

Walking Together with Jesus

Church Fellowship and its Implications for Confessional Lutherans



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Foreword

The Significance of the Emmaus episode: Κοινωνία (Fellowship) lost and restored

It was as though they had been staring at a disassembled jigsaw puzzle, freshly dumped out of the box in a jumbled mess. The individual pieces were all there, and they could see those pieces clearly enough. They sensed that it was supposed to be a beautiful scene when complete. But they were clueless as to how the pieces fit together, and even more in the dark as to exactly what the completed picture was supposed to look like. They had no photo on the cover of the box to guide them, no indication of what the completed work would depict, no apparent rhyme or reason to show how it would all come together and make sense. Like a child faced with a task requiring skill beyond his years, they turned from the puzzle, sad, frustrated, and confused, and walked away. They walked away from the company and the fellowship of those who had walked together for three years, away from the reassuring words of the Teacher who had offered them the water of life, the way of salvation, and the truth that alone could set them free.

Cleopas and his companion headed out of Jerusalem toward the village of Emmaus, the trauma of recent days etched on their downcast faces. One can only imagine how they were trying, struggling mightily, to make sense of it all. Scenes they had witnessed earlier in Jesus' ministry undoubtedly replayed again and again in their minds. His hand touching the leper with cleansing and forgiving power.¹ His eyes looking lovingly at people who didn't deserve to be loved.² His feet anointed by the tears and the perfume of a repentant sinner.³ His arm out-

stretched to calm howling winds and crashing waves in an instant.⁴ His head, years earlier wetted by the waters of the Jordan,⁵ more recently bathed with his own blood, flowing from wounds caused by thorn and fist.⁶ The pieces of the puzzle were there, but the complete picture eluded them.

They thought not just of what they had seen during their time with him; they also must have recalled what they had heard from Jesus. His words and his teachings over the past few years undoubtedly swirled in their thoughts and echoed in their memories. "I will make you fishers of men."⁷ "Blessed are the eyes that see what you see."⁸ "I am the resurrection and the life."⁹ "Destroy this Temple and I will raise it up again in three days."¹⁰ "It is finished!"¹¹ They remembered those words. But they didn't comprehend. The pieces of the puzzle were there, but the full picture was not.

And how could they not be thinking about the events of the last week? How could they not recall how, just days before, when the mob laid hands on Jesus, they had run away from him with the others. Etched in their minds was the searing memory of how, mustering just enough courage to get close, they saw him ridiculed, tortured, and finally executed like a criminal.

¹ Luke 5:13

² Luke 13:34

³ Luke 7:38

⁴ Mark 4:39

⁵ Mark 1:9

⁶ Matthew 27:29-30

⁷ Matthew 4:19

⁸ Luke 10:23

⁹ John 11:25

¹⁰ John 2:19

¹¹ John 19:30

And now, making it all the more confusing for them, they had heard the stories on that Sunday. Those stories told by the women; those incredible accounts of the stone rolled-away, the tomb now empty, the body missing, appearances of angels saying that Jesus was alive. Those same reports, incredible as they were, confirmed by their friends who said that it was just as the women had described.

They walked away from friends and companions who were struggling with the same puzzle and who were just as confused and feeling just as alone as they were. They walked away from the people that had been drawn together by the words of the carpenter's son from Nazareth. They walked away from the little group, once a close-knit spiritual family, now splintered and fractured. What had joined them together for the past few years seemed to have vanished tragically from them. In spite of those amazing reports, it still appeared to them that the One who had drawn them together was now gone. Without his living Word drawing them together and without his visible presence gathering them to himself, they concluded that they were very much alone. Without him in their midst, even the reported facts of that Easter morning saddened them. So they walked away, convinced that their unity was shattered, the κοινωνία they had once enjoyed now hopelessly fractured.

Then the Stranger joined them. His questions, framed as the innocent inquiry of a visitor about recent events, forced them to articulate their confusion about what had happened. They described to him the pieces of the puzzle they had been staring at, but their words and their furrowed brows displayed how little they understood, how "seeing they were not seeing," how confused they were, how lacking in the faith that had once connected them to their Lord and to each other. The Word of God Incarnate, the crucified and now risen Messiah, was still unrecognized by eyes shrouded in doubt and fear.

And then the Stranger began to speak. He minced no words: "How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken!"¹² Those were words of correction and admonition, to be sure, but they were spoken with the deepest love and affection for struggling, dim-sighted sinners. So in that same love he began to help them to see what they were not seeing. He led them with the only means which could create clarity, and, more importantly, faith. He began to lead the two wandering disciples back to the words and prophecies inspired by the Spirit in those days before his incarnation, when the Word was with God and the Word was God.¹³ He carefully, lovingly, powerfully, "explained to them what was said in the Scriptures concerning himself."¹⁴ One by one, he took the scattered pieces of the puzzle and put them carefully, methodically, into place.

The narrative transfixed them as they heard him speak. No doubt the Stranger returned to the very beginning—to the shattering of a perfect world by the tragic rebellion of two perfect creatures. The Stranger must have recounted how those cowering and frightened sinners found themselves not immediately and eternally destroyed but graciously embraced by a God who gave an amazing promise. The Seed of that very woman, a woman now hiding in shame and fear with her partner in disobedience, would someday permanently undo the damage they had done, would crush the head of the serpent, and would restore them to an eternity of life and peace with the Creator they had spurned. It was a promise made in grace to unworthy sinners, and through that same grace it was a promise embraced by faith.

He walked them through the unfolding details of that gracious plan: how God pointed Abraham to the skies and assured him of a world blessed through one of his descendants; how God formed a people for himself in Egypt and brought them to the land he had prepared for them; how God promised David that

¹² Luke 24:25

¹³ John 1:1

¹⁴ Luke 24:27

through one of his descendants an eternal kingdom would be established. Would he have not also reminded them of the covenant that God has made, with its continuing sacrifices and ceremonies and priestly functions—all pictures of the One who would come as both the sacrificial Lamb and the mediating High Priest?

Then we can imagine him mentioning, one by one, the increasingly specific details of how this Messiah would come. He told of what he would do and, amazingly, how each one of those detailed promises and prophecies was fulfilled in the birth, life, ministry, and death of the one they had known as their teacher and friend.

Isaiah said that he would be born of a virgin—and well they knew of the miracle that would cause Mary forever to be called blessed. Micah had pinpointed lowly Bethlehem as the unlikely place of his birth—and that is exactly where Jesus was born. The Stranger would have reminded them of the fulfillment of many prophecies fulfilled before their very eyes, from the “weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children”¹⁵ caused by the death of the innocents at the hand of Herod, the witness of John in the wilderness preparing the way for the Messiah,¹⁶ the beginning of Jesus’ ministry described as the dawning of the great light on those living in the shadow of death,¹⁷ the hostile and unbelieving reaction to Jesus of those who though seeing would not see and though hearing would not hear or understand.¹⁸ More recently, he reminded them that the circumstances of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem were not accidental; in fact, Zechariah had described the means of transportation¹⁹ while the Psalms had detailed both the hosanna-filled reaction from the crowd²⁰ and the joyful songs of children²¹ that would greet him.

And then came the events of the last three days. The Stranger pointed them to the words of the prophets—his own words, really, words which all testified about him²²—and invited them to compare those Spirit-filled utterances with what they had just seen. Zechariah had told of how the Shepherd would be struck and the flock scattered.²³ The Stranger reminded them of the prophecies of a betrayal by a friend for money²⁴ and of garments divided by lot.²⁵ Can you hear him reciting the words of Isaiah, so pointed and specific in their gruesome yet marvelous detail: “...despised and rejected, a man of sorrows and familiar with suffering . . . took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows . . . stricken by God, smitten by him and afflicted . . . pierced for our transgressions . . . crushed for our iniquities . . . oppressed and afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth . . . led like a lamb to the slaughter . . . cut off from the land of the living.”²⁶

But the message of the prophets didn’t end there, with suffering and with death. They also foresaw life and victory. Isaiah would continue, “After the suffering of his soul he will see the light of life.”²⁷ Job spoke those beautiful words of faith and confidence, telling of his Redeemer who is not dead but lives, a Redeemer whom Job would see with his own resurrected eyes. David, in an inspired messianic reference, uttered the words of the coming Son of David, “You will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your Holy One see decay. You have made known to me the path of life.”²⁸ Each one of these words of Scripture, the Stranger reminded them, found perfect fulfillment in the One they had followed to Jerusalem, the One whose miracles and teachings and recent actions were now a confused vortex of disconnected thoughts swirling in their minds.

¹⁵ Jeremiah 31:15

¹⁶ Isaiah 40:3

¹⁷ Isaiah 9:1-2

¹⁸ Isaiah

¹⁹ Zechariah 9:9

²⁰ Psalm 118:26

²¹ Psalm 8:2

²² John 5:38

²³ Zechariah 13:7

²⁴ Zechariah 11:12

²⁵ Psalm 22:18

²⁶ Isaiah 53

²⁷ Isaiah 53:11

²⁸ Psalm 16:10-11

And then at the end of their walk, as the Stranger finished putting each of those pieces of the puzzle carefully into place, he sat down with his friends and broke bread. In that moment, he lifted the veil from their eyes and enabled them to see the completed picture. He gave them the eyes to see him—by faith—as the Lamb of God who once was slain but who now lives. He enabled them to see him as the One who had taken a similar loaf of bread and offered it to his disciples with the amazing words, “This is my body.” He opened their eyes, and more importantly their hearts, to understand and to believe all that they had seen and heard. What had only moments earlier been a jumbling confusion of words, events, facts, and unexplained reports, now came into clear focus. Now, hearing his Words, they understood. They saw. They believed.

Theirs was not an understanding and realization arrived at by logical conclusion or intellectual exercise. What had only moments earlier been a disjointed jumble to them, they now saw as a complete and seamless picture—through the eyes of faith. Theirs was now a view enlightened by the Word of the prophets, instructed and brought into focus by the Incarnate Word who had once spoken through the prophets and who was now speaking with them in person. The One speaking to them on the path, they now knew, was the Word who had been made flesh, who had lived for a while among them, who Himself was the fulfillment of the prophecies, whose glory as the victorious and living Christ they were now able to see and behold in all its splendor.

And so, with the Word of the living Christ ringing in their ears and still working in their hearts,

they returned to Jerusalem to do what believers do. They yearned to share their joy and faith in the living Savior with others who were now joined as members of one body, by faith in the one Head of that body. They hungered to be strengthened by the words of the rabbi from Nazareth that now they knew as the risen and victorious Messiah. They sought out the fellowship of people who were also now able, by the power of the living Word and the living Christ, to greet them with the same joyful conviction, “It is true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon!”²⁹ Together they wanted to be strengthened in their faith, and together they wanted to respond to what God had done in worship, in prayer, in Christian love for one another.

That newly-restored fellowship would be strengthened in the following forty days through the words of the living Christ himself as he spoke to them about the kingdom of God.³⁰ And after Pentecost, the same Word would cause that fellowship to expand and grow as “they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer”³¹ and as “the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.”³²

It is that same fellowship, a unity founded on the Word of the Risen Christ, which would continue, according to the clear promises of God, until that Risen Christ would return again to restore a permanent, perfect, and lasting fellowship to all believers gathered in victory around the throne of the Lamb.

²⁹ Luke 24:34

³⁰ Acts 1:3

³¹ Acts 2:42

³² Acts 2:47

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Lutherans have always been comfortable with seemingly contradictory biblical concepts existing side by side. Law and Gospel. God's unconditional grace and his perfect righteousness. *Simul justus et peccator* (at the same time saint and sinner). Jesus both fully human and fully divine. As they assigned the topic for this essay, the organizers of this Emmaus conference were characteristically Lutheran in their approach. They requested an essay on the doctrine of fellowship. When I asked what specific aspect of this doctrine they wanted me to explore, their answer was at the same time wonderfully kind—and heartlessly cruel. They showed their *kindness* by saying that I was free to pursue any aspect of the topic; they showed their *cruelty* by saying that I was free to pursue any aspect of the topic.

Lutheranism at the crossroads: A compelling reason to talk about fellowship

It was the fall of 2010. Months earlier, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America had voted by a sizable (though far from unanimous) margin to allow individuals involved in open and committed same sex relationships (both men and women) to serve as ordained pastors in the ELCA. Almost immediately, numerous congregations and individuals in the ELCA voiced great concern and disapproval over the action of their church body and began to consider whether it was time for them to leave the ELCA.

Many of those congregations, either through their pastors or through committees of

lay people, began to investigate whether other Lutheran synods might provide a place of refuge for them. Inquiries went out to the LCMS, WELS, ELS, and other Lutheran bodies. I received inquiries from at least ten committees assigned to research other Lutheran bodies (often joking with them that their committee must have drawn the short straw in being assigned to contact WELS). Invariably, all asked good questions, and all seemed to appreciate the direct and honest answers.

One ELCA congregation, ironically located in rural Perry County, Missouri, invited me to come personally to their congregation to summarize the doctrinal position of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod and to compare it with the position of the ELCA, especially in regard to the issue of ordaining openly practicing homosexuals as pastors.

I accepted that invitation gladly, but my time with them proved to be bittersweet. When I arrived, the setting felt eerily familiar. It was the fellowship hall of a Lutheran congregation. As I entered I was greeted with the unmistakable aromas of good Lutheran coffee, freshly baked cookies, and homemade doughnuts. There were even cups inscribed with the Thrivent logo. And every single person to whom I was introduced had familiar sounding names like Schmidt, Mueller, Huebner, and Krueger. (The members of Norwegian descent must not have been in attendance that evening.) A picture of Luther nailing the 95 Theses hung in a visible and

prominent position in the narthex. The agenda of the next Lutheran Ladies' Guild meeting was posted on the bulletin board, with the names those assigned to bring refreshments highlighted in yellow marker. This was my first visit ever to an ELCA congregation, and I was surprised how familiar it felt.

I began by thanking them for inviting me to introduce WELS and its doctrine to them. I assured them that I would be open and honest in describing WELS beliefs and would do my best to outline the differences between the doctrine of WELS and the ELCA. The very first thing I said seemed to gain their immediate attention (as I hoped it would). "You've asked me to come here because of the recent decision by your church body to ordain practicing homosexuals as pastors. But I would like you to consider something very important before we go any farther. That one decision of the ELCA is not really the problem that has brought you into such a state of concern and led you to invite me here tonight. That decision was really only a *symptom* and the unavoidable result of something that happened much longer ago. You see, it was decades ago that the churches that later formed the ELCA openly abandoned the belief that the Bible is the inspired, inerrant Word of God. And once that decision was made, the door was opened for any and every possible departure from what God's Word teaches and from what Lutherans have always believed. Allowing for practicing homosexuals to serve in the ministry is possible only if a church no longer accepts the Bible as the Word of God and the only source of its teaching."

As soon as I spoke that last sentence, every single head in the room was nodding in sad agreement. That reaction was an encouragement to me. These Lutheran Christians, despite belonging to a church body that, decades ago, had abandoned the *sola scriptura* principle of the Reformation, still seemed to believe and

understand that the Bible is indeed the Word of God, and that any departure from that Word inevitably results in doctrine and practice that do not reflect the truth. They themselves were experiencing the painful divisions being caused by those who were teaching "contrary to the doctrine they had learned." I was encouraged as I witnessed first-hand something that I knew to be true: that even in a church body as far from Lutheran orthodoxy and the Lutheran Confessions as the ELCA is today, the power of the Gospel is still at work. In spite of misguided efforts to deflect and dull the blade, the Spirit still wields his sharp sword. Even in a synod where doctrine is changed to suit cultural whims and the precious truths of God's Word are jettisoned as inconvenient and outdated, the Word of the living Christ and his blessed Sacraments continue to create and preserve saving faith. Even in a church body where the majority of theologians and leaders have taken a path away from the Word of the living Christ, there are still pastors and people walking on the road to Emmaus with their Savior, led by him, assured by his Word, joined to him as a member of his body through faith in him as the Head.

But I also felt a palpable sadness and disappointment at the end of that evening. After outlining other areas of doctrinal differences between the ELCA and WELS, I fielded many perceptive questions about how the application of the scriptural principles of fellowship would affect their congregation in practical ways. In each case, rather than offering pat and simple answers, I encouraged them to arrive at the proper conclusions to which a sincere and consistent commitment to the Word of Christ would lead. In many cases they seemed to reach the proper conclusions. But then, near the end of the discussion, one woman raised her hand and asked, "If we were to join the Wisconsin Synod, would that mean that our congregation could no longer hold our joint vacation Bible school with

the Methodist church just down the street?" They knew the answer, but the looks on their faces showed that they were not ready to accept it. Like the rich young man, in the end this congregation appeared to be going away sad,³³ unable or unwilling to let the Word of God guide their doctrine and their practice, regardless of the cost. Or, in keeping with our Emmaus theme, this congregation seemed poised to remain on its chosen path, one that would inevitably lead it farther away from the life-giving Word of the living Savior.

There is a growing perception (a correct one, I believe) that the Lutheran church in America is entering yet another crucial time in its history. First consider the ELCA. With its increasingly close relationships and fellowship with other Christian church bodies, along with its decision to accept openly homosexual ministers, the ELCA has clearly signaled its intent to depart even farther from biblical and Lutheran doctrine. As a result of the latest action, hundreds of ELCA congregations like the one I visited in Perry County are in the process of deciding whether or not to leave the ELCA.

The LCMS, with commendable honesty, is confronting the fact that it is still a synod divided on many doctrinal issues, not to mention matters of practice and application. Last summer's election of a new president who had called for synod-wide Scripture-based efforts to foster doctrinal unity (called, coincidentally to the topic of this essay, the *Koinonia* Project) is welcome evidence of a growing desire for a clear articulation of, and a unified commitment to, biblical and confessional faithfulness in the LCMS.³⁴

³³ Mark 10:22

³⁴ In a refreshingly blunt but loving analysis, soon-to-be LCMS President Matthew Harrison wrote in his "It's Time" treatise: "Let's be honest. There are enduring divisions in our Synod, and these divisions not only make our life together bitter, they consume our energy, and they cripple our ability to share the Gospel in its fullness with a world that has never been so open to what we have

The Wisconsin Synod finds itself emphasizing the need to balance the church's amazing Christian freedom in the practice of worship and outreach, with the need to do all things in a fitting and orderly way and to remember that not all things are wise, beneficial, or loving.³⁵ That discussion also involves attempts to determine what activities are truly matters of adiaphora, able to be utilized in Christian freedom guided by wisdom and love, in contrast to those which, by their very nature and origin, are impossible to cleanse of false theological underpinnings. Sometimes difficult questions regarding fellowship relationships and activities are being addressed by those who supervise doctrine and practice. Amid these reminders that we are still in the Church Militant, however, a renewed and refreshing emphasis on the Lutheran Confessions has taken root in WELS, especially among the younger generation of pastors, with the ensuing appreciation for what it means to be a *confessional* Lutheran.

In recent years the ELS has looked to the Scriptures and the Confessions as it wrestled internally with questions of the nature of the church and its ministry. At the same time, the ELS has carried on frank and brotherly

in Christ as Lutherans . . . These divisions are publicly minimized or maximized, depending on one's particular theo-political persuasion. They are artfully capitalized upon by various factions for political ends. These divisions rob us of our joy in our churchly work, place barriers between brother pastors and others, breed distrust, and even throw many into camps bent on exterminating the power and influence of the other. Many simply try to do their work, quietly ducking the bullets flying overhead. Many have simply 'checked out' of participating in synodical life. A veritable industry of an 'unofficial press' and Web activity thrives, rife with information often inaccurate, and scandalously so. Elected or appointed officials are mercilessly and sometimes egregiously vilified. But all this is not the problem. These are merely the symptoms of the problem." Matthew C. Harrison, "It's Time," pp. 3-4.

³⁵ Jonathan Schroeder, in an essay presented at the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Symposium on Worship and Outreach (2010), capsulized the issue well: "You may be free in making changes to worship practices; we will fight for your freedom to do just that. Do not, however, demand that we always call it wise." p. 11

discussions with WELS on related subjects with a shared commitment to the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions.

All three synods struggle at times and in varying degrees with inroads of “church growth” influences. At the same time, however, confessional Lutherans in those synods and in many smaller Lutheran groups are discovering with joy that, while significant differences remain between the former members of the Synodical Conference, there are many who share a sincere commitment to the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture and who hold an unapologetic *quia* subscription to the Lutheran Confessions.

All of these factors combine to give the impression that something significant is happening in American Lutheranism. As the song goes, what that “something” is, “ain’t exactly clear.” Some have observed that a re-alignment in American Lutheranism has already begun with more possibly to follow. The recent ELCA decision signals a continuing and accelerating departure from biblical truth, a move which has prompted many in that church to seek less drastic but still heterodox affinities. Sad to say, even in more confessional synods, it is possible that there will be those who conclude that historic confessional Lutheranism is too rigid, who view faithful Lutheran practice as an obstacle for Gospel outreach, and who will at some point seek affiliation with other like-minded people. And for those who sincerely hold high the banner of confessional Lutheranism, the days and years ahead seem to offer some intriguing opportunities to gather together at the foot of the cross, to open our ears and hearts to the Word of the living Christ, and to recommit ourselves to the truth of his Word and to the mission to which he has called us. LCMS President Matthew Harrison, referring specifically to the LCMS, but in words that have application for all confessional Lutherans, recently wrote,

There is unfolding before us a moment of opportunity . . . We have a worldwide vocation, a world that is calling us to account, to stand and be counted for Christ. Despite all our weaknesses, we have unbelievable worldwide capacity for the advancement of the Gospel and the Lutheran Confession. It’s a moment for courage. Shall we dare, by faith in Christ, to seize the moment?³⁶

It is indeed tragic that a large portion of the Lutheran church today is moving farther and farther from a foundation of the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions. Some are continuing to jettison Lutheran doctrine, adopting a generic, mainline, socially-conscious, politically correct Protestantism (or even moving toward *rap-prochement* with Rome). Others seem to be lured by the siren songs of Arminian theology or emergent church pseudo-theology. But at the same time, one senses that there is a clear desire among many other Lutherans to rediscover—and to reassert—what it means to be truly Lutheran, committed to a path that is both faithful to the Scriptures and to the Lutheran Confessions, and having a Gospel-produced desire to share boldly and confidently with the world a message that no one else today is proclaiming.

So now lies before us, as has been the case since the time of the apostles, the God-given call and opportunity to return humbly *ad fontes*, to bow in repentance at the foot of the cross, to listen intently to the words of the living Christ, and, God-willing, to strive and pray for a doctrinal faithfulness and *κοινωνία* that only the Spirit can create through the power of his Gospel.

³⁶ Matthew Harrison, “Beloved Synod, Take Courage!” *Lutheran Witness*, March 2011, p. 1.

Clarifying the task

There seems to be little controversy among confessional Lutherans about the primary elements of the doctrine of fellowship itself. I know of no confessional Lutheran who denies that there exists a real fellowship that all believers have with Christ and with each other as members of the *una sancta*. Furthermore, all clearly recognize that this invisible unity will show itself horizontally in the visible church as Christians participate together in outward ecclesiastical relationships and activities. In other words, all seem to agree that the fellowship we enjoy as believers in Christ is a *status* given to us through faith, a status seen only by God and that links us as members of one body to the living Christ, the Head. It is also a *status* in the visible church “in which individuals or groups on the basis of a common faith have mutually recognized one another as Christian brethren.”³⁷ Furthermore, it is also acknowledged that the invisible fellowship of the *una sancta* will show itself in the visible church as Christians jointly participate in *activities* which are spiritual in nature and which are intimately connected to the life and mission of the church. And there remains, at least among today’s confessional Lutherans, the somber, scripturally-based conviction that established and intractable differences in the public doctrine of church bodies ultimately must result in the acknowledgment that the blessed relationship of fellowship has been broken. Matthew Harrison put it well:

. . . Despite our manifold weaknesses and sins, precisely of Christians and the Church, Christ remains wherever, so far as and so long as, Christ and his Word are heard and to the extent that true Baptism and the Lord’s Supper remain. That is the

³⁷ *Reports and Memorials for the Thirty-Sixth Convention of the WELS*, 1961, p 95. This should be understood in the sense of Christian brother with whom we can practice fellowship.

expansive joy of generous, faithful Lutheranism . . . There is a time to ‘separate’ (Romans 16:17), and we bear the burden knowing that the Church is found geographically and temporally far beyond the limits of churchly fellowship.³⁸

Where the problems have arisen (and still exist) among confessional Lutherans, then, is not so much in the fundamental truths and principles of the doctrine of fellowship as in the *application and practice* of this doctrine.³⁹ Those questions of application and practice come fast and furious: What degree of doctrinal unity is required before fellowship can be expressed in joint activities? Which activities are always, which ones are never, and which ones may or may not be (depending on circumstances) expressions of fellowship? What is the God-pleasing practice when it comes to joining in fellowship activities, and in what circumstances can and should exceptions be made? When must a fellowship relationship end? Are there different principles governing fellowship activities in a public setting and those which may take place in private?

Our natural inclination is to focus our discussions on those practical questions that deal with real situations and real people. And those questions will certainly need to be answered. But as we look at specific situations and applications and attempt to determine the correct course, it will be absolutely vital to identify the *principles derived from the doctrine* which will result in a proper and biblical *application and practice* of fellowship. What are those principles? Let me suggest that faithful practice of the doctrine of fellowship is one which is:

³⁸ Matthew Harrison, *A Little Book on Joy*, p.167.

³⁹ This is not in any way to deny that doctrine and practice always go together. Doctrine guides and shapes practice; practice flows from doctrine. A denial or misunderstanding of the doctrine will always lead to false practice; false practice is always a *de facto* denial or misunderstanding of the doctrine.

- **Committed** to defending and proclaiming the Word of Christ without compromise
- **Consistent** in its confession and witness
- **Compelled** by the Gospel and guided by love

Following these three principles will play an important and pivotal role in any efforts of today's confessional Lutherans to arrive at a God-pleasing, scriptural, confessional, and complete agreement in both the doctrine and in the faithful practice of church fellowship. And since the doctrine of fellowship is intimately linked with the commitment to hold faithfully to all of the doctrines of Scripture, only a correct understanding of fellowship, reflecting that commitment to the Word and to the Confessions, can make possible the first steps in restoring a more far-reaching doctrinal unity among confessional Lutherans.

Guiding our discussion

Without doubt any treatment of the doctrine of church fellowship must begin (and end) with **Scripture**. The biblical basis of this doctrine, as well as its faithful application, will form the explicit and implicit foundation for any

proper understanding of the subject.

Confessional Lutherans, of course, will also then look to our confessional statements (both ecumenical and Lutheran) to show the doctrine was understood, articulated, and applied by the early church and the confessors. We will be guided in our understanding of this doctrine by the **Confessions** *because (quia)* they are a clear and faithful exposition of biblical truth.

Furthermore, those who today profess a genuine *quia* subscription to the Book of Concord generally belong to synods and groups that formerly had been a part of the Synodical Conference. For that reason the central role played by the doctrine of fellowship both in the formation and in the demise of the **Synodical Conference** cannot be omitted from any meaningful discussion of the doctrine. The initial formation of the Synodical Conference, the decades-long debate that led to its tragic demise, as well as events in subsequent years, have all combined to influence and shape the theology and approach of former Synodical Conference synods and in many ways affects them to this day. It is important to understand that history and to learn from it.

Committed to defending and proclaiming the Word of Christ without compromise

The importance of the doctrine of fellowship

Fellowship is not an obscure or peripheral doctrine. It is not an insignificant theological cul-de-sac. It is also not, as some would assume, a doctrine elevated to inflated significance only because of the events leading up to the breakup

of the Synodical Conference. Nor is it a quaint or eccentric or peculiar doctrine that serves merely to define the identity of WELS or the Evangelical Lutheran Synod.⁴⁰ Rather, the doctrine of

⁴⁰ John Brug observes, "When people list an identifying mark of the Wisconsin Synod, however, the first doctrine that most often comes

fellowship is a vital and central doctrine of Scripture. It is intimately and directly connected to the very foundation of our faith, the life-giving power and unchanging truth of the Word of Christ. That means that any faithful application of the doctrine of fellowship must be *committed to defending and proclaiming the Word of Christ without compromise*.

The doctrine of fellowship and the unity it expresses were key underlying motives in the writing of the Formula of Concord:

Therefore, necessity demands explanation of these disputed articles on the basis of God's Word and reliable writings, so that those with a proper Christian understanding could recognize which position regarding the points under dispute is in accord with God's Word and the Augsburg Confession, and which is not, so that Christians of good will, who are concerned about the truth, might protect and guard themselves from the errors and corruption that have appeared among us . . . *Fundamental enduring unity in the church* [emphasis added] requires above all else a clear and binding summary and form in which a general summary of teaching is drawn from God's Word, to which the churches that hold the true Christian religion confess their adherence.⁴¹

Kurt Marquart gives the doctrine its rightful due when he says, "There is no such thing as a 'doctrine of fellowship.' There is only the doctrine

of church fellowship, which is a part and parcel of the doctrine of the church."⁴² Marquart says later:

To see the subsequent abandonment of doctrinal, confessional consensus as the proper basis for church fellowship . . . as a relaxation of outdated rigidities, is to mistake the true significance of this development. What it really means, theologically, is the summary abrogation of the Lutheran Church's Symbolical books. If these Symbols are no longer allowed to govern church fellowship, then they may still be fussed over as ethnic or cultural heirlooms of a bygone age, but they cannot in that case be taken seriously as confessions of the pure Gospel and Sacraments of Christ. The Confessions have then in fact been quietly pushed aside and pensioned off, like senile relatives who must be gently but firmly got out of the way of progress.⁴³

How we understand and apply the biblical doctrine of fellowship, then, will invariably have a profound effect on the church's commitment to confess, defend, and proclaim all of the doctrines of Scripture as they have been entrusted to it. A church that is committed to the truth of the Scriptures and to the faithful proclamation of the Gospel will correspondingly take seriously the way in which it confesses and practices fellowship. Conversely, history has shown that a failure to uphold and properly apply the doctrine of fellowship means one of two things: It is either a symptom of at least a partial denial of biblical truth, or it will result in such a denial, in the undermining of the certainty of the Gospel promise, and in the leaven-like toleration of faith-destroying error. A church's

to their minds is not justification or inspiration, but the doctrine of church fellowship or some aspect of it, such as our practice of closed Communion or our opposition to lodges and scouting. For better or worse, this is the image that many people have of the Wisconsin Synod." John Brug., *Church Fellowship: Working Together for the Truth*, p. 7.

⁴¹ FC *Solid Declaration (Preamble)*; Kolb, Robert and Timothy Wengert, ed. *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, p. 526.

⁴² Marquart, Kurt. *The Church and her Fellowship, Ministry, and Governance*, p. 41.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

position on fellowship and the way in which it applies the doctrine is, so to speak, a doctrinal “canary in the coal mine.”⁴⁴ Compromise in the area of fellowship is an early and clear indicator of an underlying lack of commitment to biblical truth or a sign that a departure from the truth has already taken place.

It comes as no surprise that the doctrine of fellowship is often seen as a restrictive, negative doctrine, both among those from whom synods have separated and among those whose synods have had to declare fellowship at an end. People think of fellowship in terms of what they *can't* do, what *isn't* allowed, and from whom they *must* separate. Some of this perception of fellowship as burdensome and overly restrictive is likely the result of an incomplete or faulty understanding of the doctrine. Some of that thinking is due to less-than-careful articulations and less-than-evangelical applications of the doctrine. It may also be a reaction to emotion-charged criticism from others—individuals and church bodies—who do not understand or accept the teaching. This is most unfortunate, since the doctrine of fellowship is an altogether *positive* doctrine. As T. A. Aberg observed,

The doctrine of church fellowship is not a set of dry, formal, man-made church regulations which hinder the work of the Holy Spirit and make it hard, if not impossible, for pious pastors, teachers, missionaries, and evangelists to witness for Christ and bring the Gospel to mankind. The doctrine of church fellowship is rather a spiritual living truth from God's very Word, connected to the heart of the Gospel itself, that of a poor sinner's

justification by grace for Christ's sake through faith. As such it should call forth from each one of us the humility, wonder, and praise expressed by Paul: 'Oh the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and his ways past finding out!' (Romans 11:33)⁴⁵

Properly understood, then, the doctrine of fellowship will elicit a deep sense of joy⁴⁶ in the fact that in Christ God has united us with himself and with other believers.⁴⁷ The practice of fellowship also becomes a wonderful opportunity for believers to confess their faith clearly in their actions.⁴⁸ Together they encourage one another to remain faithful.⁴⁹ With one mind they strive for unity in the doctrine.⁵⁰ United in faith they work side by side with others in carrying out their mission,⁵¹ in showing mercy,⁵² in training future church workers.⁵³ In joy they gather in worship and prayer to celebrate with fellow believers what God has done for them through the

⁴⁵ Aaberg, A.T. “The Doctrine of Church Fellowship.” Essay presented to the ELS Pastoral Conference in Minneapolis, 1977, p. 1

⁴⁶ In Philippians 1, Paul's greeting expresses his “joy because of your partnership in the Gospel.”

⁴⁷ Already in 1954, in the middle of the doctrinal difficulties disturbing the Synodical Conference, Carl Lawrenz sensed that the discussions were focusing on the negative aspects of the application of the doctrine of fellowship: “The practical issues facing us in our synod all tend to focus our attention on one phase of the subject of Christian fellowship, namely the limitations and restrictions which God in his Word has placed upon the outward exercise of Christian fellowship . . . We may again be reminded what a glorious blessing is involved in Christian fellowship that we may be deeply constrained by the abundant encouragements of Holy Writ to manifest it in all of its God-pleasing manifestations, to exercise it as long as we possibly can do this with the Lord's approval, that we may pay richly the great debt of love to all.” Quoted by E. Fredrich in the essay, “A Review of the Doctrine of Church Fellowship and its Scriptural Basis,” p.1.

⁴⁸ Col 1:3ff

⁴⁹ 1 Co 1:10

⁵⁰ Phil 1:27-30

⁵¹ Acts 13:3

⁵² 1 Co 16

⁵³ 2 Tim 1:13-14

⁴⁴ My beloved wife counseled me that few people would be familiar with this expression. Perhaps she is underestimating the audience. But just in case she is correct, coal miners used to take canaries into the mine with them. If there was a methane or carbon monoxide gas leak—undetectable by humans—the canary would die, providing a clear early warning to the miners.

Gospel.⁵⁴ They kneel with fellow sinners at the altar and with deep appreciation receive the body and blood of the Savior who has joined them to himself and to each other.⁵⁵ The joy of the Gospel is a joy that should never be celebrated alone. Because of the fellowship the Gospel creates, it never needs to be.

Fellowship established in the church invisible

*It is also taught that at all times there must be and remain one holy, Christian church. It is the assembly of all believers among whom the Gospel is purely preached and the holy Sacraments are administered according to the Gospel.*⁵⁶

The precious fellowship that Christians have with God and with each other is not established or declared by man; it is created by God. This fellowship, this “taking part in a common thing,” this *κοινωνία*, is an entirely new vertical relationship between God and people, established by God as he works in sinners through the Means of Grace to create faith in the atoning sacrifice of Christ. Because of Christ’s saving work, and because of God’s gracious activity to bring people to faith in that work, those who were “once far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ;”⁵⁷ and those who had been without peace now have “access to the Father by one Spirit.”⁵⁸ Those who had been aliens and strangers are now “members of God’s household.”⁵⁹ Those who had been slaves to sin are now declared to be “sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus”⁶⁰ who are now connected to the “one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.”⁶¹ Those who were

once darkness are now “children of light.”⁶² Those who had lived only for themselves now live “for him who died for them and was raised again.”⁶³ Those who were lost and wandering have now been found by the Good Shepherd, have listened to his voice, and have been brought safely into his fold.⁶⁴ Believers are joined as members of one body to Christ the Head.⁶⁵ Everything about this new fellowship relationship is worked and brought about in only one way: “All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ.”⁶⁶

The new relationship worked by God between himself and believers also creates a new horizontal spiritual relationship between all believers. Through faith in the atoning work of Christ, they are now branches attached to the one Vine.⁶⁷ They have been united with each other as members of the one body.⁶⁸ Formerly cut off from God and from each other, they are now “fellow citizens with God’s people.”⁶⁹ They are joined together spiritually as a building “built on the foundation on the apostles and prophets.”⁷⁰ No longer alone, they are brought together as “living stones . . . being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood.”⁷¹ Regardless of gender, ethnic origin, or social status, they are assured that “there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”⁷²

Together, all those united by a common saving faith in Christ comprise the *una sancta ecclesia*, the Body of Christ, a holy temple in the

⁵⁴ Acts 2:42ff

⁵⁵ 1 Cor 11:23ff

⁵⁶ *AC VII*. Kolb, Robert and Timothy Wengert, ed., *op. cit.*, p.42.

⁵⁷ Eph 2:13

⁵⁸ Eph 2:14ff

⁵⁹ Eph 2:19

⁶⁰ Gal 3:26

⁶¹ Eph 4:6

⁶² Eph 5:8

⁶³ 2 Cor

⁶⁴ John 10:16

⁶⁵ 1 Cor 12:27ff

⁶⁶ 2 Cor 5:18

⁶⁷ John 15:1

⁶⁸ Eph 3:6

⁶⁹ Eph 2:19

⁷⁰ Eph 2:20

⁷¹ 1 Pet 2:5

⁷² Gal 3:28

Lord,⁷³ the people of God, the communion of saints. While this church cannot be seen by anyone other than God (and is therefore called “invisible”), its presence can be recognized by the *notae purae* (pure marks or signs) of the church, namely, the Gospel rightly proclaimed and the Sacraments rightly administered. The church is “principally an association of faith and Holy Spirit in the hearts of persons. It nevertheless has its external marks so that it can be recognized, namely the pure teaching of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments in harmony with the Gospel of Christ.”⁷⁴ It is those marks of the church which God uses to create and sustain saving faith and through which he brings people into the fellowship relation with him. It is those same marks of the church which establish and nourish the relationship that believers now have with each other. Where those marks are present and at work, the Holy Spirit is always at work bringing people to faith in Christ and sustaining them in that faith once it has been created. Without the Gospel in Word and Sacrament, where the marks of the church are absent, faith can neither be created nor sustained.

Fellowship expressed in the visible church

Our fellowship with God and fellow believers is *established* when, through faith, God brings people into the Holy Christian Church. That fellowship is *expressed* in the visible church as believers join together in outward activities that are connected to the mission and life of the church. Those who belong to Christ by faith will hear and respond to his encouragement to gather together for hearing the Word, for worship, for prayer with and for each other, for sharing in the Sacraments, just as the earliest Christians in Jerusalem did. They will look for opportunities to provide and to receive encouragement and

loving admonition. Together they will strive to stand firm and strengthen one another against Satan’s attacks.⁷⁵ Together they will pool their efforts and resources to carry out the mission that God has given them. These activities of believers are not optional or simply a natural human response; they are faith-filled responses to the encouragement God himself gives: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.”⁷⁶ “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.”⁷⁷

It is not by accident that these visible gatherings of God’s people are referred to with the same term (ἐκκλησία) as the invisible gathering of God’s people. These are not two churches. The visible church is simply the outward, identifiable manifestation of the invisible. So whether it is the invisible church known only to God (comprised only of believers) or visible gatherings of Christians into congregations or groups of congregations (comprised of both believers and hypocrites), the blessing of fellowship is one that hinges solely on the means of grace—the Gospel in Word and Sacrament—which alone creates and sustains faith. John wrote in his first letter, “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so

⁷³ Eph 2:21

⁷⁴ *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*, Kolb, Robert and Timothy Wengert, ed., *op. cit.*, p.174.

⁷⁵ Eph 6:10ff

⁷⁶ Col 3:16

⁷⁷ Heb 10:24-25

that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.”⁷⁸

Faithfulness to the fellowship-creating Word

The church can live and be sustained only by the truth of the Word of God and the power of the Gospel. The believers’ fellowship with their Savior and with each other can only be established and maintained when the pure Gospel is proclaimed and the Sacraments rightly administered. False doctrine distorts the Gospel and always threatens the fellowship that God has created. For those reasons the Scriptures are filled with repeated encouragement to God’s people to remain faithful to that Word, to defend it, to hold on to it, to continue in it. And Christians who recognize how they became Christians, how their fellowship with Christ and with each other was created and is sustained, will do everything possible to cherish and defend every truth that God has revealed in his Word.

Jesus said, “If you hold to my teaching, then you are really my disciples.”⁷⁹ He also told his disciples, “If you love me, you will obey what I command. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever—the Spirit of truth.”⁸⁰ “Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves.”⁸¹ Holding to his teaching—every word of it—and vigilantly watching out for false teaching is the measure of faithful discipleship. If that is true, then it should not surprise us that the inspired apostles also spoke numerous warnings and encouragements for believers to hold on to

⁷⁸ 1 John 1:1-4

⁷⁹ John 8:31

⁸⁰ John 14:15

⁸¹ Matt 7:15

that saving message at any cost and in opposition to any who would change that message.

Nearly every letter of Paul contains such encouragement. To the Colossians he wrote: “Let the Word of Christ dwell among you richly.”⁸² He encouraged Timothy to “stay there in Ephesus so that you may command certain men not to teach false doctrines any longer.”⁸³ “I give you this instruction in keeping with the prophecies once made about you, so that by following them you may fight the good fight, holding on to the faith and a good conscience.”⁸⁴ “Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers.”⁸⁵ “If you point these things [false teachings] out to the brothers, you will be a good minister of Christ Jesus, brought up in the truths of the faith and of the good teaching you have followed.”⁸⁶ “The things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others.”⁸⁷ “But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.”⁸⁸ To Titus Paul wrote, “You must teach what is in accord with sound doctrine.”⁸⁹ To the Thessalonians Paul said, “So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the teachings we passed on to you.”⁹⁰

The other apostolic writers repeatedly echo how important it is for believers to be faithful to the teachings and doctrines that God

⁸² Col 3:16

⁸³ 1 Tim 1:3

⁸⁴ 1 Tim 1:18

⁸⁵ 1 Tim 4:16

⁸⁶ 1 Tim 4:6

⁸⁷ 2 Tim 2:2

⁸⁸ 2 Tim 3:14

⁸⁹ Titus 2:1

⁹⁰ 2 Thess 2:15

has entrusted to them. John wrote, "See that what you have heard from the beginning remains in you. If it does, you also will remain in the Son and in the Father. And this is what he promises us—eternal life. I am writing these things to you about those who are trying to lead you astray."⁹¹ The writer to the Hebrews pleads, "We must pay more careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away."⁹² In his second letter, Peter concludes with the loving warning, "Therefore, dear friends, since you already know this, be on your guard so that you may not be carried away by the error of lawless men and fall from your secure position. But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ."⁹³

The New Testament not only encourages faithfulness to the Word; it also consistently warns about the danger of false teaching and gives clear instructions to believers about what needs to be done when confronted by those who depart from the truth and pose a danger to faith. Romans 16:17 is probably the best known of those instructions: "I urge you brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions among you and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the doctrine you have learned. Keep away from them." To the Galatians Paul wrote, "If anybody is preaching to you a Gospel other than the one you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!"⁹⁴ Later in that same letter, he continues: "You were running a good race. Who cut in on you and kept you from obeying the truth? That kind of persuasion does not come from the one who calls you. 'A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough.' I am confident in the Lord that you will take no other view. The one who is throwing you into confusion will pay the penalty, whoever he may be."⁹⁵ John, as he encourages

⁹¹ 1 John 2:24-26

⁹² Heb 2:1

⁹³ 2 Pe 3:17-18

⁹⁴ Gal 1:9

⁹⁵ Gal 5:7-10

love among believers, also encourages them to demonstrate their love for the Word in the way that they react to false teachers: "Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching does not have God . . . If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take him into your house or welcome him."⁹⁶ Once false teachers are identified as persistent in their error, faithful Christians will acknowledge that fact and will demonstrate that they are no longer one in faith and doctrine by separating from them.

These warnings and encouragements from Scripture illustrate the absolute necessity and obligation for the church to be faithful to every doctrine of Scripture. Holding on to that truth means life; abandoning it means death. For it is the living message of the living Christ alone which creates faith and which establishes the fellowship relationship between God and his people.

Because our relationship and our fellowship with God depend solely on his Word, a faithful church will strive to hold on to the truth of the Gospel at any cost. It will uphold that truth in the face of any and all challenges. It will take steps to separate from those whose doctrine and teaching have departed from the truth. A faithful church **is committed to defending and proclaiming the Word of Christ without compromise.**

Reformer and Confessors: Full commitment to the Word

Werner Elert observes that these principles established by Scripture and held closely by the apostolic church were also maintained by the church in the centuries that followed. Faithfulness to the Word of Christ was paramount and alone produced unity and the practice of church fellowship. Departure from

⁹⁶ 3 John 9-10

the biblical doctrine fractures that fellowship and prevents its outward expression:

There is one ground for the denial of church fellowship about which there was never anywhere a difference of opinion in the early church, not even between East and West. Heterodoxy breaks the fellowship *ipso facto*. The basic foundation for this we have seen when considering the local congregation. What is true there is also true between churches. The divisive significance of dogma is only one side of the matter. Dogma is not only the binding doctrinal norm for those who teach in the church, but it is also the confession of all the members who are included in the 'We confess' or 'We believe.' For this reason doctrine is the point at which the unity of the church is most grievously wounded and therefore the point at which also the wounds must again be healed . . . Where church fellowship is broken by heterodoxy, it can only be restored by the achievement of doctrinal unity. Doctrinal unity is part and parcel of orthodoxy. The truly sound faith leads to fellowship and unity with those who believe the same.⁹⁷

Just as their fathers in the apostolic and post-apostolic church, Luther and the Reformers knew of no truth other than that revealed in the Scriptures. It was simply not a matter of debate or even question. The Word was the true, absolute and final authority, in contrast to Popes and councils and humanists and enthusiasts. They based their doctrine and their confession on that Word solely and precisely because it was the Word of God, not subject to the whims and judgment and flawed, fickle, self-gratifying wisdom of man. And because of that, they showed a clear commitment to defending and

proclaiming the Word of Christ without compromise.

Luther's commitment to sound doctrine is fundamental to his theology and is woven though all of his writings. His comments in the Large Catechism's treatment of the First Petition are representative of his convictions:

See, then, what a great need there is for this kind of prayer! [that God's name be hallowed] Because we see that the world is full of sects and false teachers, all of whom wear the holy name as a cloak and warrant for their devilish doctrine, we ought constantly to shout and cry out against all who preach and believe falsely and against those who want to attack, persecute, and suppress our Gospel and pure doctrine, as the bishops, tyrants, fanatics, and others do. Likewise, this petition is for ourselves who have the Word of God but are ungrateful for it and fail to live as we ought. If you ask for such things from your heart, you can be sure that God is pleased. For there is nothing that he would rather hear than to have his glory and praise exalted above everything else and his Word taught in its purity, cherished and treasured.⁹⁸

He voices similar sentiments in his sermon on Galatians 6:10-17:

By no means is the Word to be considered as lightly as the world considers it, and as some foolish spirits, deceived by the devil in regard to the Sacrament or other heresies, represent it to be. They tell us that one is not to quarrel so violently over one article and disrupt Christian love because of it . . . But, they say, one might well yield and surrender a bit and keep

⁹⁷ Elert, Werner. *Eucharist and Fellowship in the First Four Centuries*, p. 143

⁹⁸ *Large Catechism*, Kolb, Robert and Timothy Wengert, ed., *op. cit.*, p. 446.

up fraternal and Christian unity and fellowship with those who err in an unimportant point – as long as one agrees with them otherwise. No, my good man, for me none of that peace and unity one gains by the loss of God’s Word! For in that case eternal life and everything else would already be lost. In this matter we dare not budge or concede anything to please you or any man; but all things must yield to the Word, be they friendly or hostile. For the Word is given not in order to achieve external and secular unity and peace but life eternal. Word and doctrine are to create unity or fellowship. Where they are one and the same, the rest will naturally follow; if not, no unity will abide anyway. Therefore do not speak to me of love or friendship when anything is to be detracted from the Word or the faith; for we are told that not love but the Word brings eternal life, God’s grace, and all heavenly treasures. We will gladly keep the peace with them in an external way, as we should do with everybody in the world, even with our worst enemies . . . but in doctrine and Christian fellowship we want to have nothing to do with them. Nor do we want to consider them brethren. They are enemies, because they knowingly insist on their error; and we intend to fight against them in our spiritual struggle. Therefore nothing but a satanic, seductive, and sinister strategy is involved when we are called upon to yield a bit and to connive at an error for the sake of unity. In this way the devil is trying cunningly to lead us away from the Word.⁹⁹

⁹⁹ *What Luther Says*. Plass, Ed. Pp. 1411-12.

It was that commitment to the truth of Scripture that enabled him to stand before Pope and emperor, under threat of death, on the Word of Christ alone. For Luther, *sola scriptura* was not a motto; it was his life.

Luther also heeded the directives of Scripture when evaluating his fellowship relationship with those who had departed from biblical truth. In connection with Luther’s views on the Lord’s Supper, the *Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord* gives a glimpse of what Luther concluded about fellowship with those who denied biblical truth (in this case, the Real Presence):

More than all others, Dr. Luther understood the true, correct interpretation of the Augsburg Confession, and he remained committed to it and defended it to the end. He repeated his belief regarding this article with great ardor shortly before his death in his Last Confession, in the following words, when he wrote: ‘I regard them all as being part of the same cake’ (that is, Sacramentarians and fanatics), ‘as indeed they are. For they do not want to believe that the Lord’s bread in the Supper is his true, natural body which the godless person or Judas receives orally just as well as St. Peter and all the saints . . . Whoever (I say) does not want to believe that should not trouble me . . . and should not expect to have fellowship with me. This is final.’¹⁰⁰

For Luther, the counsel of Paul in Romans 16:17 when confronted with doctrinal error was not mere advice; it was the only possible course of action.

You cannot read the Book of Concord without recognizing the same unshakable and

¹⁰⁰ *Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord*, VII:33. Kolb, Robert and Timothy Wengert, ed., *op. cit.*, p. 598.

consistent commitment to the Word and to pure doctrine—and the ensuing action that must be taken when the truth of God’s Word is undermined or denied. The ecumenical creeds of the church all had their origin as the early church recognized the need to articulate biblical truth to combat either ignorance or heresies. Luther’s Catechisms were written as a response to the dreadful lack of scriptural and doctrinal knowledge among both laity and clergy alike and were intended to provide solid grounding in the truths of Scripture.¹⁰¹ Luther’s Smalcald Articles, often described as Luther’s last testament, were included in the Book of Concord because they were recognized as a confessional statement which served to outline scriptural doctrines, both in contrast to the errors of Rome and as clear summaries of biblical truth with which evangelical theologians could agree.¹⁰² The Augsburg Confession was written with the sincere desire for Rome and the reformers to achieve doctrinal unity, but only if that unity was based on the

¹⁰¹ Returning from his visits to Saxony and Meissen in 1529, Luther commented, “Dear God, what misery I beheld! The ordinary person knows absolutely nothing about the Christian faith, and unfortunately many pastors are completely unskilled and incompetent teachers. Yes supposedly they all bear the name Christian, are baptized, and receive the holy sacrament, even though they do not know the Lord’s Prayer, the Creed, or the Ten Commandments. As a result they live like simple cattle or irrational pigs and, despite the fact that the Gospel has returned, have mastered the fine art of misusing all their freedom.” *The Preface of Martin Luther to the Small Catechism, Ibid.*, p. 347.

¹⁰² “The Smalcald Articles began with a confession of ancient trinitarian doctrine, on which both the papal party and the Lutherans publicly agreed. The second section of the document confessed Luther’s teaching on what he viewed as the heart of the biblical message: Christ’s atoning work and the concept of trust, topics on which he saw no hope of agreement because of the Roman position on the Mass and related abuses (including the doctrines of purgatory, pilgrimages, relics, and the invocation of the saints), on monastic life, and on the papacy. A third section treated a series of doctrinal topics on which Luther hoped that theologians could find common formulations of biblical truths.” Editor’s introduction to the Smalcald Articles, *Ibid.*, p.295-296.

Word of God.¹⁰³ This conviction is clearly evident in Article VII of the AC, which states,

For it is enough for the true unity of the Christian church that the Gospel is preached harmoniously [*Einträchtiglich* is translated ‘with one accord’ in AC I.1] according to the pure understanding and the Sacraments are administered in conformity with the divine Word.

Here, as in other places (such as in AC Article V¹⁰⁴) the term “Gospel” is clearly used in the wider sense in reference to all of the divine truths revealed in the Scriptures. The confessors at Augsburg were clearly committed to deriving their doctrine—all of it—from Scripture alone and to standing on all doctrine of Scripture.¹⁰⁵ They were risking their freedom and their lives to defend that principle.

¹⁰³ “We submit in this case concerning religion our preachers’ and our own confession of the manner in which up until now we have taught this doctrine among us based on the Holy Scriptures and the pure Word of God. If now the other electors, princes, and estates of the empire similarly produce their opinions in this case . . . we submit that we are prepared, in dutiful obedience to Your Imperial Majesty, as our most gracious Lord, to discuss in a friendly way . . . so that, insofar as this may be honorably done, we may agree, and—with the matter between our parties being discussed peacefully and without hateful contention, using the written proposals from both sides—the dissension, God grant, may be stopped and one, true, harmonious religion be restored . . . so that all things may be led to the truth of God.” Preface to the Augsburg Confession, *Ibid.*, p. 33.

¹⁰⁴ The term “Gospel” and “Word” in reference to *all* divine truth are clearly used synonymously: “So 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 . . .” *Ibid.*, p. 41.

¹⁰⁵ Both the Augsburg Confession and the Apology were clearly taking the position that the unity of the church depends on faithfulness to all of the doctrines of Scripture, not on matters purely of human tradition or ceremony. “But just as the different lengths of day and night do not undermine the unity of the church, so we maintain that different rites instituted by human beings do not undermine the true unity of the church . . . For if human traditions are not acts of worship necessary for righteousness before God, it follows that it is possible to be righteous and children of God even if a person does not observe the traditions that have been maintained elsewhere.” Apology of the Augsburg Confession, VII, VIII 34, *Ibid.*, p. 180.

The Formula of Concord is even more explicit in standing on these same principles (Scripture alone is the source and norm for *all doctrine*; faithful doctrine proclaims *all Scriptures*; there is no unity without agreement in doctrine). The Formula is the one Lutheran confession specifically intended to settle disputes between Lutherans (the “theologians of the Augsburg Confession”) and, therefore, is especially instructive for confessional Lutherans today:

Although the Christian teaching in this Confession [the Augsburg Confession] has remained practically unchallenged (apart from the charges of the papists), at the same time it cannot be denied that certain theologians [in the Lutheran camp] have deviated from certain highly significant and vital articles of faith. They either never had been or indeed did not remain faithful to a correct understanding of these articles of faith. Instead, they even dared to import an alien interpretation into this teaching while wanting to appear as adherents of the Augsburg Confession and to appeal to it and praise it. Because of this odious and harmful divisions arose within the pure Evangelical churches . . . For these controversies are not merely misunderstandings or semantic arguments, where someone might think that one group has not sufficiently grasped what the other group was trying to say or that the tensions were based upon only a few specific words of relatively little consequence. Rather, these controversies deal with important and significant matters.¹⁰⁶

As it addressed these controversies among Lutherans, the writers repeatedly stressed the

¹⁰⁶ Preface to the Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord 9, 10, *Ibid.*, p 525-526.

basis on which true unity could only be established:

Fundamental enduring unity in the church requires above all a clear and binding summary and form in which a general summary of teaching is drawn together from God’s Word, to which the churches that hold the true Christian religion confess their adherence . . . We confess our adherence to the prophetic and apostolic writings of the Old and New Testaments, as to the pure, clear fountain of Israel, which alone is the one true guiding principle, according to which all teachers and teaching are to be judged and evaluated.¹⁰⁷

As the concordists outlined their summary of the true teachings of Scripture, they also expressed that those who rejected these teachings were also destroying the unity in the church:

In order to preserve the pure teaching and fundamental, lasting, God-pleasing unity in the church, it is necessary not only to present the pure, beneficial teaching correctly, but also to censure those who contradict it and teach other doctrines (1 Tim. 3[:9]; Titus 1[:9]). For as Luther states, true shepherds are to do both: pasture or feed the sheep and ward off the wolves, so that they may flee from other voices (John 10[:4b-5, 16b]) and ‘separate the precious from the vile’ (Jer. 15[:19 Vulgate]).¹⁰⁸

There will be those that argue that the doctrine of fellowship, especially as it came to prominence in the Lutheran synods in America in the mid-20th century, was not a doctrine specifically addressed or described by the Lutheran Confessions. In fact, even though the term

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 526.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 527, 528.

itself appears nowhere in the index of Kolb-Wengert, the doctrine of fellowship is absolutely fundamental to, and implicit in, all of the confessional writings. These fellowship-related presuppositions become especially clear in the development and adoption of the Formula of Concord. After the death of Luther, the Lutheran church itself was being fractured by the introduction of false teachings, with the accompanying confusion about what the true teaching was. It was then that the writers of the Formula of Concord (as well as the Lutheran princes who encouraged them) determined that they needed a more complete articulation of the doctrines of the Augsburg Confession to provide a clear summary of Lutheran teaching. The Formula provided that summary, not only with affirmative theses that stated those doctrines positively, but also in negative theses which described and condemned errors. This two-pronged testimony to the truth outlined the basis for true unity in doctrine and faith (*fides quae creditur*); it also led to the accompanying conclusion that those who held differently were no longer united with those who subscribed to the Book of Concord. Implicit is the clear assumption that where such unity does not exist, fellowship does not exist and cannot be expressed jointly without compromising the truth.

Since the Formula of Concord addressed differences among Lutherans, its commitment to the Word and its emphasis on unity in doctrine and avoidance of error remains especially applicable to the discussion of fellowship among confessional Lutherans today.

Confessionalism in America defends the principle

Genuinely confessional Lutheranism, with its emphasis on sound Lutheran doctrine and practice and its commitment to recognizing fellowship only in cases of full doctrinal agreement, came to America in the first half of the 19th

century. John Grabau and his followers from Prussia settled around Buffalo, New York, with others going on to Milwaukee. As a result the Buffalo Synod was founded in 1845.¹⁰⁹ Martin Stephan led Saxon Lutherans to Perry County, Missouri, and Wilhelm Loehe sent Lutherans from Franconia to Michigan. (Some of Loehe's men would later refuse to join the Missouri Synod and move to Iowa, where they founded the Iowa Synod in 1854.) Confessional Norwegians settled in Minnesota and Wisconsin.

The Wisconsin Synod, on the other hand, cannot claim a heritage of true confessional Lutheranism from its birth. Its founding pastors were sent to the Milwaukee area in 1849 by the Langenberg Mission Society, an organization comprised of "unionizing"¹¹⁰ Lutherans who were happy to cooperate and work side by side with the Reformed. Its first pastors claimed a Lutheran identity; its initial constitution required that "everything should be in keeping with the true Word of the Bible and the confessions of our Evangelical Lutheran Church."¹¹¹ Each pastoral candidate pledged himself "to the Unaltered Augsburg Confession and the rest of the Evangelical-Lutheran church's confessions."¹¹²

¹⁰⁹ In his essay, "The Wisconsin Synod's Debt to C.F.W. Walther," John Brenner alerts us to the official name of the Buffalo Synod: "The Synod of the Lutheran Church Emigrated from Prussia." I would submit that an earlier official name of the Wisconsin Synod is even more descriptive and creative: "The Evangelical Lutheran Joint Synod of Wisconsin, Minnesota, Michigan, Nebraska, and other States." It sounded even better in German.

¹¹⁰ Since 1817 Lutherans in Germany had been forced by decree of Frederick Wilhelm III to unite and cooperate with Reformed churches in every practical way. Some Lutherans, such as those who supported the work of the Langenberg Mission Society, accepted the arrangement. Some formed "free" Lutheran churches. Others, such as the Saxons and Franconians, took their confessional Lutheranism with them to America.

¹¹¹ Wayne Mueller, "History of Fellowship Practice in the Wisconsin Synod." Essay delivered to the WELS Southeastern Wisconsin District, 1986. P. 3.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p. 3

But this commitment on paper didn't show itself in the practice of the newly founded Wisconsin Synod. Curiously, the first draft of the synod's constitution did pledge the synod to the Lutheran Confessions, but within weeks those words were crossed out and replaced with a pledge to a generic "pure Bible Christianity." Johannes Muehlhaeuser, its first president, gave evidence of this doctrinal laxity in the new synod when he said, "Just because I am not strictly [Lutheran] or Old-Lutheran, I am in a position to offer every child of God and servant of Christ the hand of fellowship over the denominational fence."¹¹³ One Wisconsin Synod pastor left the synod to join the Methodists, explaining to Muehlhaeuser the reason for his decision: "Your practice is neither strictly Lutheran nor strictly Evangelical [i.e. Reformed], and yet you aim to be both."¹¹⁴ Even though confessional Lutheran congregations already existed in the Milwaukee area (representing the Buffalo Synod and the Missouri Synod), the Wisconsin Synod had been founded specifically as an alternative to the strict confessionalism of those churches, desiring to serve all German immigrants regardless of their Lutheran or Reformed affiliation. From its founding the synod wanted to be known as a "New Lutheran" synod,¹¹⁵ and it was achieving that goal.

¹¹³ Mark Braun, *A Tale of Two Synods*, p. 22.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 3

¹¹⁵ John Brenner writes, "The name 'Old Lutheran' was originally applied to Lutherans who refused to join the Prussian Union. In America the name was given to confessional Lutherans who had migrated to this country from Prussia and Saxony. The name eventually referred to those who took the Confessions seriously and who had an understanding of the scriptural principles of church fellowship. "New Lutheran" was the name given to those who were willing to go along with the Prussian Union in Europe while striving to remain Lutheran. In America New Lutherans were willing to serve German Reformed congregations. Although they subscribed to the Lutheran Confessions, they were sometimes inclined to view those confessions as "paper fences" which kept Lutherans from joint endeavors with the Reformed and interfered with mission work." *Op. cit.*, p. 4

In contrast, the Missouri Synod had been founded three years earlier in 1847 by the Saxons in Missouri and the Franconians in Michigan. These "Old Lutherans" had come to America both because of religious persecution in Prussia and because of their desire to preserve sound Lutheran doctrine. Under the leadership of C.F.W. Walther, arguably the most significant and influential theologian and leader in the history of American Lutheranism, the Missouri Synod soon became known as the most staunchly confessional synod in America. Under Walther's leadership and guidance, the Missouri Synod took the lead in defining what it meant to be a *confessional* Lutheran. Faithfulness to the Scriptures and an uncompromising commitment to the Lutheran Confessions came to define the Missouri Synod, in contrast to the rationalism of the General Synod and the middle-of-the-road stance of the synods comprising the General Council.

Walther and the Missourians were not content to hide their confessionalism in a corner. They were truly *ecumenical* in the best sense of the word. They sincerely desired to encourage other Lutheran synods to join with them in their commitment to the Scriptures and to confessional Lutheran doctrine. Their efforts soon began to have an effect on other Lutheran bodies. Confessional leadership was provided through periodicals. *Der Lutheraner* had been founded already in 1844, providing Walther with an instrument to articulate and disseminate confessional Lutheran theology. *Lehre und Wehre* began publication in 1856. In the initial issue of that publication, Walther issued an invitation to all Lutherans who subscribed without reservation to the Unaltered Augsburg Confession to attend a series of free conferences. The invitation clearly spelled out the purpose of these free conferences. It read,

The undersigned ministers of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the United States, with the conviction that the unity and the wellbeing of our Lutheran Zion will be greatly advanced through the free expression of opinions regarding the various interests of our Church in this land by brethren who are *united in faith*, herewith extend an invitation to all members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the United States *who hold the Unaltered Augsburg Confession to be a true presentation of the teachings of the Word of God* to meet with them . . . in a free and brotherly conference concerning the status and needs of the Church in America.¹¹⁶

The goal of these free conferences was not merely Lutheran unity, but establishing fellowship on the basis of unity in doctrine and confessional subscription. Four free conferences were held between 1856 and 1859, attended by members of a half dozen synods. No members of the Wisconsin Synod participated.

As he was calling for Lutheran unity based on the Word of God and the Lutheran Confessions, Walther was equally energetic in emphasizing that true fellowship could not exist with those who held to false doctrine. In an address to the newly forming Iowa District of the Missouri Synod, Walther pulled no punches in his criticism of the Iowa Synod. Of the Iowa Synod or anyone else who departed from scriptural truth, Walther said,

But though we must constantly battle against all false faith, we do not hold that when a congregation is heterodox, all its

members are wicked people. We know that also among them are dear children of God. Our polemics in no way apply to them, but to those who lead [them] astray. They are traitors to the pure Gospel; they are the enemies of Christ, who pretend to be Christ's greatest friends. We will have nothing to do with them, and because of what they are, we must withdraw from many a dear person of whom we are convinced that he has the true faith. Because they are connected with false teachers, one can have no brotherly fellowship with them but only bemoan to God the fact that there also a dear brother is captive. Therefore we besiege this prison in order to capture it and to rescue our beloved brothers and sisters from the claws of those who mislead them.¹¹⁷

Due to Walther's influence (in part but not entirely), Confessional Lutheranism began to take root in other places. In 1860, Johannes Bading became the second president of the Wisconsin Synod. Schooled in Berlin and Hermannsburg, Bading was much more confessional in his stance than Muehlhaeuser. When he was ordained by Muehlhaeuser in 1853, he demanded to be asked for total adherence to all the Confessions—a practice apparently not required and somewhat alien to Wisconsin Synod practice. Muehlhaeuser had not included doctrinal essays on the agendas of synod conventions; Bading immediately included them. The budding confessionalism in Wisconsin was further bolstered with the arrival of Adolph Hoenecke in 1863. Hoenecke quickly became the leading theological figure of the synod.

Wisconsin struggled toward confessionalism with varying success and consistency. It was accused (with some justification) by Walther and

¹¹⁶ "Fellowship Then and Now. (Concerning the Impasse in the Intersynodical Discussions on Church Fellowship)," Report of the WELS Commission on Inter-Church Relations, 1961, p. 3-4.

¹¹⁷ Matthew Harrison, *op. cit.*, p. 259.

the Missourians of having an indecisive doctrinal stance and tolerating unsound practice, and those accusations stung. Walther's criticism, intended to prod Wisconsin to an even more solid confessional stance, while causing some hurt and irritation, ultimately had the desired effect. Under Bading the synod was already growing more confessional and was looking for ways to reinforce that direction. One sign of this change was that in 1866 the Wisconsin Synod joined the newly formed General Council. It was attracted by the relatively strong confessionalism of a number of synods that had departed from the unionistic General Synod. The relationship was short-lived, however, for the same reasons that led Wisconsin to the General Council in the first place. At its 1868 convention, the Wisconsin Synod displayed its growing confessional maturity by voting to withdraw from the General Council over the "Four Points" of doctrinal differences that had become apparent among members of the Council. Three of the four points involved issues of fellowship (altar fellowship, pulpit fellowship, and lodge membership). At the same convention the synod publicly disavowed the Prussian Union and severed any remaining relationships with the unionistic mission societies in Germany. Missouri's message was taking root in Wisconsin. Doctrinal unity was vital. Complete agreement was necessary. Without it, genuine fellowship did not exist and could not be practiced. With it, the door was opened to the possibility of fellowship with the Missouri Synod. The 1868 *Proceedings* report that the synod agreed that "there is no conflict in doctrine" with the Missouri Synod, and it directed the synod president "to take proper steps for the restoration of peace, so that a mutual recognition of both as Lutheran synods and a brotherly relationship between the members of both synods in the spirit of truth on the basis of pure doctrine may result."¹¹⁸ That goal was

¹¹⁸ Brenner, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

achieved in a single, two-day meeting the following October in Milwaukee. All areas of doctrine were discussed, and it was determined that there was complete agreement. Walther reported in the next issue of *Der Lutheraner*, "All of our reservations about the dear Wisconsin Synod have not only faded but have been put to shame. God be thanked for this inexpressible gift!"¹¹⁹

The declaration of the fellowship *status* on the basis of doctrinal unity began to express itself in *activities* between the two synods. Altar, pulpit, and prayer fellowship were restored immediately. Incredibly, within a year after the establishment of fellowship, unity was so palpable that the Wisconsin Synod agreed to close its seminary, transfer its students to Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, and supply a professor to teach at Concordia. Missouri's pre-seminary students in Wisconsin would attend Northwestern College in Watertown, Wisconsin, with Missouri providing a professor there.

Meanwhile, the winds of confessionalism were touching other Lutheran bodies as well. The Norwegian Synod had been in fellowship with Missouri since 1853. The Ohio Synod reached agreement on doctrine and practice with Missouri in 1869; the Illinois Synod did the same in 1872. Minnesota established fellowship with Wisconsin in 1871 and with Missouri in 1872. The Iowa Synod remained outside of these developments. Iowa had separated from the Missouri Synod over the doctrine of the ministry; Iowa's approach to the Confessions¹²⁰ in regard to "open questions" led both Missouri and Wisconsin to take the position that no doctrinal unity with Iowa existed and no fellowship could be recognized or practiced.

¹¹⁹ Brenner, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

¹²⁰ Iowa maintained that matters not specifically addressed by the Confessions were "open questions," and therefore different views and teachings in those matters were permissible and not divisive of fellowship.

Led by Walther, bolstered by like-minded theologians and leaders such as Bading and Hoenecke of Wisconsin, Matthias Loy of Ohio and Friedrich Schmidt of the Norwegian Synod, confessional Lutherans in America had reached a point of unprecedented unity—not in structure, not in merely wearing the Lutheran label, but in a commitment to the doctrine of the Scriptures as articulated by the Lutheran Confessions. Now it would be possible to express that fellowship in practical and visible ways.

The Synodical Conference is built on the commitment to defend and proclaim the Word

All of this mutual recognition led to and made possible the establishment of the Synodical Conference in 1872. As might be expected, the doctrine of church fellowship was by no means a peripheral matter when it came to the formation of the Synodical Conference. Kurt Marquart points out that it was central to the very purpose and nature of the organization:

That body had been founded in 1872, precisely as a vehicle for orthodox church fellowship, and having for its high aim 'the consolidation of all Lutheran synods of American into a single, faithful, devout American Lutheran Church.'¹²¹

According to its constitution, it was formed

to give outward expression to the unity of spirit existing among the constituent synods [joint confession]; to encourage and strengthen one another in faith and confession [mutual encouragement]; to further unity in doctrine and practice and to remove whatever might threaten to disturb this unity [doctrinal discipline]; to cooperate in matters of mutual interest [joint church work]; to strive for true unity

in doctrine and practice among Lutheran church bodies [proper ecumenical efforts].¹²²

Another provision of the constitution served to emphasize the importance of a unified confession among all Synodical Conference members:

Without the consent of all the synods of the Synodical Conference of North America, no one of its constituent synods shall be permitted to enter into actual church fellowship with any other church body.¹²³

Article 4 of the constitution also addressed the matter of church fellowship and "rejected 'all ecclesiastical union and cooperation [emphasis added] that is not based upon the pure Lutheran faith,' including mixed congregations, exchanging pulpits, open Communion, and the formation of religious societies with sectarians."¹²⁴ Prayer fellowship was also clearly included in this list. Mark Braun summarizes,

'Missouri and Wisconsin were not known for their peculiar teachings about justification by faith,' Martin Marty has observed, 'but for their refusal to pray with others.'

The signal event that solidified Missouri's narrow practice of prayer fellowship was the bitter rupture between Missouri and Ohio over the predestination controversy. Missouri resolved at its 1881 convention, 'We can no longer walk together. We also cannot pray with one another any longer. For you [the Ohio Synod] will pray for our and we for your conversion.' Such joint prayer 'is an abomination in the sight

¹²¹ Kurt Marquart, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

¹²² Continuing in His Word: Eleven Tracts." Tract #1 in a series of tracts issued by the WELS Conference of Presidents, 1954, p. 3.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

¹²⁴ Mark Braun, *Op. Cit.*, p. 47.

of God.' Missouri then instructed its delegates to the next year's Synodical Conference convention neither to sit with nor to recognize any synod that had publicly accused the Missouri Synod of Calvinism.¹²⁵

Clearly, anything less than full agreement in doctrine and practice not only would not have been *tolerated* by the synods forming the Synodical Conference; it would have *prevented* its formation at all. With full doctrinal agreement in place, a joyful fellowship in both status and activity would continue for nearly ninety years. The constituent members of the Synodical Conference would share in altar and pulpit fellowship; they would cooperate in educational endeavors.¹²⁶ They would pray and worship together. They would pool their efforts and resources to walk together in carrying out the mission of the church. When clear doctrinal differences arose (as in the case of the election controversy involving the views of the Ohio Synod), they would stand side by side in testifying to the truth of the Scriptures and the Confessions, even if such testimony would result in the severance of fellowship with one of its own. When internal disagreements appeared (such as the issue of Church and Ministry), they would work as brothers to address the issues, seeking answers from the Scriptures and the Confessions. An unbending commitment to the full doctrine of Scripture and the confessions had resulted in a unity that was both genuine and God-pleasing, a unity of confession that showed itself in a unity of purpose and action.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

¹²⁶ The Wisconsin Synod would benefit greatly from the confessional influence of Walther and the Missouri Synod seminary in St. Louis. Early theological leaders in the Wisconsin Synod, such as August Pieper, John Schaller, and J.P. Koehler were trained at Concordia during the time when all Wisconsin Synod men were trained there; they were deeply influenced by Walther and the confessional Lutheranism taught there.

The commitment wavers

It is a common misconception that the events and discussions leading up to the demise of the Synodical Conference occurred only in the 1950's. In fact, the first signs of trouble (and the resulting reaction from WELS and the Evangelical Lutheran Synod) appeared already in the 1930's.

A review of the thirty years of conversations, discussions, committee reports and negotiations prior to the split may lead to the conclusion that specific applications of the doctrine of fellowship were themselves the source of the problems. The subject of prayer fellowship occupied a central place in the controversy, as did issues such as Scouting and the military chaplaincy. Similar to the situation in the ELCA today, these visible and practical issues were at the forefront of the controversy and received most of the attention, but they were really only the presenting issues, the visible and identifiable symptoms of a deeper and more fundamental problem.

In keeping with the ecumenical winds blowing through Protestantism in general and some portions of the Lutheran church in particular, many in the Synodical Conference yearned for increased unification of Lutheranism in America. Almost as soon as the Synodical Conference was formed, some (including Walther) favored a full amalgamation of member synods into a single united Lutheran church body. Those discussions bore no fruit. Wider union discussions took place in the Intersynodical Conferences from 1903-1906 and again in 1916. By 1928, it appeared that a broad agreement had been reached on the basis of the Intersynodical Theses,¹²⁷ which attempted to address such issues as conversion, election, church and ministry, Antichrist, chiliasm, and

¹²⁷ Also called the "Chicago Theses." Mark Braun, *op. cit.*, p. 129.

open questions. But these theses were rejected by the Missouri Synod because of their failure to provide definitive settlement of all doctrinal differences. In response, the Missouri Synod, through a five-man committee headed by Franz Pieper, drew up a document of its own, setting forth in clear and unmistakable language its doctrinal position. A *Brief Statement of the Doctrinal Position of the Missouri Synod* was adopted by the Missouri Synod in 1932; it was intended to serve as the basis for any further discussions with church bodies not in fellowship with Missouri and the other members of the Synodical Conference.

It is significant that the *Brief Statement* specifically addressed the issue of church fellowship:

Since God ordained that His Word only, without the admixture of human doctrine, be taught and believed in the Christian Church, 1 Pet. 4:11; John 8:31-32; 1 Tim. 6:3,4, all Christians are required by God to discriminate between orthodox and heterodox church bodies, Matt. 7:15, to have church-fellowship only with orthodox church bodies, and, in case they have strayed into heterodox church-bodies, to leave them, Rom. 16:17. We repudiate unionism, that is, church-fellowship with the adherents of false doctrine, as disobedience to God's command, as causing divisions in the Church, Rom. 16:17; 2 John 9,10, and involving a constant danger of losing the Word of God entirely, 2 Tim. 2:17-21. . . The orthodox character of a church is established not by its mere name nor by its outward acceptance of, and subscription to, an orthodox creed, but by the doctrine which is actually taught in its pulpits, in its

theological seminaries, and in its publications.¹²⁸

The adoption of the *Brief Statement* in 1932 did not quench the desire for a broader Lutheran union. Only three years later the synod began to negotiate with the American Lutheran Church, comprised of the same three synods (Ohio, Iowa, and Buffalo) it had refused to accept as brothers on the basis of the Intersynodical Theses.¹²⁹ The ALC "accepted" the doctrinal statements of the *Brief Statement*, but offered an additional document of its own (known as "*The Declaration*") to explain and supplement what had been said in the *Brief Statement*. Suggestions were made that union could be achieved with a dual acceptance of the *Brief Statement* and *The Declaration*, but this solution was soundly rejected by the Wisconsin Synod and the ELS. Two further attempts at forging a single unity document did not resolve the issues. The *Doctrinal Affirmation* (1940) was rejected from all directions, with Missouri's John Buenger calling it "the *most farcical* of all union efforts" because "there was too much of the controversial truth in it to please the ALC, and not enough of the truth to satisfy the consciences of true Lutherans."¹³⁰ Later the *Common Confession* appeared and was accepted by the LCMS convention in 1950. Although the convention had found it acceptable, others (even within Missouri) labeled it a "Missouri Compromise," since it adopted some of the very same ambiguous language about inspiration and inerrancy that had caused other statements to be rejected as flawed.¹³¹

¹²⁸ *Brief Statement*, Paragraphs 28 and 29, "On Church-Fellowship."

¹²⁹ The American Lutheran Conference was a federation, founded in 1930, consisting of the United Evangelical Lutheran Church (Danish), the Lutheran Free Church (Norwegian), the Augustana Synod (Swedish), the Evangelical Lutheran Church (Norwegian) and the American Lutheran Church (an amalgamation of the Iowa, Ohio, and Buffalo Synods).

¹³⁰ Mark Braun, *op. cit.*, p. 294.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, p.297-298.

As these negotiations were continuing, in 1941 LCMS President Behnken attended the first all-Lutheran conference in Columbus, Ohio; at that meeting he stated that Missouri was committed to “coordinating” (but not “cooperating in”) its efforts with other Lutherans; moreover, “he participated in prayer for the first time with Lutherans of every stripe” and, it was noted, by attending and praying with other participants, Behnken “helped bring the issue [of prayer fellowship] to a head.”¹³² Later that same year, the convention of the LCMS specifically addressed the issue of prayer fellowship after significant differences of opinion were expressed on Behnken’s actions. The adopted resolution did not settle the matter, and a memorial to the 1944 convention sought further clarification. That convention, sadly, brought significant visibility to the newly developing position of the LCMS by formally differentiating between “prayer fellowship” and “joint prayer.” The “Statement of the Forty-Four” outlined the new approach in even more blunt and direct language.¹³³ The negative reaction within the Missouri Synod was powerful and widespread, and the document was allowed to be withdrawn (not retracted) pending further discussions.

These developments and the subsequent continuation of extended theological negotiations between Missouri and the ALC raised increasingly grave concerns in the Wisconsin Synod, the Evangelical Lutheran Synod, and even among many in the Missouri Synod. The reason for those concerns was three-fold: 1) The Missouri Synod appeared to have adopted a goal of unity and outward church fellowship without the prerequisite of full agreement in doctrine and practice; 2) increasing instances of joint church-

related activities (such as common prayer,¹³⁴ the Scouting issue, and the chaplaincy question) which represented a clear departure from earlier practice; and 3) perhaps most fundamental: a nagging concern that, in its move to draw closer to the ALC (where the commitment to the inspiration and truth of Scripture was already falling victim to higher criticism and rationalism)¹³⁵, the Missouri Synod itself was displaying a diminished commitment to the inerrancy, inspiration, and normative role of the Bible itself.¹³⁶

Had Missouri changed? Or was it at least in the process of departing from the doctrinal positions championed by Walther and Pieper? That charge was at the heart of the concerns voiced by the Wisconsin Synod and the ELS (and concerned Missourians), one which had first been expressed in the late ‘30’s and continued until the split in 1961. Stung by criticism both from

¹³⁴ The “Brux Case” is a fascinating example of the changed thinking in the Missouri Synod. Adolph Brux was called as a missionary to Madras, India, in 1923. While in India he joined Christians of non-Lutheran denominations in prayer, and when questioned about this by his fellow missionaries, he maintained that he had not been guilty of unionism. In a paper he delivered in 1924, he concluded that Missouri’s practice of prayer fellowship went beyond what a sound interpretation of biblical passages and ultimately labeled the synod’s position unscriptural. Despite failed appeals before the 1935 and 1938 conventions, Brux’s thinking appears to have had a lasting and major influence on the synod’s teaching and practice of church fellowship. Richard Caemmerer called Brux “the man who for the first time charted a new course [and] faced up to his own conscience in the matter of prayer-fellowship.” By 1960, Missouri’s shifting fellowship doctrine as presented in “The Theology of Fellowship,” was taken by Brux as complete vindication of his position. —related by Mark Braun, *op. cit.*, p. 136-136.

¹³⁵ In 1926, Michael Reu of the Iowa Synod, objected to the use of the word *inerrant* in a draft document for the proposed new church body. Statements regarding inerrancy were included in the document, but it was clear that not all who would become a part of the ALC would understand the words to mean what they said. Reu would later maintain that if a part of Scripture “does not have direct religious value,” but deals only with historical, geographical, and other secular matters,” he did not see why “such a passage would have to be accepted as the inerrant, inspired Word of God at all.” —related Braun, *op. cit.*, p. 290.

¹³⁶ These perceptions proved to be correct. During the 1950’s the historical-critical method of scriptural interpretation began to receive a growing acceptance among some LCMS theologians.

¹³² *Ibid.*, p. 176. See also footnote 170 for an interesting contrast.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, p. 180

outside and within the Missouri Synod itself, LCMS President Behnken denied that Missouri had changed from its previous doctrine and practice: "It is my honest conviction," he wrote in 1955, "that the Missouri Synod has not changed its doctrinal positions."¹³⁷

Later Missouri historians, however, acknowledged that the synod had indeed departed from its previous position and was already then no longer "your grandfather's church." Martin Marty stated flatly after the synod's 1962 convention that "Missouri is changing and knows it." Wisconsin's attacks on the Missouri Synod hurt, Marty suggested, "because they were reminders of a cozy world of a century and less ago when Missouri held some of those positions."¹³⁸ In 1964, LCMS First Vice President Roland Wiederanders admitted, "We have not dealt honestly and openly with our pastors and our people. We have refused to state our changing theological position in open, honest, forthright, simple, and clear words. Over and over again we said that nothing was changing, but all the while we were aware that changes were taking place."¹³⁹ In 1973 Richard John Neuhaus observed with greater insistence, "Leadership of recent decades kept telling the people that there were no changes in the Missouri Synod, when any village idiot anywhere in the church knew that there were changes."¹⁴⁰ In 1974 Leigh Jordahl wrote that whatever one may think of the doctrinal issues that divided the synods, it was "abundantly clear" that "Missouri had changed its position."¹⁴¹

Just as the changing views on prayer fellowship came into the open, so eventually did the changing views on the inspiration and

inerrancy of Scripture that spawned the changed view on fellowship. Even though he was not the first or the leading proponent of the historical-critical method of interpretation that had begun to appear in the LCMS, Martin Scharlemann became the most visible figure, given his willingness to make frequent public presentations of his views. His questioning of inspiration and inerrancy (as taught by Missouri from its founding) was praised by some and soundly condemned by others in the LCMS. At best, it showed that the Missouri Synod was a house divided on the foundational doctrine of inspiration. At worst, it revealed how far many theologians in Missouri had already wandered from the life-giving Word of the living Christ and why the views of church fellowship could have changed so radically.

By 1961 the time had come for the long-lasting efforts of WELS and the ELS to come to an end. Already in 1955 the ELS, with great sadness, voted to suspend its fellowship with the Missouri Synod.¹⁴² The Wisconsin Synod had declared itself in a "state of confession" in 1953 and in 1955 was expected to duplicate the ELS action. A resolution called for the immediate termination of fellowship, but the motion was changed to delay a final decision until a special recessed convention in 1956 (giving the Missouri Synod one final opportunity to respond in its 1956 convention). The motion to delay a final decision was passed.

¹⁴² The ELS Convention Committee wrote: "In the face of such a long and treasured fellowship—one which has continued unbroken through testings and trials for almost 100 years, it is with the deepest and most heartfelt sadness that we consider the events of the past 20 years." The committee proposed this declaration to the convention: "THEREFORE WE HEREBY DECLARE with deepest regret that fellowship relations with the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod are suspended on the basis of Romans 16:17, and that the exercise of such relations cannot be resumed until the offenses contrary to the doctrine which we have learned have been removed by them in a proper manner." Armin Schuetze, *The Synodical Conference, Ecumenical Endeavor*, p. 321.

¹³⁷ Mark Braun, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

After some positive signals from the 1956 Missouri convention, the ELS committed itself to continuing discussions (without lifting its suspension); Wisconsin voted to hold in abeyance any decision regarding a suspension of fellowship in order to give more time to continuing talks; its 1957 convention resolved to continue a “vigorously protesting fellowship” with the LCMS as it continued doctrinal discussions on the disputed issues. By 1958, the Joint Union Committees of the Synodical Conference had crafted strong statements on Scripture and the Antichrist but had not yet addressed the crucial issue of church fellowship.

In the midst of these encouraging signs of progress, other actions of Missouri seemed to send a different message. Missouri accepted an invitation from the National Lutheran Council to a meeting that would “examine present cooperative activities in American Lutheranism and the possibility for extension of such activities.”¹⁴³ Concordia Seminary in St. Louis had invited Dr. H. Leupold of the ALC to lecture during the seminary’s summer sessions. In 1959 the LCMS convention resolved to “invite the representatives of the new The American Lutheran Church (TALC) to meet for the purpose of seeking a God-pleasing unity and fellowship”¹⁴⁴ and to reaffirm the earlier position on Scouting.

In spite of these mixed signals, and even with an increasing number of pastors and congregations leaving the ELS and WELS over the continued fellowship relationship with the LCMS,¹⁴⁵ WELS President Oscar Naumann urged patience yet again: “We must find our compelling reason for termination in God’s Word rather than in the losses we have sustained or may still sustain. . . We should spare no cost in seeking

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 346.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 351.

¹⁴⁵ Dozens of congregations would leave to form the CLC; even the president of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary resigned over the issue.

and restoring those who have erred, short of compromising the truth that alone can save our souls.” His counsel prompted WELS to delay any action yet again in 1959. The ELS, its fellowship with Missouri still suspended but its membership in the Synodical Conference still intact, showed similar patience by continuing to participate in discussions to resolve the issues.

In spite of intense internal pressure being felt in both WELS and the ELS, many still held a quiet hope that progress could be made. Those hopes were soon dashed one last time. When the Joint Union Committees met in 1960, the LCMS positions were clearly stated:

It would be a dangerous oversimplification to say that any one of the manifestations of fellowship, such as joint prayer, always necessarily presupposes and involves every other manifestation, such as pulpit and altar fellowship . . . A decision as to the propriety or impropriety of joint prayer in a given situation cannot be reached by the application of a flat universal rule . . . each case must be evaluated as it arises. This evaluation must consider the situation in which such prayer is offered, the character of the prayer itself, purpose, and its probable effect on those who unite in the prayer.¹⁴⁶

As a result of this clear statement, the WELS Commission on Doctrinal Matters declared an impasse. Theological discussions continued on a number of levels (including several meetings with the “Overseas Brethren”), but when the impasse was reported to the WELS synod convention in 1961, the convention made the heart-rending (but, in my view, necessary) decision to suspend fellowship with the LCMS. Both the ELS and WELS formally withdrew from

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 357.

the Synodical Conference in 1963, leading to its ultimate dissolution a few years later.

Further Departure

The seeds of a moderating view on the importance of doctrinal faithfulness that had been planted in the LCMS in the 30's and 40's sprouted and grew in the 50's and early 60's. They matured and bore their inevitable fruit in the late 60's and early 70's. What had begun as a subtle willingness to compromise scriptural truth for the sake of outward unity with heterodox Lutheran churches progressed to open challenges to the unchanging truth of God's Word.

The new and differing views on Scripture and inerrancy came into the open in the LCMS in the late 50's. These views were by no means universally welcomed or sanctioned. The divisions and alarm within the LCMS caused by the new approach to scriptural authority and interpretation are well documented. "Liberal" (some, of course, preferred the softer term "moderate") and "conservative" labels were affixed to the two camps that had developed; those labels referred primarily to one's position on Scripture itself and on traditional, confessional doctrine and practice.

Once the changing views gained in influence in the LCMS in the early 60's, the long-desired relationship with the ALC would become a reality. The thinking had changed so much that there was no longer even a pretense that fellowship had "full agreement in doctrine and practice" as a prerequisite. When the LCMS actually entered into full fellowship with the ALC at its convention in Denver in 1969, the shift in thinking was patently obvious in the language of the resolution. The first "Whereas" maintained that there existed a "Scriptural and confessional basis for altar and pulpit fellowship between the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and the

American Lutheran Church."¹⁴⁷ Later "Whereas" statements, however, openly acknowledged that full agreement had not yet been reached: "The Synod recognizes that *some diversities continue to exist and efforts to work toward* [emphasis added] a unified evangelical positions and practice have been fruitful."¹⁴⁸ The third "Resolved" made this even clearer: "Resolved, that the Synod reiterate the pledge made in the 'Joint Statement and Declaration' *to seek a unified evangelical position and practice* [emphasis added] on the basis of our commitment to the Gospel."¹⁴⁹ In this changed approach, full agreement in doctrine and practice had not yet been achieved and was deemed not to be necessary as a prerequisite for full fellowship; the only requirement was a commitment to *seek* such agreement.

Not coincidentally, that same year (1969) John Tietjen was installed as the president of Concordia Seminary in St. Louis. The increasing and spreading lack of commitment to scriptural inerrancy, of course, came to a wholly predictable climax with the events leading up to the "explosion" that occurred at Concordia. By the mid-seventies, the majority of those entrusted to teach Lutheran doctrine to future LCMS pastors were unwilling to subscribe to a simple confession that the Bible is fully and completely the Word of God, inerrant and true in all it says. The seminary of Walther and Pieper, the seminary of the church that for over a century had been the leading voice for confessional Lutheranism in America had, for all practical purposes, abandoned its scriptural moorings, and with it, its God-given heritage. As a synod's seminary goes, so goes the synod; as a synod goes, so goes its seminary.

¹⁴⁷ *Workbook of the LCMS 1969 Convention* (Denver), p. 94.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 94

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

A blessed return to the commitment

*"[My Word] shall not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it."*¹⁵⁰

So God promised Isaiah, and so God promises his believers of all time. At the very same time that the LCMS was making decisions reflecting a departure from that Word, at the very same time that professors at its seminary were questioning the reliability of the Scriptures, a gracious God enabled the LCMS to take great steps in regaining its scriptural foundation and confessional heritage. When that foundation of Scripture was reclaimed, the renewed stand on Scripture and its doctrines led to the only possible conclusion, that church fellowship with the ALC was no longer possible or proper. We thank God for what he did in those decisive days, and we thank God for the faithful leaders he provided to the LCMS who would lead the synod back to the path walked by the living Christ, ready and eager to listen to his Words, to follow him, and to confess him.

At the very same convention that the LCMS declared fellowship with the ALC, it elected J.A.O. Preus as its new president. Preus was the clear favorite of the theologically-conservative Missourians, especially those who had voiced concerns about the changes taking place at the synod's seminary in St. Louis. The irony is clear but not hard to understand. These two almost simultaneous actions showed the deep divisions that existed in the synod over the vital and essential doctrines of inerrancy and fellowship.

Under Preus' leadership the matter was thoroughly investigated, with the ultimate result that President Tietjen was suspended for holding views that were contrary to Scripture and the

Lutheran Confessions. The extent of the changed approach to Scripture became clear when 45 of the 50 faculty members considered themselves suspended along with their president.

By God's grace, the newly constituted board of control of the seminary replaced the departed professors with men who were firmly and solidly committed to the Scriptures as the inspired and infallible Word of God. A synod that had begun to veer decisively away from the foundation of the Scriptures was led by God to turn back in the right direction. And it did it for the right reasons. With Luther and Walther, the LCMS was once again standing squarely and only on the principle of *sola scriptura*.

It is no coincidence that this return to its scriptural and confessional moorings very quickly affected its views on church fellowship. The two, after all, go hand in hand. Only eleven years after declaring fellowship with the ALC, the LCMS in 1981 ended that relationship. The LCMS had identified "the profound doctrinal differences that exist in three major areas: the authority and interpretation of the Holy Scriptures, the meaning of confessional subscription, and the limits of diversity and the nature and basis of church fellowship."¹⁵¹ It was also stated that

The two church bodies have quite different convictions about the implications of our doctrinal differences for church fellowship. For the ALC, fellowship between Lutheran church bodies is a rather basic relationship reflecting a somewhat minimal agreement in the Gospel and the Sacraments; in this view, doctrinal differences are to be tolerated both within and between Lutheran church bodies, and are therefore not divisive of church fellowship.

¹⁵⁰ Isaiah 55:11

¹⁵¹ *Proceedings* of the 1981 Convention of the LCMS, p. 154.

However, for the LCMS (and traditionally for other church bodies as well) altar and pulpit fellowship between church bodies is the deepest and closest possible relationship precisely because it is based on comprehensive agreement in the Biblical and confessional doctrine of the Gospel and all its articles, and in the right administration of the Sacraments. In the LCMS view doctrinal differences cannot be tolerated either within or between church bodies and are by their very nature disruptive and divisive of altar and pulpit fellowship.¹⁵²

With that decision the LCMS appears to have adopted the very same conviction that led WELS and the ELS to end its fellowship with the Missouri Synod. That return could only have taken place as a result of a return to the Scriptures as the unchanging Word of God, to the truths articulated by the Lutheran Confessions, and to the beliefs held by Lutheran fathers who founded the Synodical Conference. Earlier, we had identified the first principle guiding the faithful application of the doctrine of fellowship as one **“committed to defending and proclaiming the Word of Christ without compromise.”** We can thank God that, by his grace alone, the LCMS returned to that commitment and once again was standing squarely on the Word of the living Christ.

All confessional Lutheran synods today do well to remember two truths: Even when a church is committed to the belief that the Scriptures are the Word of God, there is always the possibility of doctrinal error; secondly, when a church abandons the commitment to the Scriptures as the Word of God, doctrinal error is inevitable and unavoidable. When a church has the Scriptures as its standard of absolute truth, error can still occur through misunderstanding, unintentional distortion, and misinterpretation. But when the sole standard of absolute truth is abandoned (even partially), doctrine will inevitably be shaped only by good intentions, responses to changing social norms, or the dictates of human wisdom.

Doctrinal differences do remain among confessional Lutherans in a number of areas (including significant differences in the specific application of fellowship principles). But the commitment to defending and proclaiming the Word of Christ without compromise is shared by all genuinely confessional Lutherans today. I believe that it is this commitment, if seriously held, that will alone make possible the faithful adherence to the next two principles of faithful fellowship practice.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 154.

Consistent in its confession and witness

If we are “committed to defend and proclaim the Word of Christ without compromise,” it will lead to a clear biblical and confessional understanding of the doctrine of fellowship and its principles. The same commitment will also mean that our application and practice of those principles of church fellowship will be **consistent in its confession and witness**.

Normally we use the term “confessional” to mean “in accord with and upholding the Lutheran Confessions.” The previous section already demonstrated that a proper understanding of the doctrine and practice of church fellowship will reflect and uphold the principles articulated in the Book of Concord. But the term can also be used in a related, but different aspect.

When I prepared to head to Florida for my first spring break experience in college, my mother gave me some simple, yet profound advice. She said, “Just remember who you are.” She knew, and she wanted me to know and understand, that I held certain values and beliefs as a Christian; those values and beliefs would guide my behavior—if I remembered at all times who I was and what I believed. Conversely, she knew that my behavior would reflect—either well or poorly, consistently or inconsistently—on those same beliefs. And my words and actions would be seen by others who would draw conclusions about “who I was” by what I did and said.

Everything Christians say and do is “confessional” in the sense that words and actions always say something to others about us, our beliefs, and our values. The same could be said of Christian congregations and synods.

Whether specifically intended or not, what congregations and synods say (in both their preaching and in their doctrinal formulations) and what they do (in carrying out their mission, in their life together in worship and fellowship activities) is a statement to others, a *confession*, a witness, of what they believe and of the principles they uphold. In the church, words and actions always reflect not just personal faith in Christ and values that flow from that faith; words and actions also are a confession of *fides quae creditur* (the teaching which is believed, the object and content of our faith). They are audible and visible expressions that point to the cross, to the empty tomb, and to the Word of Christ that has made God’s saving truth known to us. Words and actions that reflect what we believe serve to confess those truths to others; words and actions that are inconsistent with those beliefs deny them.

It was this principle that Jesus was teaching when he said to his disciples, “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.”¹⁵³ Love shown is a love that speaks a message, a confession, about faith and about the Savior who is the object of that faith. When the apostles were ordered by the Sanhedrin to keep silent, the apostles went boldly to the temple courts to preach.¹⁵⁴ That action enabled them to proclaim a message about Christ, but it also said something about these men and about their commitment to what they believed. When Stephen was about to be stoned, his words (“Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.”¹⁵⁵) and his willingness to lose his life were a clear confession;

¹⁵³ John 31:34

¹⁵⁴ Acts 5:25

¹⁵⁵ Acts 7:59

he demonstrated, for all to see, the faith that he held and the crucified and risen Savior in whom that faith was centered. Even without public words, the actions of the Christians in Jerusalem were a confession about them and their beliefs. They “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.”¹⁵⁶ By regularly gathering to hear God’s Word, by joining in the Sacrament and in prayer, by showing mutual love and concern, they were confessing something to the community. Paul remarked that the “work produced by faith,” the “labor prompted by love,” the “endurance inspired by hope” displayed by the Thessalonians enabled them to become a “model to all the believers in Macedonia.”¹⁵⁷ People observed. People listened. People watched. And people drew conclusions about what those Christians believed and about the Savior they followed. Their words and actions were a *confession* and *profession* both of the faith they possessed (*fides qua creditur*) and the message they believed (*fides quae creditur*).

Confessional actions such as these reveal not only the positives. They also unmask and demonstrate flaws, inconsistencies, or hypocrisy. A married man who pledges love and faithfulness to his wife but publicly ridicules her is saying something very clearly about the depth and quality of his love. Observers will note this disconnect between words and actions and draw the expected conclusion about his love for his wife. A man who cheats and defrauds people in his business—even occasionally—will be judged by others to be inherently dishonest on the basis of the actions they have witnessed.

So it is when Christians or Christian churches act in ways either inconsistent with their stated belief or in open opposition to clear biblical truth. Those “confessional” actions not

only reveal something about them; the actions also have an impact on those who see and hear. What they do and how they do it sends a message. In Antioch, when Peter changed his eating habits with the arrival of people from Jerusalem, Peter’s actions publicly said something about him and about his flawed and hypocritical understanding of the Gospel—to the point that others were led to join him in his sin.¹⁵⁸ The Galatians’ quick abandonment of Paul’s Gospel in favor of the legalistic message of the Judaizers said something not only about them, but it was also the clear result and visible evidence of the “other Gospel” that they believed.

My mother’s wise advice is something that confessional Lutheran church bodies and individuals would do well to remember and take to heart. We must recognize that *what we believe* needs to clearly be demonstrated in *what we do*. And *what we do* will be judged to reflect *what we believe*. That is true about all doctrines of Scripture; for confessing, Confessional Lutherans, it is also true about our commitment to a God-pleasing doctrine and practice of fellowship.

Such a confession is one that we make to a number of “audiences.” By our application of church fellowship principles we furnish our witness and confession to those outside of our fellowship, who belong to churches that have departed from the truth of God’s Word. Faithful and consistent witness thus serves as a serious admonition and as a loving encouragement. By those same applications we present a witness to those within our fellowship, as we either act in keeping with our beliefs, thereby encouraging brothers to do the same, or as our words and actions fail to reflect our beliefs, leading others either into confusion or sin. And, not least, we also present a witness to God, expressing our joyful commitment not to depart from the teachings we have learned.

¹⁵⁶ Acts 2:42

¹⁵⁷ 1 Thess 1:2ff

¹⁵⁸ Galatians 2:11ff

To demonstrate our beliefs faithfully and to benefit those who see and hear us, our confession and our witness cannot be haphazard; it must be *consistent*. The principles of church fellowship are themselves consistent and unchanging. The application of those principles must also be consistent in order to provide a clear commitment to the doctrine we hold. Such a consistent approach to the application of fellowship principles does not inherently lead, as some would say, to a legalistic, rules-based approach (although the danger is there). Nor does a consistent upholding of biblical principles preclude the fact that the same consistently-held principle may be applied differently in different circumstances. A consistent approach, rather, ought to reflect an unchanging and, if necessary, uncompromising commitment to act in keeping with the convictions we hold; it strives to be faithful to the Word of God, to witness to God's truth, to proclaim the Gospel, and to act in love at all times and in all circumstances. *Law-based consistency is legalism. Gospel-based consistency is faithfulness.*

Consistency between *doctrina publica* and practice

Walther correctly observed, "It is not enough to have a Bible lying in the vestry; it must be proclaimed from the pulpits. Moreover, a church may have a thousand oaths sworn to be faithful to the Augsburg Confession and yet be a vile sect."¹⁵⁹ Walther was underlining the important truth that the publicly held doctrine of a church must be consistently taught from pulpits and reflected consistently in its practice. The finest doctrinal statement is rendered hollow and meaningless when words are not followed by consistent actions. For example, the most faithful biblical statement on closed (or "close" if you prefer) communion loses its *confessional* effect when actual practice is not *consistent* with publicly stated doctrine. What happens to the

¹⁵⁹ Matthew Harrison, *op. cit.*, p. 248.

consistency of our witness when a Lutheran congregation, publicly claiming to uphold the truths of Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions, invites all people to commune with only the prerequisite that they "trust in the Lord's Words, repent of all sin, and forgive and love as he as loved us"?¹⁶⁰ Admittedly, in synods consisting of hundreds or thousands of congregations, such consistency is difficult to maintain, but every effort must be made to encourage and achieve it. We will speak more on the role of doctrinal supervision later.

Consistency in various settings and activities

Succinct terminology can be helpful in summarizing complicated issues. It can also be harmful when the terminology is misunderstood or when the term itself becomes the object of contention. Such is the case with term "unit concept," a term coined by WELS theologians in the height of the doctrinal controversies in the 50's. It was a term that has often been panned and misunderstood (and not just because it sounds a bit like a term drawn from the realm of quantum physics.)

Even though, as we have seen, the doctrinal controversy had its roots in much broader fundamental issues, during the debates leading up the demise of the Synodical Conference, the matter of prayer fellowship became the most prominent presenting issue. It rose to that prominence because it appeared to WELS and the ELS that the LCMS had begun to make a new distinction between some activities that required full doctrinal agreement (altar and pulpit fellowship) and those that did not (such as joint prayer in some settings). WELS theologians chose the term "unit concept" of fellowship to describe what they sincerely believed was the

¹⁶⁰ A worship bulletin notice such as this is not an example of loving, pastoral "discretion." It's an example of pastoral irresponsibility.

scriptural, historic position and practice of the members of the Synodical Conference: First, all doctrine of Scripture is part of God's revelation, and, therefore, a denial of one part of Scripture is a denial of all Scripture. Secondly, *communio in sacris* ("fellowship in sacred things") cannot be limited to altar or pulpit fellowship; rather, *communio in sacris* involves any outward activity in which Christians jointly participate in the life, work, and worship of the church.¹⁶¹

With that understanding, fellowship principles and applications involve not only pulpit and altar fellowship, but they also apply to other activities (other "sacred things") such as prayer, worship in both liturgical and non-liturgical settings (joint devotions at conferences, rallies, or civic events), mission work, religious educational endeavors, and social programs. By including these other activities as expressions of fellowship, they are not being mistaken for or confused with the "marks of the church." Prayer is not a means of grace, and worship itself is not a Sacrament. It must, however, be recognized that these activities all flow from and are intimately connected to the marks of the church and therefore cannot be viewed separately from them. All involve the use and proclamation of the Gospel in the wider sense. Participation in them is confession. Our witness in applying fellowship principles must be consistent with that.

The term "unit concept" was criticized because it was viewed to be novel, simplistic, and legalistic. In reality, it was a phrase intended to

¹⁶¹ The phrase "every joint expression of faith" was also criticized, but the main thrust of the criticism was due, I believe, to a misunderstanding of the word "faith." Kurt Marquart, for example, understood it to be used only in the sense of an expression of personal faith (*fides qua creditur*), fearing that this approach would find the basis of fellowship in subjectivism and isolated personal beliefs. I believe that those who chose to use that expression intended it to refer *both* to expressions or activities which confessed the *content* of faith (*fides quae creditur*) and to those things that, at the same time, were outward activities in which personal faith was demonstrated.

illustrate the truth that faithful application of fellowship principles—if they are to be faithful—must be viewed and applied in a way consistent with biblical doctrine and which maintained a consistent view of the nature of joint religious or spiritual activities. Nor did the unit concept intend to imply that there are no such things as "hard" or "exceptional" cases. (Again, more on this later.) In making the case for the need for holding to consistency in both the doctrine and its application, the doctrinal statements of WELS during the time of controversy did not address fully the various situations in which the principle might be applied in an exceptional way.¹⁶²

Levels of Fellowship and Selective Fellowship

The term "levels of fellowship" was coined to describe a gray terrain located somewhere between full fellowship in doctrine and practice on the one hand and no fellowship on the other. It was an approach that attempted somehow to find a way to permit or legitimize some types or levels of joint activity or "relationship" between church bodies which were not in full doctrinal agreement. This approach assumes several things. It assumes that when there are varying degrees of doctrinal agreement between churches, expressions of fellowship may take place at different levels and in different ways depending on the level of agreement. It also differentiates between fellowship activities involving different levels of church

¹⁶² To be *consistent* in witness in our application of fellowship principles does not mean that every situation will be handled in exactly the same way. Different situations and circumstances will require differing approaches and applications of the one consistent principle. Public situations require different specific applications than private ones. Situations involving "erring brothers" will call for different approaches than those involving "persistent errorists." The principle needs to remain consistent and unchanged; the applications of those principles may vary. "Hard cases," "exceptional cases," and situations "*in extremis*" will occur. Exceptions dare never become the rule.

polity; what may not be permissible on the synodical level may be perfectly permissible on the congregational or individual level. It also implies that there are some doctrines in Scripture which are indispensable (such as the Gospel) and that others are less so (in which case differences may essentially be overlooked or minimized).

WELS and ELS rejected this approach. Some at the time and others in the LCMS since agreed with that rejection. In 1988, long after the synodical split occurred, Kurt Marquart noted that

Wisconsin's condemnation of 'levels of fellowship,' . . . was not only not criticized but was warmly commended [by the Overseas Committee in 1961] as 'perfectly correct.' The Wisconsin document had described it as an 'untenable position . . . to envision fellowship relations (in a congregation, in a church body, in a federation, in a church agency, in a cooperative church activity) like so many steps of a ladder, each requiring a gradual increasing or decreasing measure of unity in doctrine and practice.' Elsewhere it was pointed out that this laudable position [was] 'perhaps the most important sentence of the whole document.'¹⁶³

In his own unique way, he then offers the blunt criticism of the levels of fellowship approach being pushed by his synod president at the time:

To insert between these twin 'poles' of internal and external fellowship a whole 'continuum' of sociological 'relationships,' and then to think and talk of this disparate mixture of apples and oranges as 'levels of fellowship,' is to reduce the doctrine of fellowship to incoherence.

Firstly, the very notion of such a 'continuum' implies that without it there would be a gap, an empty space, in short, a separation, between internal and external church fellowship. Secondly, the scheme relativizes the true, God-given, Gospel-based external fellowship of the church . . . by making it a part of a continuum with all sorts of other things . . . In sum, the 'levels of fellowship' scheme slices up the living, organic fullness of the fellowship of the church, and makes its component elements appear like disconnected and desiccated items artificially arranged, together with alien material, into a false pattern . . . It should be abundantly clear that 'levels of fellowship' is so heavily burdened with an alien theological dynamic and thrust that it can serve only to confuse and destroy, but never to advance and clarify the proper understanding of fellowship among us.¹⁶⁴

When it came to levels of fellowship, Marquart clearly agreed that a *consistent* doctrine of church fellowship results in a *consistent application* of fellowship principles in visible fellowship activities.

"Selective fellowship" is the cousin of "levels of fellowship." Selective fellowship is practicing fellowship on the basis of specific circumstances and on individual confession without regard to the witness given by wider church affiliation.

A synod articulates and declares its doctrine. A congregation's or an individual's membership in that synod is a public declaration of agreement with that doctrine. Membership or affiliation is a witness of what is believed. (The full understanding of what one is publicly agreeing to

¹⁶³ Kurt Marquart, "Levels of Fellowship: A Response," *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, Vol. 52, #4, October, 1988, p.257.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 245-246; 259.

is not always there, especially in the case of individuals, but it is still a public declaration to that effect.) To deny this is to deny the obvious and to reduce synodical affiliation to a meaningless gesture.

Consistency in the application of the doctrine of fellowship will naturally need to assume that congregations and individuals who belong to visible churches agree with and subscribe to the teachings of those bodies. Even when a disclaimer is voiced (“I belong to that church but I don’t agree with all of its teachings;” “Our congregation is a member of that synod, but we disagree with our synod’s position on . . .”) ongoing fellowship cannot be practiced on that basis alone; such disclaimers cannot quiet the witness and the public testimony that is given by membership in a congregation or synod. Honest and *consistent* application of fellowship principles will recognize that membership in a congregation or synod *does* mean something. Joining in fellowship activities with a person or congregation that speaks with these two discordant voices would be to sanction the discrepancy (arising from either confusion or dishonesty) and will provide encouragement for a person to continue a fellowship relationship that he claims does not really exist.

Cooperation in Externals

The same commitment to a consistent confession will apply to how the fellowship doctrine is applied in the case of cooperation in externals (*cooperatio in externis*).

What are truly *externals*? “Cooperation in externals,” properly defined, applies to outward cooperation among Christians in activities that are truly *external* to the mission of the church, the use of the Means of Grace, and the proclamation of the Gospel. Inasmuch as such activities are truly outside of the realm of “Means of Grace ministry,” outside of the realm governed by the

marks of the church, joint activity among churches that do not share a common confession is not *ipso facto* a violation of the biblical principles of fellowship. Congregations of different doctrinal persuasions can certainly share common rented space for worship (assuming the worship is not happening at the same time). Church bodies can simultaneously serve as “friends of the court” in legal matters. Other purely external-to-the-Gospel-ministry situations can occur.

But great care must be taken to evaluate the true nature of these. *Externals* must truly be *externals*. Any activity, carried out by the church, which is directly connected to the mission of the church and which in some way assumes the use of the Means of Grace, cannot truly be *external*. Cooperation in those activities, even though they may not directly involve worship, prayer, or administration of the Sacraments, is actually a *communio in sacris*, a fellowship in holy things. Christian educational efforts, which by nature involve the instruction in the Word, cannot be external to the mission of the church. Since it is always an expression of Spirit-worked faith and love, carrying out ministries of mercy is always accompanied with Law and Gospel proclamation of some kind and is directly connected to the task of the church to “do good to all.” Social programs conducted by the church, assuming that those programs utilize—no, *depend on*—the use of Law and Gospel to be effective and God-pleasing, cannot be seen as activities external to the church’s God-given mission.

And if activities are shown to be truly a part of the work and mission of the church, if they depend on the use of the Means of Grace and are vehicles to share the Gospel, then the principles of church fellowship and their proper application by necessity come into play. Consistency in application of those principles, as well as being consistent in confession and

witness, would allow cooperation only when there is full agreement in doctrine and practice, only when genuine outward fellowship exists.

It should also be said that even in situations where the activity is truly external, the church will need to be especially careful that such cooperation is not misunderstood or misconstrued—either by the heterodox partner or by those within our own fellowship. Activities which may not be expressions of fellowship by their nature may easily be seen and construed as expressions of fellowship even when they are not. If joint participation, even in something truly external, will cause offense or confusion, it may need to be avoided. If a clear witness cannot be given, cooperation even in externals should not take place. (Another potential danger is that cooperation in externals can become the vehicle for de-emphasizing doctrine in favor of increasingly close cooperation in increasing ways in order to bring about greater external unity in the future.)

It is extremely encouraging to note (forgive me if I am misinformed about this) that the LCMS is in the process of re-evaluating its approach to cooperative activities with other church bodies. From the comments of Albert Colver III, assistant to the president of the LCMS, it appears that should such discussions take place, attention will center on the right issues:

It is no accident of history or coincidence that Lutheran churches in America coined the phrase 'cooperation in externals' around the same time that the ecumenical movement proclaimed, 'doctrine divides, but service unites.' As churches of different confessions and denominations began to cooperate in social and humanitarian projects around the world, Lutherans did not want to be left behind.

At the same time, Lutherans, especially Confessional Lutherans, recognized that the lack of doctrinal agreement and fellowship prevented certain types of cooperation. The formulation of 'cooperation in externals' was an attempt to delineate a realm where Lutheran churches could cooperate with other Christians and even with non-religious humanitarian organizations . . .

A re-examination of the principle of 'cooperation in externals' is in order for the inter-Lutheran community because many Lutheran church bodies have inherited the principle from the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod without critical or thoughtful evaluation. In the current pluralistic age, it is perhaps more important now than previously to consider what 'externals' can be cooperated in without compromising confession. As more church bodies within the Lutheran World Federation ordain or consider the ordination of women and homosexuals, confessional Lutheran church bodies need to consider if they can cooperate in so-called externals. Or does such cooperation end up compromising their confession, or even worse, open the door for such practices to enter their church? . . .

Ultimately, Christian works of mercy (*diakonia*) flow out of the gifts that Christ has given his church. Christ's love for humankind expressed in his suffering, death, and resurrection, along with this forgiving gifts of absolution, baptism, communion, and preaching give the Christian a heart to love his neighbor, whoever that might be. Ultimately, it is the common confession of faith and the recognition that we are part of Christ's

body because he put his holy name upon us in baptism and has made us a part of his body by giving us his body and blood in Holy Communion. Doctrine and service are connected. Service disconnected from the sacred things does not remain Christian for long. Doctrine without works of service to the neighbor is a dead faith. (James 2:17) We need to reclaim the connection between doctrine and service, faith and deeds, and the connection of *diakonia* in close proximity to the Lord's altar . . . **Without doctrine and truth, works of service cease to be Christian. If such service is not Christian, the church needs to ask why it has engaged in such activity [emphasis added].**¹⁶⁵

A sincere desire such as this to look at the entire issue of cooperation in externals from the perspective of the church and its evangelical mission will lead, by the grace of God, to a *consistency* in witness and confession as that work involves the principles of church fellowship.

Prayer

In 1961 the Overseas Committee attempted fervently to help resolve the fellowship issues dividing the Synodical Conference. They recognized that prayer, as the most prominent presenting issue and the center of most of the later discussion, was an issue that needed to be addressed. Their statement made some points worth noting:

12. The fellowship created by Word and Sacraments shows itself fundamentally in pulpit and altar fellowship. It can show itself in many other ways, some of which, like prayer and worship and love of the

brethren, the church cannot do without ... In whatever way the fellowship created by Word and Sacraments shows itself, all visible manifestations must be truthful and in accordance with the supreme demands of the marks of the church . . .

13. Prayer is not one of the marks of the church and should not be coordinated with Word and Sacraments, as though it were essentially of the same nature as they. As a response to the divine Word, it is an expression of faith and a fruit of faith. As a profession of faith it must be spoken in harmony with and under the control of the marks of the church . . .¹⁶⁶

The Overseas Committee appears to have recognized that much of the discussion on prayer had become sidetracked on efforts to differentiate between "prayer fellowship" and "joint prayer" or to determine what elements needed to be present for a worship activity to actually constitute worship.¹⁶⁷ Reflecting the well-documented historical position of the Synodical Conference,^{168 169} they agreed that prayer, while

¹⁶⁶ "Fellowship in its Necessary Context of the Doctrine of the Church." Statement of the "Overseas Committee," presented by Dr. Henry Hamann, Jr. "Proceedings of the Recessed Forty-Sixth Convention of the Synodical Conference", page unknown.

¹⁶⁷ Can we agree that incidents such as the unfortunate Yankee Stadium event are an inevitable result of attempts to differentiate between prayer fellowship and joint public prayer with those outside of the fellowship relationship?

¹⁶⁸ Walther's Thesis XXI in *The Evangelical Lutheran Church* concludes: "The Evangelical Lutheran Church rejects all fraternal and churchly fellowship with those who reject its confessions in whole or in part." The LCMS Constitution renounced "unionism and syncretism of every description such as . . . participating in heterodox tract and missionary activities." The Brief Statement says, "We repudiate unionism, that is, church fellowship with the adherents of false doctrine." In 1881, *Lehre und Wehre* stated, "We say openly and honestly to everyone who brings different doctrine among us, even though he appeals to the confessions of the Lutheran church, 'We do not belong together and so we must go our separate ways.' By that we do not mean to say that our opponents are heretics nor do we anathematize them . . . But this is what we say: 'We can no longer walk together. We cannot pray with one

¹⁶⁵ Albert B. Collver III, "Works of Mercy and Church Unity: Does Service Unify and Doctrine Divide?" *Concordia Journal*, Vol. 36, No. 4, 2010, p. 349-351.

not to be equated with the Word and the Sacraments, was indeed an activity governed by the biblical principles of fellowship.¹⁷⁰ Later in the document, they alluded—not in so many words—to how a *consistent witness and confession* of the truth would normally show itself:

When joint prayer shows the marks of characteristics of unionism it must be avoided. Such marks characteristic of unionism are a) failure to confess the whole truth of the divine Word; b) failure to reject and denounce every opposing error; c) assigning error equal right with truth; d) creating the impression of unity in faith or of church fellowship where it does not exist.¹⁷¹

In ordinary circumstances, then, a *consistent witness and confession* would preclude joint prayer with Christians or churches with whom fellowship bonds do not exist.

another any longer' . . . For such praying is an abomination in the sight of God." —quoted by John Brug, "The Synodical Conference and Prayer Fellowship," p. 13.

¹⁶⁹ Hoenecke's position on prayer fellowship, not at variance with the doctrines held in the Synodical Conference, is clearly stated in his *Evangelische Lutherische Dogmatik*: "Opposed to the scriptural doctrine of prayer are all those who practice prayer fellowship with errorists . . . to refrain completely from all prayer fellowship and fellowship in worship with those who are of a different faith, this alone accords with the Word of God." "Fellowship Then and Now. (Concerning the Impasse in the Intersynodical Discussions on Church Fellowship)" Report of the WELS Commission on Inter-Church Relations, 1961, p. 15.

¹⁷⁰ Even as late as 1946, President Behnken said to the American Lutheran Conference, "If such cooperation involves joint work in missions, in Christian education, in student welfare work, in joint services celebrating great events, then cooperation is just another name for altar and prayer fellowship. Without doctrinal agreement this spells compromise. It means yielding doctrinal positions. Such fellowship will not stand in the light of Scripture." (*Quartalschrift*, 1947, p. 68.)

¹⁷¹ "Fellowship in its Necessary Context of the Doctrine of the Church." Statement of the "Overseas Committee."

Supervision of Doctrine and Practice

It has always been both the privilege and the challenge for Christians to distinguish between and to properly apply the twin scriptural doctrines of Law and Gospel. Lutherans have always recognized that failure to apply these truths properly will either prevent saving faith from being created or will undermine and destroy existing faith.

All Lutheran synods have entrusted the oversight of doctrine and practice to designated ecclesiastical leaders or groups of leaders. The high responsibility of overseers and elders in the church to promote sound doctrine and to correct those who stray will certainly come into play as a church strives to be consistent in its practice and application of fellowship principles. In that work, doctrinal supervisors will need to instruct, to encourage, and, when necessary to correct and admonish. No synod can maintain a correct doctrinal position without the commitment of spiritual overseers to carry out this work faithfully.

It is not an easy task. It requires a clear commitment to the doctrine we have learned. It requires an evangelical approach that is not quick to judge. It requires a great deal of sanctified human judgment and a good deal of patience. And it is work that requires both the trustworthiness of those who oversee as well as the trust of the church body in those overseers. Faithfulness to that responsibility engenders such trust. Trust in the overseers encourages them to be faithful.

Compelled by the Gospel and Motivated by Love

“Christ’s love compels us.”¹⁷² Whether one understands the genitive τοῦ Χριστοῦ to be objective (the love we have for Christ), subjective (Christ’s love for us), or both, these words of Paul describe the motive, the guide, and the manner in which confessional Lutherans will hold to the doctrine of fellowship and apply it. Every God-pleasing thing we do as Christians as those who walk together with the living Christ as members of the visible church of Christ—as well as the manner in which we do it—is a result of the love that Christ has had for sinners. His was a love that moved him to sacrifice himself, to endure the punishment deserved by sinful man, to redeem a world cut off from the Creator by its own rebellion. Similarly, every expression and action of faith occurs in us because we have been renewed and restored by the life-giving Gospel of a living Savior. With that restoration and renewal, the Spirit works in us a love for our Savior, a living love that yearns to show that love in words and actions. It is those two kinds of love—Christ’s for sinners and ours for him—that guides, motivates, and directs us as we put the doctrine of fellowship into practice in the real world among real people.

The love of Christ for us is what brings us together with him and with each other into this blessed fellowship relationship. It is his love for us which permits us to acknowledge and celebrate that unity of faith by joining with each other at the altar, before the pulpit, on our knees in prayer, and in the world proclaiming the saving message of Christ. It is our love for Christ which moves us to rejoice in the life-giving power of his Word, to proclaim it, and to defend it. It is

¹⁷² 2 Cor 5:14

our love for him that moves us to recognize and acknowledge unity in faith when God grants it, and it is that same love for him that moves us to separate from those who have caused divisions. *Everything* about this thing called fellowship is rooted and centered in love. Christ’s love does indeed compel us.

So compelled by that love, and moved by the Gospel, at times we find it necessary, in keeping with God’s clear instructions, to avoid outward expressions of fellowship with those who do not share our doctrine. We do that because—and only because—Christ’s love compels us.

We are compelled by love when it comes to our desire to hold firmly to the word of truth that God has entrusted to us. Jesus said, “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples.”¹⁷³ Paul encouraged Timothy, “Guard what has been entrusted to your care.”¹⁷⁴ To Titus, Paul wrote, “You must teach what is in accord with sound doctrine.”¹⁷⁵ It is a love and appreciation for the saving Word of God that will move us to join with those who stand on that Word and to refrain from joining with those who do not. Nothing we do should ever serve to compromise or undermine the only truth which is able to set captive sinners free.

We are also compelled by love for those who are straying and thereby endangering their own faith. If my toddler rushes into the middle of a busy street, sits down there, and begins to play with a toy truck, my love for him will not

¹⁷³ John 8:31

¹⁷⁴ 1 Tim 6:20

¹⁷⁵ Titus 2:1

move me to run into the street, sit down with him, and join him in his play. Won't I do everything possible, in love for my child, to alert him to the danger and to remove him from it? Joining with others in expressions of fellowship when they are threatened by false doctrine does not show love. Tolerating or excusing or minimizing the danger only increases it.

We are compelled by love for those within our fellowship, always mindful never to do anything that will cause offense or threaten the faith that connects them to their Savior.

Finally, we are compelled by a love and concern for our own faith and spiritual welfare. My faith, making me a member of the Body of Christ, is my only connection to the One who is my Head. My faith, produced by the Holy Spirit through the power of the Gospel, exists only because the Gospel, as revealed in Scriptures and applied in the sacraments, came into my ears and made its home in my heart. Nothing I do should willingly expose my faith to Satan's attempts to whisper, "Did God really say?"

"Hard cases" and exceptional situations

God, of course, has not given us a set of rules outlining how we will consistently apply the scriptural principles of fellowship in all situations. "Hard cases" will arise, when we struggle to determine how we can act both in love and in keeping with those principles.

Some have approached it in this way: "Sometimes, two equally valid principles of Scripture seem to conflict; in some cases, the principles of fellowship appear to run up against the principle of Christian love. In those cases we will need to use our sanctified Christian judgment to determine which principle should apply." I wonder if that is the best way to approach these hard cases. I wonder if two God-given principles are ever truly in conflict with or

opposed to one another. Would it not be better to say, "The scriptural principles of fellowship are clear"? Those principles always need to be consistently applied in love for God, for his Word, and for people. Different circumstances will determine how that love can best be expressed.

Following that approach, we will still need to use sanctified Christian judgment. We will still be called upon to make decisions. But those decisions will not involve a choice between two conflicting scriptural principles. They will rather involve decisions as to how we can lovingly be faithful to God's Word and be of spiritual benefit to our neighbor.

This is the approach that comes into play in questions regarding prayer. The position of WELS and the ELS, affirming that joint prayer is indeed an expression of fellowship, has often been seen to deny that there may be times when a loving application of the fellowship principles not only does not forbid joint prayer but actually calls for it. It may be that, in private settings, the individual who belongs to another church body (not in fellowship with us) is clearly someone who is an "erring brother," willing to be instructed in the truth of the Gospel. In situations such as that, there is not potential for a misunderstanding or offense caused by someone's public actions. It may be that the situation is one considered to be "*in extremis*" (under extreme circumstances) where the situation calls for addressing only matters of saving faith and not an understanding of or adherence to other doctrines of Scripture. In those *exceptional* situations, the principles do not change, but a loving application of the principle may allow or even require action that is *exceptional* to the norm. Numerous writers in both WELS and the ELS have acknowledged that in private settings, where individual beliefs or

weakness of faith can be determined, exceptional situations may occur.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁶ **Armin Schuetze:** "In private situations the same biblical principles must be applied that guide us in our public actions. There is, however, this difference. In public actions the matter of offense more readily becomes a factor. This may not be present in private situations. In public we must carefully guard lest our prayer practices give the impression of indifference to doctrine, or even agreement with false doctrine, either of which may be harmful to someone's faith. In private situations the personal confession of the individual may be expressed in such a way that calls for recognition. Not to acknowledge it could prove harmful to that person's faith. Particularly weakness in faith and understanding may in private situations call for action that may not be possible in public." "Joining Together in Prayer and the Lord's Supper: The Scriptural Principles of Fellowship Applied to Prayer and Holy Communion." Essay delivered to the South Central Conference of the WELS South Atlantic District, 1995, p. 10

WELS CICR and ELS Board of Theology and Church Relations: "Do we hold that the exercise of church fellowship, especially prayer and altar fellowship, can be decided in every instance solely on the basis of formal church membership, that is, on whether or not the person belongs to a congregation or synod in affiliation with us? No. Ordinarily this is the basis on which such a question is decided since church fellowship is exercised on the basis of one's confession to the pure marks of the church, and ordinarily we express our confession by our church membership. There may be cases in the exercise of church fellowship where a person's informal confession of faith must also be considered. This is especially true regarding the weak. But whether one is guided by a person's formal or informal confession of faith, in either instance it must in principle be a confession to the full truth of God's Word." "A Reply" of the WELS Commission on Inter-Church Relations and of the ELS Board of Theology and Church Relations based on their synods' public confession on the doctrine of church fellowship to a question regarding church fellowship raised by pastors from the Conference of Authentic Lutherans," *Lutheran Sentinel*, Vol. 59, No. 14 [July 22, 1976], pp. 220-21.

WELS Conference of Presidents: "Finally we dare not forget that there are those Christians who may be caught in an error, not willfully, but because their understanding of the Scripture is insufficient. They are willing to bow to Scripture, but as yet, through human weakness, do not see clearly how the truth of Scripture necessarily rules out their error. What does God say to us concerning such weak Christians? He tells us, "Him that is weak in the faith receive ye, but not to doubtful disputations." (Ro 14:1). *Receive*, he says. *Receive* such a weak brother and tenderly help him to overcome his weakness. "Receiving" such a weak Christian means that praying with him may well be in place and God-pleasing, and we trust that God will help him to grow in knowledge and strength. Certainly, this could not be done publicly without offense. And if such a person were to defend the error, even privately, then prayer with him would be a denial of the Lord." "Prayer Fellowship," a position paper published by the WELS Conference of Presidents, 1953. Printed in *Essays on Church Fellowship*. Curtis A. Jahn, ed., p. 393.

Exceptional situations, in which a loving application of fellowship principles may be done in a way that is truly *exceptional* to the normal practice, do arise. They must remain *exceptions*.

Permit an illustration: A young WELS pastor was only a few months into his ministry. The young man was freshly familiar with the narrative of the events leading up to the synodical split. He had spent his seminary years sitting at the feet of men like Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary president Carl Lawrenz and Professor Siegbert Becker. The two professors had both been in the heart of the synodical controversy, the former as a leading spokesman for WELS and the latter as a protesting professor serving at Concordia, River Forest.

One Sunday the young pastor is in the church sacristy minutes before the worship service (with the Lord's Supper) is to begin. An elderly couple in their 80's, long-time members of the congregation, enters. A third person is with

John Brug: "The principles that govern our practice of fellowship with individuals are no different from the principles that govern our public relationships with groups of Christians. We are to warn all who are holding false doctrine against that false doctrine. If they cling to that doctrine in spite of our admonition, we must not practice fellowship with them. It makes no difference if they are family or friends. We cannot place family ties ahead of our loyalty to God and his truth (Matthew 10:32-39; 12:46-49). The one practical difference between the two situations, however, is that when religious fellowship with family or friends involves only private actions that will not give public offense, we may consider not only the public confession they make through their church membership, but also their private, personal confession . . . For example, if they are dissenting members of a heterodox Lutheran church, who object to its false teaching and are fighting against it, we may recognize them as one in the faith with us in our private relationships with them . . . If their private confession, however, reveals that they are aware of the false teaching of their church and defend it, we should not practice religious fellowship with them even in our private relationships." *Church Fellowship: Working Together for the Truth*, p. 147-148

them, another elderly woman who was a visitor that morning. The woman who was a member of the church said with some emotion, "Pastor, this is my sister Edith. She has been visiting for the last two weeks. It's the first time we have seen each other in nearly 20 years. She lives in western Canada. She is a member of the Lutheran Church of Canada, but only because there are no Wisconsin Synod churches nearby. I know that she believes exactly as she always did and exactly as I do. This afternoon she will be going back home, and I know that today is the last time we will ever see each other again. Pastor, could she please take Communion with us today?"

The pastor saw the tears in both of their eyes and heard the quiver in the voice. He knew that to say "no" would be devastating to the faith of these two believers. He also knew that there was little, if any, possibility of any public offense. The service was about to begin in moments. He said yes, she was welcome to share in Communion.

The young pastor felt strongly that he did the right thing, but doubts about his decision kept arising. So later that week, he shared the incident and his decision with his church council and said, "I am fully committed to our synod's teachings on fellowship and I am fully convinced that the practice of closed Communion is the correct one. But I felt that this case was an exception, and to do otherwise would not have been loving or God-pleasing. If I made the wrong decision, please correct me." To a man they told their pastor he had done the right thing. Still not fully assured, the young pastor went to his next pastors' conference—known at the time as one of the most conservative and traditional in the synod. He did the same thing as he did with his council, and asked the same question. "Brothers, did I do the right thing?" Every pastor assured the young man that his decision was correct. It was the only time that pastor ever knowingly communed someone not in fellowship with his synod. But it was an exception that a loving application of fellowship principles allowed—even demanded—him to make.

The Path Ahead: A Continuing Walk with the Risen Christ

"Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments and his paths beyond tracing out! Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor? Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him? For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be to the glory forever and ever!" (Romans 11:33-36)

We poor wretched sinners cannot help but marvel. On bended knees, with fearful and sorrowful hearts, we marvel that we are not consumed by a holy and righteous God. We marvel further that this God has seen us in our lost state, loved us with an everlasting love, and offered his Son to make us his own. In his sweet

Gospel message he leads us to the cross. He directs us to a bleeding and dying Lamb, perfect, innocent, holy, who suffers the rejection of his Father for the sake of our welcome into the family of God. He points our gaze in a different direction, to the open door of an empty tomb, where the Sacrifice has now become the Victor. Now, through what he has done and through Spirit-worked faith, we take our place as members of his body, as stones in his temple, as an assembly of people called the Bride of Christ. To him, indeed, be the glory!

And now as members of his church, we celebrate the amazing fellowship that he has established, a fellowship hidden from human

eyes and known only to the One who created it. We do not see that fellowship, but we know that it exists; wherever his Word is rightly taught and his Sacraments are rightly administered, that fellowship is present.

We long for ways to express that fellowship and to celebrate it in our lives as his people. But saddled with human eyes, we cannot look at hearts. We can only judge what words confess and deeds confirm. But judge we must. Faithfulness to his life-giving Word demands it. And where words and deeds outwardly express a unity in the faith seen only to God, we rejoice to be able to walk together in worship, at the altar, in mission. Therein lies both the enduring challenge and the glorious privilege of those who confess his name and walk together with the living Christ.

What lies ahead for Confessional Lutherans? What are our opportunities and responsibilities in the days and years ahead? Permit some suggestions:

- We must begin with repentance. We ask God's forgiveness for eyes that have not always seen his truth, ears that do not always hear his Word, hearts that judge others unfairly, and lips that utter words at times both unloving and untrue.
 - We must joyfully commit ourselves to return at all times to the source of all we believe, to the truth of God's unchanging Word. We must commit ourselves to return to those confessions of our Lutheran Church, not because they are our heritage, but because they faithfully proclaim the truth of God.
 - We should agree that while restored fellowship is our prayer and desire, our initial and primary goal is joint faithfulness to the Word and the Lutheran Confessions.
- Even though not all Confessional Lutherans today may pray with one another, we must pray for one another. For wisdom. For faith. For courage. For patience and understanding.
 - We must encourage one another. Efforts such as the Koinonia Project in the LCMS should be commended, and similar continuing efforts to clarify and focus on scriptural doctrines should take place in all synods. Results of those efforts should be shared among the synods. Any possible mutual assistance in carrying out those studies should be offered.
 - We must talk with one another. We should talk together to remove misunderstandings, preconceived ideas, and caricatures of each other's beliefs. Free conferences such as the Emmaus Conference should be encouraged by synodical leadership. Consultations between synodical leaders or doctrinal committees (for the sake of clarifying positions) should not be avoided. Mutual familiarity, respect and trust, even when we disagree, must be fostered.¹⁷⁷
 - We must give our leaders the opportunity to lead evangelically and to exercise doctrinal discipline faithfully, recognizing that faithful supervision of doctrine and practice takes time. Our leaders must commit themselves to take their responsibility seriously and carry them out faithfully, regardless of cost.
 - We need to define clearly the *status controversiae* between our synods. Plans

¹⁷⁷ This is fully in keeping with the spirit of the 1961 WELS resolution (which suspended fellowship with the LCMS): Resolved b) of that resolution states, "That under conditions which do not imply a denial of our previous testimony we stand ready to resume discussions with The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod with the aim of re-establishing unity of doctrine and practice and of restoring fellowship relations, these discussions to be conducted outside the framework of fellowship." *Proceedings of the 36th Convention of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod*, p. 198-199.

should be made to discuss issues such as specific applications of the doctrine of fellowship, Church and Ministry, the role of men and women in the church, worship and the Sacraments, and any other areas which need to be addressed and clarified. Where there appear to be differences, we need to define them and understand them. When those differences have been clarified, we need to be ready to discuss them and resolve them only on the basis of the Scriptures and the

Lutheran Confessions. Is a 21st century “Formula of Concord” effort possible?

- As we strive to apply the scriptural principles of fellowship faithfully, remaining separate when we must on the basis of our confession, we should just as energetically seek to determine where doctrine and practice are one, to trust in the power of the Word for results, and to rejoice in a unified confession if and when God brings it about.

**Walking together with the risen Christ. Committed to defending and proclaiming his Word.
Consistent in our confession and witness. Compelled by the love of Christ.**

That is our privilege. That is our heritage. That must be our goal.

“Even though we possess no power but that of the Word, we nevertheless can and should carry out our work joyfully. Let us, therefore, esteemed sirs and brethren, use this power properly. Let us above all and in all matters be concerned about this, that the pure doctrine of our dear Evangelical Lutheran Church may become known more and more completely among us, that it may be in vogue in all of our congregations, and that it may be preserved from all adulteration and held fast as the most precious treasure. Let us not surrender one iota of the demands of the Word. Let us bring about its complete rule in our congregations and set aside nothing of it, even though for this reason things may happen to us, as God wills. Here let us be inflexible, here let us be adamant. If we do this, we need not worry about the success of our labor. Even though it should seem to us to be in vain, it cannot then be in vain, for the Word does not return void but prospers in the thing whereto the Lord has sent it. By the Word alone, without any other power, the Church was founded. By the Word alone, all the great deeds recorded in Church history were accomplished. By the Word alone, the Church will most assuredly stand also in these last days of sore distress, to the end of days. Even the gates of hell will not prevail against it. ‘All flesh is as grass, and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, and the flower falls, but the Word of the Lord remains forever.’ ” – C. F. W. Walther in his first president’s address to the Missouri Synod Convention (1848)

“Therefore, it is our intent to give witness before God and all Christendom, among those who are alive today and those who will come after us, that the explanation we have set forth regarding all the controversial articles of faith which we have addressed and explained—and no other explanation—is our teaching, faith, and confession. In it we shall appear before the judgment throne of Jesus Christ, by God’s grace, with fearless hearts and thus give account of our faith, and we will neither secretly nor publicly speak or write anything contrary to it. Instead, on the strength of God’s grace we intend to abide by this confession.” – Conclusion of the Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord

Soli Deo Gloria!

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