

License vs. Legalism:
Finding the Narrow Middle Road in
Applying the Doctrine of Church Fellowship
(with Special Reference to “Cooperation in Externals”)

Pastor Joel D. Otto
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Introduction

“I thought we settled the whole fellowship thing over 40 years ago. Let’s move on.”

“We’ve got to get past our petty doctrinal differences and focus on spreading the gospel.”

“Confessions are just paper fences that keep us from enjoying unity and getting God’s mission done.”

“It should be enough that we believe in Jesus as our Savior. No one can be expected to agree on everything in the Bible.”

“The doctrine of church fellowship stands in the way of growing our churches.”

I cannot say that I have heard any of these statements verbatim from any pastor in our fellowship. But are these statements sometimes, at least partially, found in our deepest thoughts or expressed in our attitudes and practices? Are they sometimes mumbled under our breath when we have had to say “no” once again? Or have I merely set up a gang of straw men that can be smote with one quote from Romans 16:17, or a more extensive treatment like we have already heard at this conference?¹ Perhaps a little of everything. Maybe these attitudes are just perceived, and not really found in WELS pastors. Or maybe they find some evidence in our attempts to apply the doctrine of church fellowship without coming across as isolationists.

When it comes to applying the doctrine of church fellowship, as well as many other practical aspects of the Christian ministry and life,² it is essential that confessional Lutheran pastors find the narrow middle road between legalism and license.³ We are *evangelical* Lutheran pastors with an unceasing and unyielding focus on the gospel. We are *evangelical Lutheran* pastors who have subscribed to the Lutheran confessions as the correct exposition of Scripture. We are *evangelical Lutheran pastors* who strive to shepherd the flocks “of which the Holy Spirit has made [us] overseers” (Acts 20:28), so that God’s people might remain in the one true faith.

At times, we might wish that we were Old Testament Levites, although I am not sure how crazy I would be about taking care of the morning and evening sacrifices. Everything was pretty cut and dried in Leviticus. God had set down his will in stone, even to the point of giving “if this... then that” commands to almost every conceivable situation. Or so it seems. But he had a higher purpose for working this way. His people needed to be preserved from the idolatrous influences of the heathen around them in order to fulfill his salvation promises. His extensive levitical law code served that purpose, as well as painting pictures of the Messiah and pointed ahead to his arrival and work. Yet, God also said in the Old Testament, “For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings” (Hosea 6:6), teaching his people not to blindly follow the road of legalism, while at the same time desiring faithfulness to his Word.

This is what we face in applying the doctrine of church fellowship: walking the road of evangelical Lutheran practice without running into the stone wall of legalism or falling into the

¹ Expounding on the doctrinal principles of church fellowship is beyond the scope of this paper. For a review, see Professor Brug’s *People’s Bible Teachings* book on church fellowship and the anthology *Essays on Church Fellowship*, as well as the WLS on-line essay file.

² Worship forms, evangelism methods, vestments, church architecture, and congregational organization are just a few examples.

³ For a more extensive treatment of this thought, see Professor Daniel Deutschlander’s paper, “Hold On... to the Narrow Lutheran Middle,” available on the WLS on-line essay file.

canyon of license. Paul wrote, “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery” (Galatians 5:1). In the same letter he also wrote, “You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love” (Galatians 5:13). Legalism versus license. How do we walk the narrow middle road in practicing church fellowship? Can finding this narrow middle road help us in determining what is to be included and not included in joint expressions of faith?

That Christ and his apostles were concerned about understanding and evangelically applying the principles of church fellowship is evident. Jesus warns against false prophets on more than one occasion.⁴ He says that his disciples will hold on to his teaching in order to know the only truth⁵ and teach everything he has commanded.⁶ That truth is the only way to heaven.⁷ He spoke these words to future missionaries and even in connection with the Great Commission. So the “straw man” idea that proper practice of church fellowship and zealous mission work are mutually exclusive entities does not hold biblical water.

In fact, the writings of the apostles bear this out. Paul wrote his letter to the Romans because he wanted to make sure that the church in Rome was on the same doctrinal page as he was. He wanted to use Rome as his base of operations to take the gospel further west. Carrying out mission work is a joint expression of faith. Doctrinal unity was necessary before Paul and the Roman Christians could work together in this endeavor. John expresses similar views in his second letter when he talks about supporting traveling missionaries.⁸ To support a false teaching missionary would be to share in his work of proclaiming doctrinal errors. Paul’s emphasis on the faithfulness to the Word in the pastoral epistles and John’s purpose for writing his first letter – “... that you also may have fellowship with us” (1 John 1:3) – solidify the connection between doctrinal unity and joint expressions of faith.

Our synod’s “Theses on Church Fellowship” give this definition of church fellowship. “Church fellowship is every joint expression, manifestation, and demonstration of the common faith in which Christians on the basis of their confession find themselves to be united with one another.”⁹ The assignment given for this paper is to deal with the question: what is a joint expression of faith? Do all joint expressions of faith fall under the doctrine of church fellowship? Are there situations where some limited cooperation might be possible? Does the tension between legalism and license leave some opening for “cooperation in externals”? God willing, this paper will provide, if not the answers for every last situation imaginable, at least some points for brotherly discussion and consideration.

⁴ Matthew 7:15; Matthew 24:4-5,10-11

⁵ John 8:31-32

⁶ Matthew 28:19

⁷ John 14:6

⁸ 2 John 10-11

⁹ *Doctrinal Statements of the WELS*, pg 29.

Joint Expressions of Faith: Proclaiming the Gospel

Proclamation of the gospel is the natural response of faith in Christ. When someone's life has been turned around by the good news of Jesus' saving work, we want to open our lips "to declare [God's] praise" (Psalm 51:15). When a Christian understands the new identity that God has given in baptism – that we are chosen by God, royal priests, holy and forgiven children of God – a Christian will "declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light" (1 Peter 2:9). Declaring God's praises is declaring why God is to be praised. In other words, it is proclaiming the gospel. In speech or song or reception of Lord's Supper, we are proclaiming the good news of Christ – who he is and what he has done for us.

The early Christians understood that an expression of faith, if not the chief expression of faith, is to proclaim the gospel together. They knew this was what God wanted them to do. In the days after Pentecost, the believers "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer" (Acts 2:42). They studied and heard the gospel together. They gathered to declare the gospel in formal worship services. They received Lord's Supper together.¹⁰ And they prayed together as part of their public worship.¹¹ The proclamation of the gospel was the chief expression of their faith. "Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ" (Acts 5:42).

This was the regular practice of Christians in the decades to follow and outside of Jerusalem. We have evidence from the other writings of the New Testament. "Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Ephesians 5:19-20). What were they speaking to one another? The good news of God's salvation proclaimed in Old and New Testament hymns. For what did they give thanks to God? Everything he accomplished for them in Christ. How did they give thanks? "In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ," or the revelation of Jesus Christ – who he is and what he has done. Paul expressed similar thoughts in another letter. "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God" (Colossians 3:16). Again, notice the emphasis on the gospel and how they proclaimed the gospel together. The writer to the Hebrews encourages, "Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching" (Hebrews 10:25). What is the most encouraging thing we can do for our fellow Christians? Remind them of God's forgiving love in Christ and confess our common faith together.

So what is the point of mentioning all of this? Our proclamation of the gospel together – whether it is spoken, sung or received in public worship, or taught in schools, or proclaimed in mission work – is a joint expression of our faith. Since we proclaim the gospel together as Christians, the principles of church fellowship apply. Paul first letter to the Corinthians provides an illustration of this. There were divisions in the congregation (1 Corinthians 1:10-17). There

¹⁰ This author takes the interpretation that "breaking of bread" refers to the Sacrament of the Altar.

¹¹ The Greek literally says "the prayers." It's entirely possible that this is referring to prescribed prayers that would have been most likely adapted from the synagogue worship – an early form of formal liturgy.

were doctrinal problems (teaching about Lord's Supper and the resurrection). There were disruptions in their unity. This was causing a lack of fellowship in their proclamation of the gospel among each other and in the community (see Paul's discourse in 1 Corinthians 3). They were not expressing the true unity they should have been enjoying in their public worship and the Lord's Supper. Doctrinal division and a lack of Christian love were to blame. Paul wrote his first letter to the Corinthians in order to diagnose their problem and provide solutions and encouragement to restore their unity.

When it comes to applying the principles of fellowship to our worship practices, this is something to keep in mind. Those who preach the gospel publicly need to share our public confession. But that does not just include those who are in the pulpit. Public readers of the gospel and public singers of the gospel are included in this application. Since the music carries the gospel, those who accompany soloists also should share our public confession. While saying "no" to soloists and musicians outside of our fellowship is one of the less enjoyable aspects of planning weddings and funerals, it is a proper application of the principles of church fellowship. To give in for the sake of peace and expediency would be falling into the canyon of license. Taking the time to patiently explain that singing the Word is also jointly expressing our unity of faith can avoid the stone wall of legalism.

While we are primarily receiving forgiveness of our sins and strengthening of our faith in Lord's Supper, we are also making a joint expression of our faith by proclaiming the gospel. "For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Corinthians 11:26). Receiving Holy Communion together is a unique occurrence in a society where we often seem divided by age, gender, race, social standing or belief. Kneeling shoulder to shoulder before the Lord's altar might be the teenager and the ninety-year-old; the wealthy stockbroker and the janitor; the Asian-American and the Hispanic-American. But there is a oneness and unity. By taking Communion together, we are expressing our common faith in Jesus – who he is and what he has done for us.¹² "Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ?" (1 Corinthians 10:16). While the biblical practice of close(d) communion can have the appearance of a hindrance to the growth of a church, it is rather a beautiful expression of unity we have as a body of believers.¹³ We confess our common faith. This is something to be cherished and practiced.

The proclamation of the gospel takes place outside of public worship. It is carried out in our Christian homes, our Lutheran schools, in the workplace, in social situations, and in the mission fields. Obviously, many of the opportunities we have to express our faith by proclaiming the gospel do not involve doing so jointly. I may share Christ with a parent after a soccer game or a hurting friend or a grieving relative. But when we are doing these things together, then we have to apply the biblical principles of church fellowship.

¹² The Lord's Supper is such a beautiful expression of who Christ is – true man; true God – and what he has done for us – given his body; shed his blood for our sins – and what this means for us – "for the forgiveness of sins."

¹³ My experience in San Diego of carefully and kindly explaining the biblical practice of close(d) communion – how it is an expression of unity and we do not want anyone to express that unity dishonestly or ignorantly – almost invariably produced a respect of our biblical practice.

The early church again gives evidence of the need for doctrinal unity among those who carry out mission work together. The Jerusalem Council (Acts 15) was called precisely because some missionaries from one congregation were proclaiming a gospel different from what the others were doing. There needed to be unity, if they were going to work together. Since the Judaizers were proclaiming errors, they needed to be corrected. Again, Paul's letters, especially Romans, point to the need of a common confession of faith if gospel proclamation was to take place together. Martin Franzmann summarizes, "What [Paul] looked for and strove for in a church that was to be his base in the West was a full and thoroughgoing common understanding of the Gospel."¹⁴ John writes about the importance of practicing proper fellowship principles in the support of mission work in two of his letters.

Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God; whoever continues in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take him into your house or welcome him. Anyone who welcomes him shares in his wicked work. (2 John 9-11)

Dear friend, you are faithful in what you are doing for the brothers, even though they are strangers to you. They have told the church about your love. You will do well to send them on their way in a manner worthy of God. It was for the sake of the Name that they went out, receiving no help from the pagans. We ought therefore to show hospitality to such men so that we may work together for the truth. (3 John 5-8)

With this strong biblical support, we can conclude that it is not a legalistic application of fellowship principles to refrain from carrying out mission work with those who do not share our biblical confession. To do otherwise would be an example of license. To do otherwise would not be "work[ing] together for the truth" because we would be advocating the false doctrine of those who "cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned" (Romans 16:17). The divisions and obstacles of false teachings invariably attack the core of the Bible – justification by faith, the gospel. We can only jointly proclaim the gospel with those who share our confession of the truth.

Our synod illustrated a proper understanding of this when it chose some of the first mission fields. Both the Apache field and the fields in Zambia and Malawi were chosen because there were no other Christian missionaries working in those areas. While that would seem to be obvious because that would mean less competition, it would also eliminate the temptations isolated foreign missionaries might feel to work together with any other Christian, regardless of fellowship principles.¹⁵

The same principles are applied in proclaiming the gospel in the area of Christian education. The early church does not provide us with any concrete examples, although the letters of Paul are often educational in nature. The importance of the Word being faithfully and purely taught is especially emphasized in the pastoral epistles to Timothy and Titus.

¹⁴ Franzmann, pg 17.

¹⁵ Pastor Frederick Tiefel's observations of LCMS missionaries in Japan demonstrating lax fellowship practices led him to depart with his mission work in the late 1950's and eventually join the CLC (*The Wisconsin Synod Lutherans*, pg 225ff).

Jesus' command to teach everything he has commanded implies that when we jointly teach the Word to children, we will have to agree on what we are teaching. Aberrations in teachings about creation, baptism or Holy Communion are not insignificant enough for us to ignore. Joint work in the education of children in the Word demands an agreement in what the Word teaches.¹⁶

With attendance in our schools of non-member children, both prospects and those with church homes, the principles of fellowship will need to be applied. But care must be taken that we walk the narrow road between legalism and license. We cannot water down what we teach in the classroom and to parents for the sake of having the desks filled and the tuition income increased. The expectations we have of families in our schools, both member and non-member, need to have a certain amount of consistency. We should not be afraid of demanding that non-member parents attend a Bible Information Class. We should not hesitate to expect non-member students in our catechism classes to recite memory work and take sermon reports. Questions arise when it comes to singing in church and expectations in that regard. Such questions have been addressed by other authors in a more complete fashion than is the assignment of this paper.¹⁷ For the sake of the Word, both preserving it in its truth and purity and a desire to give opportunity to faithfully proclaim it, we will want to carefully walk the road between legalism and license. For the sake of our brothers in the ministry, we will want to be slow to judge the actions of others and quick to put the best construction on applications where there might be some disagreement, while there is still agreement on the principles. Often local situations might be different.

While prayer is a fruit of faith and a natural response to the proclamation of the gospel, it can also be a joint expression of faith. In fact, prayer and the proclamation of the gospel are like two parts of a conversation. God speaks to us in his Word, communicating his grace and forgiveness in the gospel. He invites us to speak to him in prayer, communicating our gratitude, praise and petitions. Prayer is often done alone. We pray as part of our personal, private devotional life. Christians also pray together. When Christians pray together, prayer becomes a joint expression of faith. The principles of church fellowship now apply. How we apply those principles again must be done walking the narrow middle road between legalism and license. To delve into this topic further is also beyond the scope of this paper, but many other authors have treated the subject of prayer fellowship.¹⁸

Before we move on, it does us well to keep in mind several of our synod's "Theses on Church Fellowship."

3. Faith as spiritual life invariably expresses itself in activity which is spiritual in nature, yet outwardly manifest, e.g., in the use of the means of grace, in prayer, in praise and worship, in appreciative use of the "gifts" of the Lord to the Church, in Christian testimony, in furthering the cause of the gospel, and in deeds of

¹⁶ Many LCMS churches do not seem to understand the implications and problems of working with ELCA church to operate Lutheran elementary and high schools.

¹⁷ Professor Brug's *Church Fellowship: Working Together for the Truth* is probably the most extensive. A perusal of the WLS on-line essay file will produce a number of essays.

¹⁸ Again, note Professor Brug's *Church Fellowship: Working Together for the Truth*; also Professor em. Armin Schuetze's essay "Joining Together in Prayer and the Lord's Supper," and J. P. Meyer's "Prayer Fellowship," both included in the NPH publication *Essays on Church Fellowship*. Professor Schuetze's examples of praying in private situation are especially informative (pg 489ff).

- Christian love. Jn 8:47; Gal 4:6; Eph 4:11-14; Ac 4:20; 2 Co 4:13; 1 Pe 2:9; Gal 2:9; 5:6.
4. It is God the Holy Ghost who leads us to express and manifest in activity the faith which He works and sustains in our hearts through the gospel. Gal 4:6; Jn 15:26,27; 7:38,39; Ac 1:8; Eph 2:10.
 5. Through the bond of faith in which He unites us with all Christians, the Holy Spirit also leads us to express and manifest our faith jointly with fellow Christians according to opportunity: as smaller and larger groups, Ac 1:14,15; 2:41-47; Gal 2:9; as congregations with other congregations, Ac 15; 1 Th 4:9,10; 2 Co 8:1,2,18,19; 9:2. (Before God every activity of our faith is at the same time fellowship activity in the communion of saints. 1 Co 12; Eph 4:1-16; Ro 12:1-8; 2 Ti 2:19.)
 6. We may classify these joint expressions of faith in various ways according to the particular realm of activity in which they occur, e.g., pulpit fellowship; altar fellowship; prayer fellowship; fellowship in worship; fellowship in church work, in missions, in Christian education, and in Christian charity. Yet insofar as they are joint expressions of faith, they are all essentially one and the same thing and are all properly covered by a common designation, namely, church fellowship. Church fellowship should therefore be treated as a unit concept, covering every joint expression, manifestation, and demonstration of a common faith. Hence, Scripture can give the general admonition “avoid them” when church fellowship is to cease (Ro 16:17). Hence, Scripture sees an expression of church fellowship also in giving the right hand of fellowship (Gal 2:9) and in greeting one another with the fraternal kiss (Ro 16:16); on the other hand, it points out that a withholding of church fellowship may also be indicated by not extending a fraternal welcome to errorists and by not bidding them Godspeed (2 Jn 10,11; cf. 3 Jn 5-8).¹⁹

Joint Expressions of Faith: Showing Christian Love Together

Showing Christian love to others is also a natural expression of our faith. “Love your neighbor as yourself” is that simple summary. On more than one occasion, Jesus emphasized that faith showed itself in action. “By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” (John 13:35). The apostolic writings state the same truths and encouragement. John’s letters are especially full of such encouragements. “If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth” (1 John 3:17-18). “We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother” (1 John 4:19-21).²⁰ It is significant that a letter devoted to building up the fellowship of believers

¹⁹ *Doctrinal Statements of the WELS*, pg 29-30.

²⁰ It is noteworthy that in the letters of Paul, Peter and John encouragements to sanctification are intertwined with the proclamation of the gospel. Justification produces sanctification. Faith comes before works. But faith always produces works of love (see James 2:17-18).

would also contain so many exhortations to expressing Christian love. Christians who confess the truth together will want to show their faith together in love.

Christians express their faith through love without this necessarily being a joint activity. That is obvious in the daily life of the believer. In the home, at work, school or social situations, Christian love will be evident in the lives of God's people. But as a body of believers, Christians also have the desire to express their Christian love together. The primary way Christians show their love for others together is through the proclamation of the gospel. Our first concern is for the souls of our neighbors. The only cure for what troubles souls is the gospel of Jesus.

But the hearts of God's people also want to help those who have material, physical, emotional, mental and psychological needs. The gospel remains always the one thing needful (Luke 10:42). But showing Christian love in physical and materials ways can also be a joint expression of faith.²¹

The early Christian church again gives us examples. Not only did the believers join together to proclaim the gospel, but "selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need" (Acts 2:45). Showing Christian love in acts of charity was part of their joint expression of faith. Was it the chief expression? No, that remained the proclamation of the gospel. In fact, when the charity work started infringing on the time the apostles had to devote to proclaiming the gospel, other arrangements were made. The church wanted to continue expressing their Christian love. So they chose men "who were known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom" (Acts 6:3) to take responsibility for that area of the church's work. The fact that they needed to be spiritually qualified says something about the spiritual nature of "waiting on tables." Because the church was taking on this activity of Christian love, this was a joint expression of faith. We are not told they carried out this work with the local synagogues in order to be more efficient or in an effort to break down theological barriers.

Likewise, when Paul was giving instructions to the Corinthian congregation about the collection for the church in Jerusalem, he related that the Macedonian Christians "urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints" (2 Corinthians 8:4). This charitable action to help the famine-stricken believers in Jerusalem was a joint expression of faith. God's people from various places were joining together to show their Christian love.

The principles of church fellowship need to be applied when we are jointly expressing our faith together, even in things that might appear "external," like charity work. Paul's emphasis that the charity work he was spearheading was a "sharing," as well as the concerns of the Jerusalem church that the administrators of their charitable work have spiritual qualifications, provide us with guidance in this area. Our synod's actions show this to be true as well. There is a WELS Committee on Relief, a WELS Humanitarian Aid Committee, Builders for Christ, and WELS Lutherans for Life. Other religious organizations exist that do the same things that our synod-affiliated groups do in the area of jointly expressing Christian love. The opportunity to participate with these organizations would be readily available. But our synod has properly

²¹ It can also serve the proclamation of the gospel as can be seen in the role humanitarian aid plays in some world mission fields.

applied the scriptural principles of church fellowship by establishing avenues for us who are united in faith and confession to express our Christian love.

The narrow middle road between legalism and license is fairly easy to see in most of these situations, as far as the larger church body is concerned. But what about individual believers? Individual Christians can engage in charitable work in the community with other people without their actions being a joint expression of faith. For example, a Christian might volunteer at the local hospital or community center. A Christian might belong to the Rotary Club or Lion's Club, organizations which engage in charitable work in the community. Is the Christian expressing his/her faith through Christian love? Certainly. Is he/she doing this with other people, even other Christians? Yes. Is this a joint expression of faith? No. The intent in those situations is not a joint expression of faith. Lyle Lange provides an excellent summary of these thoughts.

There are civic or community organizations that do not have religion as an integral part of their function. Christians may join these organizations in order to serve their nation or community. Sometimes, some of these organizations may bring a religious element into their functions. It is important to note if this is part of a religious philosophy of the organization or not. If the religious element is incidental to the organization, we will not participate in the objectionable religious rite. We may still remain a member of the organization. If the organization does adopt a religious philosophy contrary to Scripture, we will separate ourselves from it.²²

In some situations, however, we do need to exercise caution. A recent example is "Habitat for Humanity," and Thrivent's financial support of this service organization. Habitat for Humanity is a well-known organization which has a noble purpose.

Habitat for Humanity International is a nonprofit, ecumenical Christian organization dedicated to eliminating substandard housing and homelessness worldwide and to making adequate, affordable shelter a matter of conscience and action. Habitat is founded on the conviction that every man, woman and child should have a simple, decent, affordable place to live in dignity and safety.²³

Habitat for Humanity has constructed over 225,000 homes for the poor and homeless around the world. As noted in its purpose statement, it is a "nonprofit, ecumenical Christian organization." Religion is a stated part of the organization. Devotions and prayers are not uncommon on the building sites. The stated theology of Habitat for Humanity, referred to as the "theology of the hammer," should raise eyebrows among confessional Lutherans. "Habitat is a partnership founded on common ground—bridging theological differences by putting love into action."²⁴ A disregard for doctrine is part of Habitat's theology.

Obviously, we cannot police our members' every action. But we can issue cautions in getting actively involved in this kind of charitable work. Devotions and prayers would invite false fellowship without unity of confession. Financial support and participation would give the

²² Lange, pg 566. The chapter on church fellowship is an excellent brief overview of the scriptural principles.

²³ www.habitat.org

²⁴ www.habitat.org

impression of tolerating false teaching. Certainly, as a church and church body, active involvement, promotion and support of Habitat for Humanity would be an example of falling into the canyon of license in putting the principles of fellowship into practice.

The WELS Conference of Presidents recognized this. The concern especially arose when Thrivent Financial for Lutherans began publicizing its support of Habitat for Humanity. Since many WELS members and churches participate in Thrivent activities, the assumption was that there would be nothing wrong with expressing our faith by participating in the charity work of Habitat for Humanity. The COP wisely and evangelically counseled against such participation because it would involve a joint expression of faith with Christians who do not share our confession.

- WHEREAS 1) Thrivent Financial for Lutherans has co-branded themselves with Habitat for Humanity in connection with their *Thrivent Builds* program, and
- WHEREAS 2) Habitat for Humanity is an organization that promotes false ecumenism even terming its mission the Theology of the Hammer, and
- WHEREAS 3) The Thrivent Financial for Lutherans Web site states, “While we are proud to support Lutheranism through our members and through our benevolent efforts, we are not a church,” and
- WHEREAS 4) participation by WELS congregations and their members in the *Thrivent Builds* program will involve them in unionistic activities, therefore be it
- Resolved, a) that we advise WELS congregations and their members not be involved in the *Thrivent Builds* program, and be it further
- Resolved b) That we encourage Thrivent Financial for Lutherans, as a corporation, to honor its stated purpose and remain separate from religious involvement including Habitat for Humanity.²⁵

Swinging a hammer to help build a house with other Christians is not always a joint expression of faith. For example, one could do this through a secular organization. The Christian is expressing his faith through an act of kindness. But when it is done with other Christians for the expressed purpose of fostering fellowship with no concern for doctrinal agreement, then this is something confessional Lutheran need to avoid, so we do not give a false confession of unity where none really exists.

“Cooperation in Externals”

This brings us to the issue of “cooperation in externals.” This phrase has historical usage that should be reviewed. It was a phrase used in the intersynodical debates on church fellowship as a loophole to carry out cooperative work with church bodies where fellowship had not been

²⁵ Minutes of October, 2005 COP meeting.

established on a common confession of faith. It was a phrase with an ecumenical flavor. Professor George Lillegard observed:

In recent years, however, the main effort of the unionists has been to bring about cooperation in so-called “externals” of church work. Some mean by this all the activities of the church—its missionary, educational, and charitable work. They believe it possible to cooperate in these fields of work, even though their teachings and confessions differ on many points. Others seek to limit their “cooperation in externals” to such matters as do not affect or concern their teachings or the strictly “spiritual side” of the Christian work. This form of cooperation has captured practically all the churches today and threatens also the peace and unity of the Synodical Conference. For in many parts of our country members of the Synodical Conference are cooperating with errorists in various ways, not only defending this on the ground that it is only the “externals” of their church work that are affected, but also expressing the hope that they in this manner can bring about the long-desired unity of the churches.²⁶

Examples of “cooperation in externals” were the construction and operation of service centers at military bases for use by the LCMS and the liberal National Lutheran Council; the establishment of a society called “Lutheran Men in America,” which included Missouri Synod groups and other men’s groups of Lutheran church bodies not in fellowship with the Synodical Conference; the Walther League (LCMS youth organization) and the Luther Leagues (ALC, Augustana Synod, ULC, etc.) began meeting to discuss common problems. Assurances were given that “safeguards” were in place to keep these examples of “cooperation in externals” truly external.

The author of the pamphlet, “Cooperation in Externals,” stated the reaction and concerns of the WELS and others in the Synodical Conference.

Our synod, together with other thoughtful Lutherans, had reason to become more and more alarmed as Lutherans of different persuasions established increasingly familiar relationship with each other. They knew that “safeguards” were being set up, but in spite of them, they foresaw real dangers in such wholesale contacts of Lutherans not in pulpit and altar fellowship. The distance between cooperation in “externals” and in joint spiritual work was being narrowed to perilous closeness.²⁷

Their concerns about the dangers proved to be correct. An “All-Lutheran Youth Conference” was held at Valparaiso in 1948. Delegates of both the Walther League and assorted Luther Leagues attended. “They worshiped and prayed together as if they were doctrinally and confessionally one.”²⁸ Similar problems occurred in other areas of joint charitable work and military chaplaincy. What often might have been seen as “cooperation in externals” did not always turn out that way. What was often portrayed as “cooperation in externals” was not always intended that way.

²⁶ *Essays on Church Fellowship*, pg 180.

²⁷ *Essay on Church Fellowship*, pg 382.

²⁸ *Essays on Church Fellowship*, pg 383.

The fact that our synod continues to refrain from participating in the military chaplaincy program stems from the dangers toward unionism that are inherent. The military chaplain has no choice but to serve the spiritual needs of Christians of all denominations in his unit (and sometimes even non-Christians). This can result in serving Holy Communion to those who do not believe in the real presence of our Savior's body and blood. Likewise, it would not be a matter of "cooperation in externals" to join with the Salvation Army or the local Catholic church to operate a thrift store or food bank. While we can direct individuals in need to those institutions, to work together in supporting or funding such charity work would be a joint expression of faith. It would give the impression that doctrinal differences are no big deal.

At the same time, walking the narrow middle road between legalism and license, our synod has understood that "cooperation in externals" can and does exist. The 1950's pamphlet, "Cooperation in Externals," pointed out some examples where true cooperation might take place.

On the other hand, we do not go so far as to insist that every kind of intersynodical cooperation among Lutherans of other synods must be ruled out. We have employed a non-Synodical Conference Lutheran welfare organization in Pennsylvania to distribute clothing to war sufferers in Europe. A congregation of our synod and a congregation of the American Lutheran Church could own a burial plot jointly and share the responsibility for its upkeep. As American citizens, we could together with other Lutherans defend the religious rights, which we have under the Constitution, and oppose legislation that would discriminate against our Lutheran churches and schools. Such cooperation does not involve pulpit and altar fellowship. It is not joint gospel work. In such "externals," all of them purely business arrangements or undertakings in defense of our civic rights, we may cooperate if need be.²⁹

A concrete example from WELS history is the story of Wisconsin's Bennett Law of 1890 that, among other things, demanded that all public and private schools teach all subjects in English. German was the predominant language in Wisconsin Synod homes, churches and schools at that time. The WELS stood together with other denominations, including the Roman Catholic Church, to oppose this legislation³⁰ on the grounds that it was a violation of First Amendment rights and the separation of church and state. In these examples from history, the working together is limited to truly outward matters. The gospel is not being proclaimed jointly. No impression of unity is intended or given. While one could argue that some involved might see it as a joint exercise of faith and might even look upon such cooperation as another step along the path of unity in the church, the same could be said about joining other outward organizations like the Rotary Club. There are Christians in those organizations. But they are not intentionally expressing their faith jointly, as though they were one in faith. Church bodies are not expressing unity.

True "cooperation in externals" can be found today. There are opportunities where we can avoid the wall of legalism. When it comes to serving military personnel, I recall using the base chapel at Warner-Robbins Air Force Base to conduct a worship service for WELS/ELS families during my vicar year in Georgia. Our current civilian chaplains who serve our WELS military

²⁹ *Essays on Church Fellowship*, pg 381.

³⁰ *The Wisconsin Synod Lutherans*, pg 81ff.

personnel need to cooperate in some ways with the military chaplains in order to contact and meet with our servicemen and women. This is especially the case on bases in war zones.

When a home mission is in its earliest stage, the search for a worship space sometimes leads to the local Seventh Day Adventist church building. To make use of such a building is not a joint expression of faith. It is merely a business arrangement.³¹ George Lillegard makes this point.

Similarly, a Lutheran congregation may rent the church building of another denomination, or a Lodge Hall, without thereby becoming guilty of unionism. The connection with the sect or lodge is truly “external.” We may also furnish other churches with our statistics and procure copies of their statistics for our own use, “cooperating” with them to that extent, without thereby “fellowshipping” them in any manner. We could do the same for the State or for any secular organization. There may be instances in connection with the work of charities or missions where we have to deal with the State, and where our interests would be identical with those of all other churches, so that we could consult with them or “cooperate” with them in deciding upon our course.³²

I have run into some similar situations recently. Our congregation collects food for the Lakeland Community Food Bank. Most of the other churches in the community also contribute. Our Lutheran Girl Pioneers help with sorting and stocking shelves a couple of times a year. Is this true “cooperation in externals” or a joint expression of faith? If the food bank was operated under the auspices of the local ministerial association with the intent of showing how wonderful it is that all the local churches are working together in this way, then it would cease being “cooperation in externals.” But because it is a community matter where secular organizations also participate and it is organized by the local community center and town government, it is not a joint expression of faith. This is true even though the Christians who do contribute to the food bank are expressing their faith.

Another example was recently brought to my attention. Every month in the Minocqua area a dinner is held for senior citizens at a very minimal charge. Most of the local churches are on a rotation to serve the meal and offer their buildings as locations for the meals. One of my members who has attended these meals noticed that Trinity was conspicuously absent. She asked why. After telling her that I had received no information about these meals, my first question was whether this was a community event or a church event. In other words, I wanted to know the organizing group behind these meals. Was this something originating with the other churches as a joint ecumenical endeavor? Or were there other community organizations involved and these other churches were simply taking their turn as another member of the community which happened to have a large meeting room and a sizable kitchen? When I was told that this was a community event and not church organized, I asked her to find out more

³¹ The church I served during my vicar year sold their church building to a Presbyterian church a few years after I left. Their intention was to relocate to a larger property. Before their building was ready, the Presbyterian congregation wanted to begin using their newly purchased buildings. An arrangement was made to share the building for a short time. While certainly awkward and, I’m sure, uncomfortable at times, this could be labeled “cooperation in externals.”

³² *Essays on Church Fellowship*, pg 195.

information. This is something we could get involved in (provided willing volunteers step forward to prepare and serve the meals). Sometimes, we might feel the easier course is to set up a rule that prohibits all areas of cooperation. But we might deprive ourselves of some opportunities to serve our community with acts of love. And the positive experience that people have from coming to our facility or meeting our members in these situations might raise their curiosity and create a positive impression of our church in the community.³³

The situation of cooperating in defending our civil rights, which has happened in our synod's history, is something that may be needed again in the near future. With the aggressiveness of liberal politicians and organizations in some states pushing for laws that would prohibit schools and churches from publicly stating that homosexuality is a sin, we might find the need to work together with Christians in other denominations to oppose such legislation on the grounds of the First Amendment.³⁴ While all involved would certainly profess to the same biblical truth regarding homosexuality as a sin, we would not be all sharing the same confession of faith, and we would not be expressing unity in doctrine. Our work together would not be a joint expression of faith, even though the actions we would be taking as Christian citizens would be an expression of our faith. We would not be expressing our faith, but a common position on a legislative and political matter.

A final example of what could fall under the broader heading of "cooperation in externals" would be the inviting of speakers and presenters outside of our fellowship to conferences, workshops or events. While this issue has been treated extensively by other essays,³⁵ it provides an example of the need to walk the narrow middle road between legalism and license. On the one hand, we cannot say that every invitation of every outside speaker is a violation of church fellowship principles. Hearing an expert impart information on Hebrew manuscripts, organ registration or Lutheran history is not a joint expression of fellowship. But that does not mean that any and every outside speaker should be invited. Some speakers have a well-known reputation for false doctrine that would preclude an invitation. The presence of such a speaker at a WELS-sponsored event would give the impression of acceptance and oneness with that person's theology and confession, which is known to cause divisions. Likewise, what a speaker is addressing needs to be taken into consideration. Is doctrine their topic? Are they speaking about church methods and practices that are inherently tied to theology, such as worship and evangelism? By inviting and listening to those who have a different confession regarding the work of the Holy Spirit and the means of grace, are we not implicitly stating that their false theology is acceptable? What message are we sending to these errorists? Also, what offense might be given to our fellow brothers and sisters in our fellowship, as well as those outside of our fellowship who might be looking to the WELS as a bastion of Lutheran confessionalism?

These examples, I think, serve to show how we can walk the narrow Lutheran middle road between legalism and license as we apply the fellowship principles in areas outside of proclaiming the gospel. When it comes to proclaiming the gospel, we can see the applications

³³ The reminder is in place that the mission of the church must always remain to proclaim the gospel and administer the sacraments, not to turn into a religious soup kitchen.

³⁴ Several attempts have been defeated in the California legislature in recent years.

³⁵ Most notably, "The Framework of Fellowship," by Pastor Jeffrey Holtan, presented to this conference and the AZ-CA district pastors' conference.

much clearer. It is in other areas that this can prove difficult. We can start to question our actions and wonder if we are doing the right thing. It can be easier to just say “no” to everything, or “yes” to everything. George Lillegard offered a good principle to follow. “The test of so-called externals in church work is whether they may properly be carried on with all manner of churches and religious or civic organizations”³⁶ If what we are doing could be done with other Lutherans, Catholics, or even Mormons or atheists, then it is truly external. If the religious belief does not matter, then it is external.

Conclusion

A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none.

A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.³⁷

Luther’s seemingly contradictory statements help us understand the narrow middle road between legalism and license. The gospel of Jesus gives us freedom – freedom from sin because we have forgiveness in the blood of the Lamb; freedom from the curse of the law because Jesus suffered the punishment in our place;³⁸ freedom from the burden of legalism because Jesus nailed the requirements of law to the cross;³⁹ freedom to live as God’s children in service to our Savior and our neighbor; freedom to enjoy the bliss of eternal life in heaven. At the same time, the gospel enslaves us. We are bound to serve our Lord and others in love. We are slaves to the Word which gave us freedom and life.

Do you see where the doctrine of fellowship fits into this paradox? Since every false teaching eventually strikes at the central teaching of justification by faith, the scriptural principles of church fellowship protect our faith and our outward confession of that one true faith. What we believe and what we speak has to be the pure gospel. The proper practice of church fellowship protects the center and source of our Christian freedom. Likewise, love for those caught in error will demand that we do not simply overlook false doctrine, which has the potential to damage and destroy faith. The loving actions we take in our joint expressions of faith are part of the slavery of love we exercise toward others.

How we live the doctrine of church fellowship in our activities as pastors and as a church can neither infringe on the gospel freedom we enjoy, nor give the impression that the pure truth of the gospel does not really matter. Legalism vs. license. Striving for the narrow middle road is a constant struggle because our sinful nature, this sinful world and the devil would have us careening off the road in either direction. We can only find it through an ongoing thorough study of Scripture.⁴⁰ We can only walk it with the Spirit’s help. When you find yourself unsure and confused, retreat again to your Bible. Reread the pastoral letters of Paul. Reflect on John’s letters. Learn from Paul’s instruction to the Corinthians. Immerse yourself in Romans.

³⁶ *Essays on Church Fellowship*, pg 194.

³⁷ LW 31:344.

³⁸ Galatians 3:13.

³⁹ Colossians 2:14.

⁴⁰ While the complaint might be made that the WELS has studied the doctrine of church fellowship *ad nauseum*, a wise professor reminded me that each generation needs to study these truths for themselves.

As we strive to walk this narrow middle road in applying the principles of church fellowship, let us remember again who we are. We are forgiven Christians, set free from the bondage of sin and the law at the waters of baptism when we were connected to Christ's death and resurrection. And we are evangelical Lutheran pastors who strive to feed the flock with the truth for the edification of their souls. To do so requires faithfulness to the Word and love for souls. Faithfulness to the Word and love for souls requires our evangelical Lutheran practice in the area of church fellowship. We join the confessors at Augsburg.

It is taught that we cannot obtain forgiveness of sin and righteousness before God through our merit, work, or satisfactions, but that we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God out of grace for Christ's sake through faith when we believe that Christ has suffered for us and that for his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us. For God will regard and reckon this faith as righteousness in his sight, as St. Paul says in Romans 3[:21–26] and 4[:5].⁴¹

To obtain such faith God instituted the office of preaching, giving the gospel and the sacraments. Through these, as through means, he gives the Holy Spirit who produces faith, where and when he wills, in those who hear the gospel. It teaches that we have a gracious God, not through our merit but through Christ's merit, when we so believe.⁴²

May our efforts to walk the narrow middle road in matters of fellowship always reflect pastoral concern for the souls of our members, a gospel-centered and gospel-focused ministry and a firm stand on Scripture as confessional Lutherans who love the truth of God's Word.

✠ SOLI DEO GLORIA ✠

⁴¹ AC IV

⁴² AC V

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