for an opportunity to talk about my beliefs. Maybe we will never end up anything more than friends who respectfully disagree about certain Bible teachings. But maybe God can use me to help this person give up his false doctrine.²⁶

We can take comfort knowing that many of our friends and relatives in other churches believe in Jesus as their Savior in spite of their erroneous thoughts about some biblical teachings. Our goal is to help them over their wrong notions whenever there is an opportunity. In hard cases we should ask ourselves, "How can I best give a clear testimony against error to the false teacher, to his adherents, and to everyone who observes my action? How can I best win them for the truth?" Professor Carl Lawrenz's comment may serve as a fitting illustration for this evangelical mindset in applying the biblical principles of church fellowship in everyday life situations.

The Lord in his Word tells us: "Him that is weak in the faith receive ye, but not to doubtful disputations." Wherever Christian faith manifests and expresses itself the Lord would have us strengthen and encourage it. After the manner of the Savior Himself we are not to break the bruised reed or quench the smoking flax. We are not to "offend" those who believe in Him, and who by their confession lead us to assume that they do believe in Him, even though they may still be weak in Christian understanding and judgment. We are rather to do all in our power to build them up in their faith and Christian understanding.

On the other hand, the Lord tells us in His Word to mark them which cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which we have learned and to avoid them. This clearly applies to all adherents of false doctrine and practice. It is clear that this will keep us from practicing Christian fellowship both privately and publicly with those who manifest themselves as persistent errorists. It will

²⁵ Vieths, *op.cit.*

²⁶ Vieths, *op.cit.*

also keep us from practicing Christian fellowship publicly with all those who follow adherents of false doctrine and practice and who identify themselves with them, whether they themselves are fully conscious of what they are doing or not.²⁷

6. Conclusion

In our relationships with people outside our fellowship we need to remember that the biblical principles of church fellowship are not an end in themselves. As children of God we delight in God's law (Psalm 1:2) because we know its ultimate purpose: It was given to serve people's good. So also in the principles of fellowship we see the gracious guidelines of our heavenly father who wants to protect us from spiritual harm and to enable us as his ambassadors to win over others for the full truth of his Word. John Brug, comparing the biblical principles of church fellowship with the Sabbath law, writes:

The law was given to serve people's good. "Therefore, it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath" (Matthew 12:12). . . . The Pharisees failed to understand that God desired "mercy not sacrifice" (Matthew 12:7).

In short, "the Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27). We shouldn't forget that "fellowship principles were made for man; man wasn't made for fellowship principles." If we remember that God wants mercy and not sacrifice, we won't condemn the innocent (Matthew 12:7).²⁸

The biblical practice of church fellowship is always an act of love. It has always in mind to serve the well-being of others: To strengthen fellowship where it already exists and to lead others to their Savior and at the same time into the fellowship at Jesus' feet. Therefore, we will patiently instruct those who listen (Matthew 28:20). We will make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit in our fellowship (Ephesians 4:1ff; Acts 2:42; Hebrews 10:24,25). We will help each other as brothers and sisters by loving admonition where fellowship is in danger (Matthew 18:15ff; Galatians 3:1; 6:1). And we will keep away from persistent errorists and all who support their false teaching as long as they reject warning and correction (Romans 16:17ff; Titus 3:10).

However, we will make a distinction in our dealings with weak brothers as long as they are willing to take instruction from the Word of God. If somebody is not aware of the false beliefs tolerated or promoted within his church, we will patiently lead him to see what Christ says. We will point out error in doctrine and practice to win him over for the truth. Even if someone will not listen immediately, we will continue to talk to him until our efforts prove to be in vain (2 Thessalonians 3:14,15): "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."

In doing so we are motivated by the love of Christ which compels us (2 Corinthians 5:14) to watch over one another as Christian brothers and sisters and to share the gospel with others. Our practice of church fellowship will have to avoid the notion of being legalistic or arrogant as well

²⁷ Carl J. Lawrenz, "A Statement on the Applications of Our Fellowship Principles" in www.wlsessays.net, p. 1.

²⁸ Brug, "Can There Ever Be Exceptions?" p. 169.

as the temptation to look for loopholes to avoid conflict. We do not just use a set of rules but always ask how to best apply God's principles evangelically. We are motivated by the gospel. It is our desire to show love for God, love for his truth, and love for the people around us. The following points highlight our motivation:²⁹

1. Love leads us to warn the errorist against his errors in the hope that he can be won to repentance (Titus 3:10; Matthew 18:15; 2 Timothy 2:25-26; 1 Timothy 1:3-5).
2. Love leads us to warn others against the errorist, so that they do not fall victim to his false teaching (1 Timothy 4:1-6; 2 Timothy 4:2-5; Titus 1:10-14).
3. We seek to avoid even the appearance of going along with error, also in matters which are adiaphora (Galatians 2:3).
4. We separate from errorists to protect ourselves from the dangerous poison of error which is a threat to our souls (2 Timothy 2:17; Galatians 5:9).
5. We have a special concern for those weak in the faith (Jude 22,23).

When we study the biblical principles and applications of confessional fellowship we do well to always come back and sit at Jesus' feet. There we will always find his full forgiveness for all our shortcomings in our dealings with each other as fellow believers. We find grace upon grace for our failure not to have confessed his truth boldly and lovingly at all times. And at his feet as redeemed and justified children of God, we rejoice in the fellowship we have with Jesus our Redeemer and through him with our Father in heaven. We praise him for the fellowship he has created between us as brothers and sisters in Christ. And equipped with his comforting message, we can step out into the world again to confess his saving truth to others so that they may find lasting comfort and peace with us at Jesus' feet.

To him be all glory.

²⁹ Taken from Brug, "Can There Ever Be Exceptions?" p. 166; and Brug, *Church Fellowship*, p. 117.

7. Bibliography

- Aaberg, Theodore A. "The Doctrine of Church Fellowship." ELS Pastoral Conference, Minneapolis, 1977. Available at www.wlssays.net.
- Brug, John F. "Applications of the Principles of Church Fellowship." Metro Conference, November 1994. Available at www.wlssays.net.
- . "Can There Ever Be Exceptions To Our Regular Fellowship Practices That Do Not Violate Scripture's Fellowship Principles?" *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, 99:3 (Summer 2002), pp. 163-181; 99:4 (Fall 2002), pp. 243-258.
- . *Church Fellowship—Working Together for the Truth*. Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1996.
- Erlandsson, Seth. *Church Fellowship—What Does the Bible Say?* Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1979.
- Hedkvist, Stefan. "Evangeliet föder ett ekumeniskt sinne." *Biblicum*, 1/2011.
- Hoffmann, Martin. "Evangelische Kirchengemeinschaft." Unpublished essay.
- Jahn, Curtis A., editor. *Essays on Church Fellowship*. Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1996.
- Kinery, Jeffrey C. "Kirchengemeinschaft und ihre Grenzen." *Theologische Handreichung und Information*, 3/1991.
- Lawrenz, Carl J. "A Statement on the Applications of Our Fellowship Principles." Available at www.wlssays.net.
- . "The Scriptural Principles Concerning Church Fellowship," in *Our Great Heritage*, Vol. 3. Edited by Lyle W. Lange. Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1991.
- Paustian, Mark A. "Church Fellowship—Expressing it in Positive Ways." Presented to a Conference of the Western Wisconsin District at Luther Preparatory School, Watertown, 2009.
- Schmeling, Gaylin. "The Theology of Church Fellowship," in *Bread of Life From Heaven—The Theology of the Means of Grace, the Public Ministry, and Church Fellowship*. Mankato: Bethany Lutheran Theological Seminary Press, 2009.
- Schroeder, Mark G. "Walking Together with Jesus: Church Fellowship and its Implications for Confessional Lutherans." Essay delivered at the Emmaus Conference in Tacoma, Washington, May 6, 2011. Available at www.wlssays.net.
- Vieths, John. "Biblical Principles that Impact Christian Fellowship Practices." *Biblicum*, 3/2009.

Discussion Questions

1. Our blessed fellowship

Do we treasure enough the spiritual fellowship of all believers? What is our view of Christians outside our fellowship—reason to rejoice? possible threat? competitors?

Do we talk enough about the doctrine of church fellowship in our own circles? The unit concept: A clear confession as basis for all expressions of fellowship—a burden? a reason to rejoice over what God has entrusted to us? a blessing to share with others?

2. Speaking the truth in love

How can we communicate the biblical truth to our fellow believers who struggle with this topic? to those outside our fellowship we want to reach with the gospel? to the next generation? How can we avoid both a legalistic approach in our practice as well as the danger to look for loopholes in God's law?

3. Unity of Spirit—Bond of Peace

How much unity in things other than doctrine is necessary / advisable / possible—to keep the bond of peace within our fellowship? How much diversity in the area of adiaphora can our fellowship bear? How much uniformity are we willing or able to strife for in our fellowship? How much diversity are we willing to live with? rejoice over?

Challenges and opportunities of Augsburg Confession VII / Formula of Concord X? To what extend do we see this as a blessing? To what extend could it threaten our unity?

4. Outside the Framework of Fellowship

What do we mean by this? Could this be an area we should make more use of, to grow in knowledge, extend our confessional fellowship, and advance the gospel (free conferences, input from outside our fellowship / cooperation in externals)? Could this become a loophole for a looser fellowship practice? How can we avoid falling in either one of the two ditches?

5. Other points for discussion

What challenges do you face in your culture in applying the biblical doctrine of fellowship? What can we do to foster the “positive side” of fellowship in a better way?