

## II. SYSTEMATIC STUDY OF THE DOCTRINE OF FELLOWSHIP

### A. Scriptural Definitions of the Terms

The central word to be considered in any study of fellowship is *κοινωνία*, the word usually translated "fellowship." *κοινωνία* and its relatives appear in the New Testament about 40 times. Bauer, Arndt and Gingrich lists four meanings for *κοινωνία*: 1) association, communion, fellowship, close relationship; 2) generosity, fellow-feeling, altruism; 3) sign of fellowship, proof of brotherly unity, gift, contribution; and 4) participation, sharing in something.

Bauer, Arndt and Gingrich lists the majority of New Testament occurrences of *κοινωνία* under meaning one. The New Testament says that the believer has a "fellowship" with God the Father (1 Jn 1:3); with God the Son (1 Jn 1:3, 1 Cor 1:9); with the Holy Spirit (2 Cor 13:14, Php 2:1); with the apostles (1 Jn 1:3) and with his fellow-believers (1 Jn 1:7). The passages make it clear that the Christian is not alone or isolated. He has been brought into a close relationship with the triune God and with all others who are part of God's family. Paul uses *κοινωνία* to describe his and Barnabas' being accepted fully by the apostles. "James, Peter and John, those reputed to be pillars, gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognized the grace given to me" (Ga 2:9). Much more than the hand of friendship and warm welcome was being extended. Paul and Barnabas were being accepted into the fellowship, and their ministry was being received as one with that of the apostles. It is clear that *κοινωνία* pictures the most intimate bond of unity and trust possible.

Bauer, Arndt, and Gingrich's second and third definitions spring

logically from the first. Closeness, unity, fellowship will express itself in gestures of "generosity, fellow-feeling and altruism" which give proof of the close bond that exists. We see this meaning especially clear in Hebrews 13:16 where *κοινωνίας* is linked with "the doing of good" (*εὐποιίας*): "Do not forget to do good and to share with others." Paul commends the Corinthians for their "generosity in sharing" (*ἀπλότητι τῆς κοινωνίας*-2 Cor 9:13).

*κοινωνία* also is used to describe "a participation in or sharing in" something, that is, having a part in it. This is shown most straightforwardly in 2 Corinthians 8:4: "They urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in (literally, the favor and the sharing in) this service to the saints." For Philemon Paul prayed that "his participation in the faith" may lead him to "a full understanding of the good things we have in Christ" (v.6).<sup>29</sup> Or again "the cup...is...a participation in the blood of Christ;...the bread...a participation in the body of Christ" (1 Cor 10:16).

The noun form, *κοινωνός*, sheds further light on the close relationship which this family of words describes. For the noun means companion, partner, sharer. Peter, James and John were "partners" in their fishing business (Lk 5:10). The Hebrew Christians "stood side by side with" those being persecuted (He 10:33). To eat at an idol's altar is to "be participants with demons" (1 Cor 10:20). A *κοινωνός* is not just a disinterested bystander or a neutral observer. Rather a *κοινωνός* takes part in the activities of his partners and shares responsibility for what they do.

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<sup>29</sup> The NIV seems to mistranslate here. It turns the passage into a mission emphasis. "I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith." *κοινωνία*, however, means not "sharing" but "sharing in." Paul is saying that Philemon's putting his faith into practice (i.e. participating in the faith) will result in greater blessings for Philemon himself.

The verb form, *κοινωνέω*, shows that a real closeness is the inherent meaning of this family of words. "Since the children have flesh and blood, he (Jesus) too shared in their humanity" (He 2:14). The Bible teaches clearly that Jesus totally took on humanity. There was nothing partial or halfway about his becoming a man. Or again "the gentiles have shared in the Jews' spiritual blessings" (Ro 15:27). Jews and gentiles equally enjoy God's blessings; there's nothing less than full equality here. Speaking of the false teachers, Jesus warns: "Anyone who welcomes him shares in his wicked works" (2 Jn 11). To encourage a false prophet makes you a partner with him, sharing responsibility for his false teaching.

After studying *κοινωνία* and its related forms, the LCMS CTCR concluded that the word has the root meaning "having part in a common thing."<sup>30</sup> Their document concludes: "*κοινωνία* most frequently appears in connection with the spiritual unity which exists in the body of Christ, but it is also used at times to refer to the attempts of Christians to manifest this unity externally." While these conclusions are fine as far as they go, I feel that the emphasis in *κοινωνία* is "the bond of closest unity" and "within that bond shared responsibility for one another's words and actions."

Now that we have made our study of *κοινωνία*, it must be stated that much (perhaps most) of what the Scripture says about the practice of fellowship is found in passages where the word is not even used. Our study will have to go far beyond those forty or so passages where *κοινωνία* and its derivatives occur.

We should also note that occasionally in our Bible translations the word fellowship occurs because of presuppositions the translators bring to the text. An example of this is the NIV translation "fellowship

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30 LCMS CTCR, The Nature and Implications of the Concept of Fellowship, p 8.

offering" for the Hebrew word **שְׁלָמִים**. The **שְׁלָמִים** is the only offering in the Old Testament which ended with part of the sacrifice being used for a communal meal. The offerer, his family and the priest ate it together. Could it be that the translators were influenced by the shallow idea that Christian fellowship is little more than Christian friendship when they agreed on the translation "fellowship offering" rather than the more literal and time-honored "peace offering"? According to the Gesenius Lexicon, peace and friendship are the meaning of **שְׁלָמִים**; fellowship is not suggested as a translation. In defense of the translation "fellowship offering" it should be said that, on the basis of the sacrifice, peace and fellowship with God and the other partakers of the meal is being demonstrated.

### Spiritual, Christian Fellowship

Spiritual fellowship is the term we use to describe that unity which is ours through faith in Jesus Christ. Membership in the Christian church is not established by nationality, natural descent, external ties to believers or any other human relationship. Membership in the church is in every case the result of faith in Christ. Consider the pertinent words in Acts. "The Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved" (2:47). "Many who heard the message believed, and the number of men grew to about five thousand" (4:4). "And all the believers used to meet together in Solomon's Colonnade....More and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number" (5:12-14).

In the Holy Christian Church, the invisible body of the saved, we are one with all true believers everywhere and of all ages. The saints share in a spiritual fellowship because equally and fully all are

citizens of the Kingdom of God and brothers and sisters in the family of God. Spiritual fellowship is not of human origin, and it reaches beyond the sphere of the earthly and human. It is produced by the Holy Spirit alone, working through the divine means of grace, the gospel in Word and sacraments. Simply put, spiritual fellowship equals membership in the Holy Christian Church.

The Apostle John was thrilled by the unmerited fellowship he and all believers now enjoyed with God. "How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God" (1 Jn 3:1). Paul describes the intimate bond which results for all believers because we are siblings in God's family. "There is one body and one spirit -- just as you were called to one hope when you were called -- one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all" (Eph 4:4-8).

The Bible uses numerous pictures to describe the closeness of this spiritual fellowship of which we are now a part. These pictures include:

A BODY -- "In Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others" (Ro 12:5);

A TEMPLE -- "We are the temple of the living God. As God has said, 'I will live with them'" (2 Cor 6:16);

A PRIESTHOOD AND A NATION -- "You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God" (1 Pe 2:9);

BRANCHES OF ONE VINE -- "I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit" (Jn 15:5);

ONE FLOCK UNDER ONE SHEPHERD -- "There shall be one flock and one shepherd" (Jn 10:16).

In this world the Holy Christian Church is invisible. This is the case because faith is invisible. Only God who searches the heart knows absolutely the members of his family. "The Lord knows those who are his" (2 Tm 2:19). Not until judgment day will God completely separate the members of his church from those who are not true members. "When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory" (Col 3:4).

The Holy Christian Church cannot be equated with any visible church. Walther described this truth well:

Whoever is in fellowship with Christ is in fellowship also with all those in whom Christ dwells, that is, with the invisible church. Accordingly he who restricts salvation to fellowship with any visible church therewith overthrows the article of the justification of a poor sinner in the sight of God by faith alone in Jesus Christ.<sup>31</sup>

Although the church is invisible, it is real. There are believers, and they are one. While we cannot now prepare an absolute and complete membership list for the church, we can tell where the church is. God works faith through the means of grace. Where these means are being used, the Holy Spirit is working. Therefore, we can be sure results are being produced for God promises: "It (my word) will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it" (Is 55:11). The Apology of the Augsburg Confession puts it this way:

Augustine says, "The question is, Where is the church? What, therefore, are we to do? Are we to seek it in our own words or in the words of its Head, our Lord Jesus Christ? I think that we ought to seek it in the words of him who is the Truth, and who knows his own body best."<sup>32</sup>

The church is to be found wherever the marks of the church, the pure Word and sacraments, are used. While we dare not minimize the harm done by false teaching, we must recognize the presence of believers also in heterodox church bodies. God calls his elect through

31 Francis Pieper, Christian Dogmatics, III, p 424-425.

32 Triglotta, p 227.

the means of grace, and it is only the purity of the Word and the right use of the sacraments that produces the results. God does not call people to faith through error or false practice. On the other hand, God's powerful means can produce results inspite of errors and misunderstandings -- as God sidesteps the false teaching and drives the truth home to the heart. "The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit" (Jn 3:8).

We should also note that those who gather around the Word and sacraments and even state their acceptance of them are not automatically the church. Hypocrites may be found among those who confess faith. Such hypocrites are not really part of the spiritual fellowship. God knows that, and when the time is right, he will expose them for the impostors they are.

God's desire for his church is that it be united in perfect harmony and oneness. That is what Paul writes about: "I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought" (1 Cor 1:10). The church will have perfect unity in Heaven. In this earth such harmony and unity remain an elusive goal, but one for which we are continually to strive.

#### Church/Confessional Fellowship

The church is invisible. Christians, however, do not have to wait until someday in Heaven before enjoying the closeness and unity. Members of the church desire to enjoy their fellowship already now.

Christians want to find proper, God-pleasing ways to be close in this world. Consider Paul's words in Colossians. It is true a Christian should sing with gratitude in his heart to God and should let the word of Christ dwell in him richly. Paul says, however, the Christian does that also in fellowship with others as members of one body, teaching and admonishing one another with all wisdom (3:15-16).

Church/confessional fellowship is the term we use to label expressions of our common faith and oneness in this world. Scripture encourages us to manifest the unity we have been given:

I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. (Eph 4:1-3)

Expressing our oneness then is not just something we instinctively desire; it is something God commands us to do. We manifest our oneness in fellowship activities with those who confess a common faith with us. Since we belong together as brothers in Christ, we show this by joining together in spiritual activities.

Church fellowship is the time-honored term for such joint displays of Christian oneness. The term has been subject to misunderstanding because some limit it to church body fellowship. They understand this term to be the formal declarations and activities of church bodies. The term is not meant to be limited in such a way, however. All individual Christians are part of the church. Church fellowship is meant to be all-inclusive, referring to every visible expression intended to demonstrate oneness in faith. Church fellowship refers to activities Christians do together for the purpose of showing or enjoying their common faith. This is in contrast to activities Christians may do at the same time and place acting as individuals. Prayer, for example,



can be either. When Christians pray the Lord's Prayer together in unison, they are showing that they recognize each other as brothers and sisters calling on their common father. The same Christians, on the other hand, could pray the Lord's Prayer silently and individually, intending by the vehicle of silent prayer to show they recognize that differences in confession separate them.

In recent years orthodox writers have tried to change the term used from church fellowship which can be misunderstood as shown above to the term confessional fellowship. This term means the same as church fellowship, namely every joint expression of the common faith in which Christians on the basis of their confession find themselves to be united. The term emphasizes something we will still need to demonstrate in this thesis, namely that fellowship in the world must be based on one's confession, i.e. what he says he believes.

We should also note that when talking about church fellowship we may be talking about either a status or an activity. Church fellowship is the status in which individuals or groups have mutually recognized one another as Christian brethren sharing a common confession and faith. Church fellowship is also the term used to label the activities through which they jointly express and demonstrate that common faith. In other words, we of the WELS are in church fellowship with the ELS (status), and therefore we practice church fellowship through pulpit exchanges and intercommunion (activity).

We may express fellowship through a whole realm of activities -- some of which are clearly fellowship activities, others of which are fellowship activities only when they are intended as such by the participants.

Some activities are clearly church fellowship. God works through the Holy Bible. "He chose to give us birth through the word of

truth" (Jas 1:18). "Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ" (Ro 10:17). In his high priestly prayer Jesus spoke about the Christians in generations to follow -- you and me. They will believe through the apostles' "message" (Jn 17:20). Through that Word he also strengthens our faith and understanding. That is why the Holy Spirit leads Christians to crave the Word. For it is a fact that "he who belongs to God hears what God says" (Jn 8:47). The Holy Spirit gathers the believers around the Word. Consider the early Christians who "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching" (Ac 2:42).

The gathering together of believers to hear the Word keeps us in fellowship with Jesus, for he promises: "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Mt 18:20). Gathering together around the Word is also an outward expression of faith. We come together on the basis of our trust in Jesus and love for his Word to be jointly enlightened and strengthened by the Word. We gather in worship to confess our faith and sing God's praises. Such hearing the Word requires joint faith. Those who deny the Word will not crave its milk and desire to grow thereby. Only believers can recognize and appreciate the Gospel for what it is, namely, the power of God unto salvation. Only believers can confess a God-pleasing faith. Only believers can rightly sing God's praises.

When the Christians gather for worship, they correctly intend it as both a corporate and a spiritual thing. Worship is corporate. We could listen to cassette tapes by orthodox preachers in the privacy of our own homes, but we gather at church and hear the Word together. Worship is spiritual. We gather with groups of people for all kinds of secular reasons -- perhaps for a card party or a political rally or a union meeting. In worship we gather for a spiritual purpose

-- to commune with God and his people. As we worship together, therefore, we are enjoying our special fellowship in the family of God. We can label this worship fellowship.

Worship is shown to be church fellowship also by the fact that Jesus said: "God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth" (Jn 4:24). God-pleasing worship must be built on a correct understanding and acceptance of what God declares to be truth. That requires a common confession of what is the truth by those who choose to worship together.

It follows logically and clearly that those whom the believers choose to guide such study of God's Word and lead their worship services must be individuals who share the true faith with them. "Test the spirits to see whether they are from God," John says, "for many false prophets have gone out into the world" (1 Jn 4:1). Paul writes: "Hold on to the good; avoid every kind of evil" (1 Th 5:21-22). And again: "I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them" (Ro 16:17). Christians will -- must -- withdraw from false preachers and teachers and have no fellowship with them. Those whom we call into our pulpits must certainly make a clear confession of the truth. Pulpit fellowship refers then to those individuals whom we recognize as qualified on the basis of their confession to preach the Word to us. Since the training, examination and certification of pastors is done by church bodies, pulpit fellowship usually means that the Christians of one church body recognize a valid fellowship with the Christians of another church body and as part of that accept one body's pastors in the pulpits of the other.

Altar fellowship refers to Christians expressing their oneness by

going to Holy Communion together. The term is more often used to mean welcoming of members of one church at the Lord's Table in another church. Scripture clearly demonstrates that altar fellowship is church fellowship in the fullest sense of the word. When Jesus instituted Communion, he did it in the privacy of the upper room. Only the disciples, his closest followers, were present and included in the sacrament. A careful study of the harmony of the four gospels gives evidence that even Judas, the hypocrite among the 12, had left the room by the time the Lord's Supper was served. The words of institution also make it clear that the sacrament is intended for those who are in fellowship with Jesus, for he says: "Do this in remembrance of me" (1 Cor 11:24). Obviously the sacrament was meant for those who knew, understood and believed what Jesus' body and blood meant for them. St. Paul emphasizes the fellowship aspect of the sacrament when he writes:

Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one loaf we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf.

Consider the people of Israel: Do I mean then that a sacrifice offered to an idol is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, but the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God, and I do not want you to be participants with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons too; you cannot have a part in both the Lord's table and the table of demons. (1 Cor 10:16-21)

Through the Lord's Supper we are in fellowship with Jesus and actually participate in his body and blood. But more, through the Lord's Supper we are in fellowship with all others who receive the sacrament "for we all partake of the one loaf." To join in pagan sacrifices puts you in fellowship with demons; to drink the cup of the Lord and be a part in his table brings you into fellowship with him. It follows then that Paul would become so upset when he heard that the Corinthians were using the sacrament in a way that caused divisions rather than increased unity (1 Cor 11:17-34).

Another privilege which is ours in the Holy Christian Church is the privilege of coming to our God in prayer. "The Father will give you whatever you ask in my name," Jesus promises (Jn 15:16). We come to God in Jesus' name, trusting that we will be heard and answered because of the redemption Jesus won. Saving faith in Jesus is essential to true prayer, because "through him we have access to the Father" (Eph 2:18). There is no reason for the almighty Creator of the universe, the holy God, to listen to weak sinful human beings like us -- except that Jesus has rescued us and brought us into God's family. Through the faith which the Holy Spirit has worked in us, God is no longer a frightening judge to us but rather "Abba, Father" --our dear dad in Heaven (Ga 4:6). Faith is a necessary ingredient in every true and God-pleasing prayer for "without faith it is impossible to please God" (He 11:6). Or as Jesus put it bluntly: "Apart from me you can do nothing" (Jn 15:5). When Christians join together with other Christians to pray to a common Father on the basis of a common trust in Jesus' name, that is prayer fellowship. Such prayer carries a wonderful promise: "I tell you that if two of you agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven" (Mt 18:19).

Prayer with those whom we do not share a common faith poses numerous problems which reinforce our conviction that such prayer is not God-pleasing. For example, common prayer without common confession requires that we only pray for things about which we agree, so all can say Amen. Erlandsson suggests the type of prayer that becomes necessary:

Thou, O Lord, naturally knowest that I would be glad to speak the truth, which I am obligated to proclaim, but thou seest, O Lord, how tactless

this would be. Therefore be pleased to bend down thine ears to our prayer which is somewhat unnatural in order not to hurt the feelings of those who have deviated from thy truth. 33

Such prayer is sin, because it is sin to take away anything from God's Word. Moreover to join in prayer with errorists certainly is not to "avoid them" (Ro 16:17). If we by greeting false teachers can become guilty of their evil deeds (2 Jn 8-11), how then can we pray together with them?

Consider also the implication of these verses to what makes for effective and God-pleasing prayer: "Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven" (Mt 10:32-33).

Worship fellowship, pulpit fellowship, altar fellowship and prayer fellowship are simply parts of the whole. Church fellowship encompasses these forms and any other activities which Christians undertake jointly as outward expressions of their oneness in the Holy Christian Church. Together all forms of church fellowship form a unit, and the same principles apply to all the various parts of the whole (hence, unit concept).

Joint mission endeavors, radio and TV broadcasts and cooperative schools are other examples of activities that can form parts of the whole. These examples by their very nature involve church fellowship. The only exceptions would be instances where the groundrules clearly state that these activities do not mean to imply a common faith, as could perhaps be the case in a radio timeslot that is passed from one church body to another on some kind of schedule. Even in cases where the groundrules are acceptable, Christians must consider whether the casual listener would understand or whether he may be misled into thinking

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33 Erlandsson, op cit, p 38.

those churches really are the same.

There is another group of activities which may or may not fall into the realm of church fellowship depending on how the participants understand them. A handshake, for example, can be a gesture of friendship. It can signal an agreement reached on the sale of a car. It can be a form of greeting. Such instances certainly are not examples of church fellowship. On the other hand, a handshake can be church fellowship as the handshake at the reception of a new member or a confirmation. Scripture is talking about church fellowship when it speaks of "the right hand of fellowship" extended by Peter, James and John to Paul and Barnabas. Scripture also is talking about church fellowship when it calls upon us to withhold a handshake of welcome "if anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching" (2 Jn 10). Activities such as the handshake just mentioned become expressions of spiritual unity when those involved intend them to be such, understand them in that way and want them understood thus.

Church fellowship includes all expressions of the spiritual oneness which is ours in the Holy Christian Church as evidenced by the oneness in our confession of the truth. All other activities and dealings we may have with others fall outside of the realm of church fellowship. There are no divisions of church fellowship for pancake supper fellowship, rummage sale fellowship or fellowship hall fellowship. Christians deal with all people in friendship and civility whether they are members of churches outside our fellowship or whether they are atheists. No common faith is being confessed by being cordial or polite or friendly to people, and certainly the Lord who says: "Love (even) your enemies" expects such of us.

## B. The God-pleasing Practice of Church Fellowship

The fellowship we have with Christ and with all believers, real yet unseen, we call Christian or spiritual fellowship. The outward expression of it, we call church fellowship.

### Where Fellowship Should Be Practiced

Who are my fellow Christians? How can I know with whom I have a common faith? How can I be sure with whom I may practice church fellowship? For the God-pleasing practice of church fellowship these questions must be answered.

Paul addresses Titus as "my true (i.e. genuine) son in our common faith ( *κατὰ κοινὴν πίστιν* )" (Tt 1:4). *κατὰ* means because of, as a result of, on the basis of. It signifies the norm according to which a judgment is rendered. At the same time that norm is often the reason for the judgment. Paul could regard Titus as a genuine son and therefore fellowship with him because of or on the basis of the common faith they shared. True fellowship is an expression of oneness in faith.

We cannot, of course, look into anyone's heart to see the personal faith that unites him with Christ and with all Christians. God tells us what the Christian can do, however. He says: "With the mouth confession is made unto salvation" (Ro 10:10). A Christian will confess his faith, for "we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard" (Ac 4:20). When St. John tells us to "test the spirits to see whether they are from God," he is saying: Look at the confession they make; look at what they say. "This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not



acknowledge Jesus is not from God" (1 Jn 4:1-3). You will be able to recognize false prophets by their confession. Jesus said that too: "For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned" (Mt 12:37). You will be able to recognize false prophets also by their actions. "By their fruit you will recognize them" (Mt 7:16), Jesus said. Paul made the same point. While only God can see faith, Paul continues that there is visible evidence for us to consider: "Everyone who confesses the name of the Lord must turn away from wickedness" (2 Tm 2:19). The Christian cannot look into hearts, but he can judge others by what they say and do, by their confession in word and action.

A true confession of faith is one that confesses in principle the whole Word of God. That is the Old Testament understanding: "Do not add to what I command you and do not subtract from it, but keep the commands of the Lord your God that I give you" (Dt 4:2). That is Jesus' understanding: "If you hold to my teaching, you are my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (Jn 8:31-32). That is the teaching of the apostles: "If anyone speak, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God" (1 Pe 4:11). Fellowship in the early church was practiced on the basis of the doctrine of Christ: "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" (2 Jn 9). This doctrine of Christ is, simply put, all the Scripture teaches. For regarding the Old Testament Jesus said: "Scripture cannot be broken" (Jn 10:35). And regarding the still-to-be-written New Testament Jesus said: "The Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you" (Jn 14:26).

How much agreement in doctrine is necessary for godly church fellowship? It is possible to speak in terms of fundamental and non-fundamental doctrines with regard to what is essential for saving faith. The Gospel-message of justification by faith through the redemption of Jesus Christ is fundamental and essential to salvation. On the one hand, God will not be administering an orthodoxy quiz on the days of creation, Jonah in the fish or church and ministry before determining if one has saving faith or not. You can speak of such doctrines as non-fundamental to salvation. On the other hand, our Lord gives us no basis to say that any doctrines of his Word are unimportant. In the Old Testament God speaks through Moses: "Be careful to follow every command I am giving you today, so that you may live and increase..." (Dt'8:1). In the New Testament Jesus says: "Teach them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you" (Mt. 28:20). Then he places his imprimatur on the finished product when he places the most solemn warning at the end of his Word: "I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds anything to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book. And if anyone takes words away from this book of prophecy, God will take away from him his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book" (Re 22:18-19). Therefore we must conclude, as have the orthodox Christians of all ages, that when it is a question of how much of the doctrine of Scripture is necessary for true unity and the exercise of church fellowship, the only correct answer is: all that Scripture teaches, all its doctrines. A true confession does not depart from the Word of God in any point.

The Lord's promise is clear. "Whoever will confess me before

men, him will I confess before my Father in heaven" (Mt 10:32). To confess Christ is to confess what the Word teaches. And conversely to confess what the Word teaches is to confess Christ. Jesus said to the unbelieving Jews, "Search the Scriptures, for it is they which testify about me" (Jn 5:39). Luke reports: "And beginning with Moses and the Prophets, he (Jesus) explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself" (Lk 24:27). Jesus said: "If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching (τὸν λόγον μου = my word).... He who does not love me will not obey my teaching ( τοὺς λόγους μου = my words)" (Jn 14:23-24). Or again he said: "If anyone is ashamed of me and my words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his glory and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels" (Lk 9:26; cf. also Mk 8:38).

One's *fides quae*, what he believes, is the basis for practicing church fellowship. That *fides quae* can be known only on the basis of his confession. We cannot see into another's heart; we must go by what he says he believes. There is more to one's confession, however, than merely words, for the right words don't guarantee true fellowship. Jesus applied Isaiah's condemnation to some Pharisees and teachers of the law, saying: "These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me" (Mt 15:8). In the context of that verse he refers to their disregard of the fourth commandment as evidence that they are hypocrites and condemned by Isaiah's words. The old adage is true in Christian relationships too. "Actions speak louder than words." A church body may, for example, have a constitution that states full acceptance of the Lutheran confessions. Yet it may ignore that in practice. A church's confession is also what is actually preached in its pulpits, taught in its classrooms, and

practiced in its day-to-day dealings. On paper the church may well be orthodox, but if it in reality mixes truth and error and makes no honest effort to discipline those who go contrary to its written confession, that body has become heterodox. The same can be true of individuals who say the right thing, but openly and without repentance do what is wrong. We must practice church fellowship only with those who share a common faith with us as shown by their confession in word and deed.

But none of us are perfect in word or deed. Therefore it would appear that there is no one who measures up to the standard set for church fellowship. It would seem that there is no one good enough for us to recognize as one with us, and for that matter we are not good enough for anyone to accept us into church fellowship with them. All Christians have many imperfections in understanding scriptural truths and in putting them into practice in our lives.

The Apostle Paul writes:

Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. If anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself. (Ga 6:1-3)

Accept those whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters. (Ro 14:1)

And we urge you, brothers, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone. (1 Th 5:14)

Weakness of faith is not a reason to refuse fellowship, but rather an inducement for practicing it vigorously to help one another overcome our weaknesses. In Matthew 18:15-17 the Savior tells us how far we should go in our efforts to restore a brother who has sinned. The hope, of course, of our patient witnessing is to win our brother over. Christians are to help one another to overcome our weaknesses and to

repent of our sins. Gentle, loving, patient attempts to strengthen the weak and regain the erring are important parts of practicing the fellowship which is ours in Christ.

Christians can fall into grievous sins. David's affair with Bathsheba is sufficient evidence of that. And Nathan's coming to David at the command of the Lord is sufficient evidence that God wants Christians to seek and regain the sinner. Excommunication of an unrepentant sinner comes only after the steps of Matthew 18 have been followed patiently and lovingly but to no avail. A Christian may show weakness in other ways besides grievous sinning. He may show weakness in trusting God's promises. Frequently Jesus rebuked his disciples for their "little faith" (cf. Mt 6:25-34). In the midst of the storm, for example, their faith gave way to fear, and they were on the verge of despair. In principle the disciples did not deny God's protecting arm over them. But when the chips were down, they were not strong enough to trust the promises and be confident in them. Jesus scored them for their lack of trust, but then he continued to instruct them and build them up in their faith. In fact, he gave them another miracle to bolster the foundation on which their trust rested. Jesus was not pleased to see weak faith, for weak faith is in danger of dying altogether. Yet Jesus recognized these disciples as his believers. Notice: "O you of little faith" -- not, O you of no faith. Like Jesus we are not to break the bruised reed or snuff out the smoking flax, but rather make every effort to restore it to healthy vigor. Weak believers distinguish themselves from scoffers and unbelievers in their willingness to receive spiritual help and instruction. Their attitude is that of the father who prayed: "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief" (Mk 9:24).

In the New Testament we are also shown instances of Christians who were weak in matters of adiaphora. Romans 14 and I Corinthians 8 and 9 tell of those in the church who were troubled about food sacrificed to idols. It bothered their conscience to eat meats sold in the butcher shops of pagan markets because these meats had initially been offered as sacrifices to the pagan idols. They felt guilty being drawn into association with the idols in this way. This question did involve Christian doctrine, and the Christians had been taught the doctrine. Moreover they accepted the doctrine, but their conscience had not yet matured sufficiently to be comfortable with the doctrine. Their conscience kept them from being as free as they could be in this matter neither commanded nor forbidden in God's Word. Paul addresses this problem with patient, sympathetic instruction of the weak, explaining carefully the liberty we now enjoy in Christ. Meanwhile to the strong he writes: "Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters" (Ro 14:1).

Notice, however, that Paul does not leave any doubt about what the right doctrine is. Paul clearly sets forth the truth: "The kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking" (Ro 14:17). Then he pleads with those who understand that to deal patiently and lovingly with the weak in their midst, so the weak will be strengthened and not crushed. "It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother to fall" (v. 2).

The New Testament shows that members of the Holy Christian Church can be weak also in understanding God's truth and can even become involved in doctrinal error. Jesus' own disciples on Ascension Day still clung to the error that Jesus came to establish an earthly kingdom and restore the political Israel (Ac 1:6). In his epistles Paul

had to deal with numerous cases of false teaching in the early church. The Galatians were infiltrated by the error of judaizing. The Colossians questioned the deity of Jesus. The Corinthians doubted the resurrection. The Thessalonians drew the wrong conclusion regarding the immediate return of Christ. In all these cases Paul patiently spelled out the truths of God and pleaded with the Christians to throw off the serious error in which they had become involved. When error besets our brothers and sisters in Christ, we are to seek to lead them to the truth.

False teaching will appear also in the true church. Paul warned the Ephesians: "I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them" (Ac 20:29-30). A church does not forfeit its orthodox character through the casual intrusion of error, provided the errors are fought and eventually removed. Paul left Timothy behind for just such a fight in Ephesus. "As I urged you when I went into Macedonia, stay there in Ephesus so that you may command certain men not to teach false doctrines any longer nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies. These promote controversies rather than God's work-- which is by faith" (1 Tm 1:3-4).

With whom may we practice church fellowship? We should fellowship with all those who share a common faith with us as evidenced by their confession with us of all the truths of God's Word. When such a common confession is present, we will energetically practice fellowship also with those who have fallen into sin or who are weak in their faith or their understanding. And we will continue to make every effort to build up "the unity of the Spirit" with them until they become ones with whom Scripture says we must not fellowship any longer.

## Where Fellowship Must Not Be Practiced

The consistent message of Scripture is: Avoid those who do not share a common faith and confession with you.

In our efforts to win the erring, it will at times become evident that we are not dealing with a weak Christian. We cannot recognize or treat as a Christian brother anyone who impenitently clings to sin. "But now I am writing you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat" (1 Cor 5:11). Or again the Scripture warns: "Do not share in the sins of others" (1 Tm 5:22). Christians become partakers in the sins of others also when "by their silence they assent." As evidence of the extreme wickedness of the gentiles, Paul specifies that they not only do evil deeds, but they also "approve of those who practice them" (Ro 1:32).

How do we know that one is impenitently clinging to sin? To determine that requires several steps. We admonish that person, showing him what God's Word says regarding the sin in question. We go to considerable lengths in the effort to regain that brother (Mt 18:15-17). We do our best. If that fails, we call in others to assist in our admonition. If that doesn't work, we tell it to the church, calling upon the corporate body of believers to join the efforts to regain the impenitent brother. And finally if he refuses to listen to the church, we must remove him from the fellowship. Put him "our of your fellowship" (literally from your midst)," Paul says (1 Cor 5:2). The impenitent sinner is excommunicated and treated as "a pagan and a tax collector." We cease all activities which could give him the false



impression he still stands safely within the Christian Church. Church fellowship with the unrepented sinner is no longer possible for it would give the impression that his impenitence is less than damnable. The message must be clearly spoken and reenforced by actions. "No one who lives in him (Jesus) keeps on sinning. No one who continues to sin has either seen him or known him" (1 Jn 3:6). By his impenitence the sinner has placed himself outside of Christ's church. The church's judgment is strong, even harsh, but it is made for a loving reason. Excommunication is meant to shock the sinner into realizing what his impenitence means. It is the hope and prayer of all in the church that this shocking action will lead that person to think again. Imagine the impact of all one's brothers and sisters in Christ -- those with whom the sinner had shared that closest of fellowship, oneness in the family of God -- imagine the impact when all one's brothers and sisters in Christ unanimously must say: "You are no longer one of us. We have no choice but to conclude that you are not even a Christian anymore. You are going to Hell because of your impenitence." In Paul's epistles we see an example of the hoped-for result. An excommunicated sinner repents and is received anew as a brother (2 Cor 2:5-11).

Excommunication assumes a one-on-one type of situation where the individual Christian can be dealt with directly by his brothers and sisters in the church. It also assumes that the sinner is part of the fellowship of the group seeking to call him to repentance. Obviously it makes a farce of Matthew 18 if we seek to discipline one who does not recognize our right to speak to him or does not consider himself part of our fellowship in the first place.

We cannot deal with other church bodies in exactly the same way

as we deal with an individual. The general principle applies, however, that Christians have no fellowship with unrepentant sinners.

Therefore, we are to have no fellowship either with a church body which becomes guilty of sin in some corporate way and refuses to repent or which tolerates unrepentant sinners in its midst without seeking to discipline them.

Christian also must not fellowship with persistent errorists. A persistent errorist can be defined as one who after patient admonition and instruction from God's Word holds to false doctrine and makes it his confession. Even after studying the Word, he remains convinced that his is the scriptural position.

We must take care, however, before applying the label "persistent errorist" to anyone. As we have seen, Christians also can fall into doctrinal error. Such error may be an inadvertent slip, as the person who espouses a false belief without realizing it is indeed false. Years ago after I taught a Bible class that touched on the government's right to capital punishment, a member of our congregation spoke to me that her former pastor had taught that capital punishment is morally wrong in all instances. I wrote that man and included the study sheets from my Bible class. A few weeks later I received a letter back, stating that after considering Romans 13 he realized he was in error and retracted his statements. He sent a copy of his letter to the former member. This is an example of someone who had slipped into error without realizing it. More important, this is an example of a man ready to admit his error and correct it.

The error into which a brother falls may also be of a more prolonged nature. The person may hold to a teaching that he knows goes contrary to our confessions, but holds to it because he fails to understand fully the scriptural basis for the confessional position. In other words, he accepts without reservation the Bible and feels that Scripture sets forth his view rather than the view stated in the confessions. Scripture makes it clear that we can no longer treat such a Christian as a brother if he after patient admonition holds to that error. Signs that one is a persistent errorist and not just a weak brother may include his demanding recognition for his error and demanding the right to make propaganda for it.

In the previous section we saw how Paul dealt patiently and lovingly with those among the brethren who showed weakness in understanding. Praise God that most of those who received Paul's patient instruction listened and grew in their understanding. The truth was preserved, and most of those in the congregations matured to understand and confess it. In Thessalonica, however, not all came to understand the truth about Christ's return and about the God-pleasing life until that day. All those who rejected the truth must be avoided Paul said (2 Th 3:6).

The Bible saves most of its ink and its strongest words for the third group with whom we must have no fellowship. The Bible warns us to separate ourselves from false prophets. False prophets are those who deviate from God's Word and then seek to spread their errors and win adherents for them.

The category of "persistent errorist" and that of "false prophet" overlap considerably. In fact, they may be viewed as two sides of the same coin with the difference being mainly a matter of degree. Both

hold to false doctrine; the false prophet actively promotes it. Even the innocent Christian who has been misled into false belief promotes his error, however, albeit inadvertently. When the Roman Catholic puts his offering in the plate, for example, he is supporting the world-wide propaganda machine of the Antichrist and enabling it to mislead others. When the Baptist rejects infant baptism, he encourages others to reject it with him. When certain Lutherans deny the details of the creation account or say that the Bible contains errors, they are striking blows at the foundation on which the Holy Christian Church rests.

False prophets may begin simply by asking toleration of their views. False doctrine inevitably proceeds to stages two and three, however. In stage two it wishes equality with the truth. In stage three false doctrine will demand supremacy over the truth. False prophets may be deceived themselves by their own sheep's clothing, but, whether they realize it or not, in reality they are "ferocious wolves" (Mt 7:15). They threaten God's flock with harm and destruction. Their false doctrine "will spread like gangrene" (2 Tm 2:19).

When the false prophet arises within the fellowship, the Christians must practice love first of all. "Love is patient,...it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs... It always protects, always trusts, always hopes..."(1 Cor 13:4-7). We must begin by hoping that our brother has merely made an inadvertent slip or has proposed a false doctrine because of weakness in understanding the Scripture. We will seek to admonish the false teacher. Our love does not embrace only him, however. We love all those in our fellowship and therefore must not permit the false teaching to continue in such a way that it

deceives others in our midst or becomes established as a yeast that can work its way through the whole batch of dough.

The false prophet will just as often come from outside and seek to be allowed into our midst. Watch out, the Bible says, don't be deceived. "Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world" (1 Jn 4:1). "Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil" (1 Th 5:21-22).

A sampling of Bible passages makes it clear that there must be no fellowship with false prophets:

Away from me, you evildoers, that I may keep the commands of my God! (Ps 119:115)

"Both prophet and priest are godless; even in my temple I find their wickedness," declares the Lord... This is what the Lord Almighty says: "Do not listen to what the prophets are prophesying to you; they fill you with false hopes. They speak visions from their own minds, not from the mouth of the Lord." (Jr 23:11,16)

"Be careful," Jesus said to them. "Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees."... Then they understood that he was not telling them to guard against the yeast used in bread, but against the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees." (Mt 16:6,12)

"I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel --which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned! (Ga 1:6-9)

If anyone teaches false doctrines and does not agree to the sound instruction of our Lord Jesus Christ and to godly teaching, he is conceited and understands nothing. He has an unhealthy interest in controversies and arguments that result in envy, quarreling, malicious talk, evil suspicions and constant friction between men of corrupt mind who have been robbed of the truth and who think that godliness is a means to financial gain. (1 Tm 6:3-5)

Many deceivers, who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh, have gone out into the world. Any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist. Watch out that you do not lose what you have worked for, but that you may be rewarded fully. Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God; whoever continues in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take him into your house or welcome him. Anyone who welcomes him shares in his wicked work. (2 Jn 7-11)

The false prophets may have much to say that seems worthwhile. They may even be able to point to miraculous signs and wonders they

predicted. That makes no difference. Jesus warned that "false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect-- if that were possible" (Mt 24:24). There is only one sure test: Does their teaching measure up to what God's Word says?

If a prophet, or one who foretells by dreams, appears among you and announces to you a miraculous sign or wonder, and if the sign or wonder of which he has spoken takes place, and he says, "Let us follow other gods" (gods you have not known) "and let us worship them," you must not listen to the words of that prophet or dreamer. The Lord your God is testing you to find out whether you love him with all your heart and with all your soul. It is the Lord your God you must follow, and him you must revere. Keep his commands and obey him; serve him and hold fast to him. That prophet or dreamer must be put to death, because he preached rebellion against the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt and redeemed you from the land of slavery; he has tried to turn you from the way the Lord your God commanded you to follow. You must purge the evil from among you. (Dt 13:1-5)

I repeat! There is only one sure test: Does their teaching measure up to what God's Word says?

We are from God, and whoever knows God listens to us; but whoever is not from God does not listen to us. This is how we recognize the Spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood. (1 Jn 4:6)

For the faithful minister of God there is a double task. He must proclaim the truth, but he must also expose false doctrine. It is interesting to note the order in which Paul puts these two tasks. "He (an elder) must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it" (Tt 1:9). A clear presentation of true doctrine must come before the refutation of false doctrine. That is true. Both are necessary, however, and mere presentation of the truth is not enough. Walther elaborates:

A man may proclaim the true doctrine, but if he does not condemn and refute the opposing false doctrine, does not warn against the wolves in sheep's clothing, the false prophets, and unmask them, he is not a faithful steward of God's mysteries.... Polemics are absolutely needed. Not only because a doctrine is more fully comprehended in the light of its antithesis, but mainly because the errorists so craftily mask their error behind a show of truth that the simple Christians, if not forewarned, are despite their love of the truth only too easily deceived. The pastor cannot wash his hands in innocence, pleading that he has always preached the truth, if he did not at the same time warn against the error and, when necessary, identify it by naming the errorist. <sup>34</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Pieper, *op cit*, I, p 50.

Paul did precisely that when he called Hymenaeus, Alexander and Philetas by name (1 Tm 1:20; 2 Tm 2:17; 4:14).

It goes without saying I would think, but there is one other group with whom we must not practice fellowship. There can be no Christian fellowship with those who are adherents of non-Christian religions.

Paul tells us the obvious:

Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said: "I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people." "Therefore come out from them and be separate, says the Lord. Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you." "I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty." (2 Cor 6:14-18)

Even if we bring only light and truth to such relationships, it is wrong. Merely by permitting light and darkness to stand together we are giving some credibility and status to falsehood. Fellowship with those who worshiped idols caused much of Old Testament Israel's troubles. The prophets clearly testified against such ungodly mixing with the heathen. Ezra and Nehemiah, for example, refused help from the outsiders and received into their fellowship only those "who had separated themselves from the unclean practices of their gentile neighbors in order to seek the Lord, the God of Israel." (Ezr 6:21)

Christian unity is demonstrated in numerous different ways in the Bible, but can anyone point to even one instance where the New Testament endorses any kind of fractional obedience to God? The Scripture is clear: "Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them" (Ep 5:11).

## Establishing and Severing Fellowship

The heading is poorly worded. We do not establish or sever spiritual fellowship. God alone establishes fellowship as he draws us to faith and leads us to confess as true all that his Word says. Moreover, fellowship is severed when one becomes an unrepentant sinner, a persistent errorist or a false prophet. The question we want to address in this section concerns the visible expressions which we know as church or confessional fellowship. Both the establishment and the severance of church fellowship must of necessity involve a process in which steps are taken and judgments made.

Studies of church fellowship in our circles tend to be negative. Emphasis is on "avoid" and "breaking fellowship." The reason in part may be that the past couple generations have primarily had to address deteriorating situations where relationships were coming apart rather than joining together. The fact that fellowship studies tend to be negative may also be explained in part by the fact that God addresses real issues in his Word. Christians desire fellowship. We want to embrace everyone we can. We want to put our love into practice and believe all things, hope all things and look upon everything in the kindest possible way. Therefore, we want to assume the best about others who profess to be Christians and to hope that they treasure God's Word and God's truth as highly as we do. We desire fellowship because we recognize ourselves as a besieged minority in this sinful world and crave all the mutual support and encouragement we can find. We desire fellowship also because we realize that there is something contradictory -- and fundamentally wrong -- when the church is torn



by warring factions. At the very least factions hinder our efforts to reach out to the unbelievers throughout the world. Christians desire to express and enjoy church fellowship. God knows that such a heartfelt desire can lead into danger, and so he gives clear warnings in his Word.

The fact remains, however, that Jesus desires unity for his church. "I pray also for those who will believe in me... that all of them may be one" (Jn 17:20-21). Our charge remains: "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" (Eph 4:3). Christians must always be on the look-out for opportunities to extend the visible bonds of church fellowship by encouraging and assisting others toward a clear confession of God's truth. There are no set steps -- no scriptural procedures or timetables to follow. Whenever God gives opportunity, we will discuss God's truth. We must "always be prepared (and willing) to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have" (1 Pe 3:15). But more, we must also be watching for those whom we may be able to help come to a scriptural confession of God's truth. The world is full of those whom the Holy Spirit has called into the Holy Christian Church. Many are like newborn babies who crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it they may grow up in their salvation (1 Pe 2:2). We who are strong, by the grace of God products of a confessional church with solid, thorough agencies of Christian instruction, carry a responsibility. Jesus said: "From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked" (Lk 12:48). Certainly we must recognize ourselves as among those strong of whom Paul speaks: "We who are strong ought

to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves" (Ro 15:1).

As individual Christians and as a church body we seek to give our witness wherever possible. And when that witness opens a door for further sharing of God's Word, we welcome the opportunity. Such study and sharing of God's truth is done outside of church fellowship at first, but always with the hope and prayer that true oneness in faith will be the result. The fact that there are significant differences between us at the outset should not discourage us for we are working with God's Word "which will not return empty..." (Is 55:11). Every pastor I am sure can relate stories of individuals who began an adult class as atheists or agnostics ready to do battle with the Word (perhaps they came to fulfil some "prenuptial agreement" with a spouse-to-be), but were won by the Word before the course was finished.

The quest for church fellowship begins outside of fellowship. With the blessing of God formal recognition of fellowship comes later when on the basis of his confession the individual is received into our church through confirmation or reaffirmation of faith; when on the basis of its confession the church body is recognized as one in doctrine and practice with us.

Sad to say, any discussion of church fellowship in a sinful world must also address the termination of fellowship. This gives us the opportunity to discuss Romans 16:17, the passage which has been the center of attention when ending of fellowship relationships between church bodies is being discussed. The verbals *σκοπεῖν* and *ἐκκλίνετε* are key to understanding. "I urge you, brothers, to watch out for (*σκοπεῖν*)

those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away (*ἐκκλίνατε*) from them."

*σκοπεῖν* is a present infinitive. The present tense of *σκοπέω* points to an activity that has duration. Although the present tense does not specify the length of time involved, it clearly indicates an extended or ongoing action. "Keep on watching; always be on the look-out for" false prophets. Christians must never let down their guard or fall asleep in spiritual matters. "Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour" (1 Pe 5:8).

And what does the watchful Christian do when he spots one who might be a causer of divisions and a putter of obstacles in the path that are contrary to the teaching he has learned? He cannot look the other way and simply ignore the danger. The Christian must determine if what he has observed is indeed the case. If it is an error that has surfaced within the fellowship, the Christian must approach the false teachers to instruct them and admonish them from God's Word. If the error is from without, the Christian must examine the Word and his confession to make sure he is correct in identifying this as a false teaching.

When it is clear, however, that the Christian is dealing with a false prophet, then the *ἐκκλίνατε* applies. The aorist imperative calls for a decisive, conclusive action. Avoid them. Separate from them. Put distance between yourself and the false prophets. Paul is speaking of a clean break with errorists. Peter used *ἐκκλίνω* in a similar way when he wrote: "Whoever would love life and see good days...must

turn from evil and do good" (1 Pe 3:11). Once one has been recognized as a false teacher there can no longer be any religious fellowship with him.<sup>35</sup>

There is no timetable and no rigid order of steps to follow. When one with whom we are in church fellowship appears to be becoming one with whom we must not be in fellowship, we must approach him, admonish him and seek to regain the brother. In love we approach him as a weak brother. His response to our overture will determine whether fellowship still exists between us -- or he has severed that oneness. Formal severance of fellowship will follow if the latter is true. For a sister church body a termination of fellowship must follow. For an individual member of our congregation excommunication is the appropriate response when we must judge our former brother guilty of an error that destroys faith. Suspension or release from membership is the appropriate means of terminating fellowship when the fellowship has been broken by something that does not automatically mean loss of saving faith (i.e. perhaps a dispute over an adiaphoron such as what Bible translation to use or over a doctrine such as hell or the Antichrist).

Are there differences between the way we deal with an individual and with an entire church body. In essence, no. The same principles apply in both cases. In dealing with a church body, however, the matter becomes more complex because many individuals are involved. Undoubtedly all have not changed. What is truly the confession of the church? Are the errorists being dealt with by the body? Do the

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<sup>35</sup> The alternative reading used *ἐκκλιναί*, a present imperative. The aorist seems preferable because *ἐκκλιναί* is used in parallel with 16 aorist imperatives ( *ἀποδοσάτω* ) which precede it. If the present imperative is chosen over the aorist, however, the meaning remains the same. The decisive, conclusive action is found also in the meaning of *ἐκκλιναί*.

leaders truly speak for the members? Has our admonition been heard? Has it been understood? Because of such complexities dealings between church bodies will require more time. Moreover, there may be honest differences in judgment on the part of the members of one body regarding the timing and/or the specific actions to be taken.

We Christians take comfort from the biblical doctrine of the Holy Christian Church. We know that there are many throughout the world who are part of our spiritual fellowship, even though we are not able to practice church fellowship with them because of confessional differences. Sometimes we give the impression that the Missouri Synod pastor down the street or our Roman Catholic neighbor is our worst foe in the world. We sense that such an impression is wrong. But what is the God-pleasing relationship for us to have with those outside our confessional fellowship?

We correctly realize that differences in doctrine among Christian denominations are of the utmost seriousness. False doctrines jeopardize the salvation of the teacher and countless others who may fall under his sway. Our confession of the truth must be steadfast and unmovable. But there has got to be a way for us to do that without denying the doctrine of the Holy Christian Church in the process and losing its comfort.

Social and other ordinary contacts of life may go on even with those outside of our fellowship. Paul had urged the Corinthians not to associate with sexually immoral people. The Corinthians had taken his words to mean that they should have no dealings whatsoever with that kind of people. They thought Paul meant ALL contact with them.

But Paul explained: "In that case you would have to leave this world." Paul goes on to reiterate his point: "But now I am writing you that you must not associate with ANYONE WHO CALLS HIMSELF A BROTHER but is sexually immoral or greedy.... With SUCH A MAN do not even eat" (1 Cor 5:10-11). Paul's point is this: Christians must not allow an impenitent sinner to be left with the impression that his relationship with God's family is unaffected by that impenitence. The Christians must deal with him in a way which makes clear that "things are not business as usual. Your impenitence is leading to your damnation." Paul has come back to our original definition, hasn't he? He is saying: Fellowship is any activity by which believers express their oneness in faith. A friendly meal with the believers for that unrepentant man would communicate to him that nothing has changed inspite of his impenitence. He could easily draw the conclusion that he is still part of the fellowship. On the other hand, a similar meal with a person who realizes he is not part of that Corinthian fellowship (an unbeliever, for example) could be an entirely proper act of hospitality and open up an opportunity to witness to the truth. In this case neither the guest nor the host would regard this act of hospitality as a testimony of spiritual or confessional fellowship.

Paul shed some further light on this in Second Thessalonians. The persistent errorists had to be removed from the fellowship. "Keep away from him," Paul said. "Take special note of him. Do not associate with him." But then Paul throws in a puzzler. "Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother." The Christians could not compromise the truth by continuing to treat this man as part of the fellowship. They had to make that decisive and perfectly clear. But that did not change the fact that the Christians in that

congregation were to remain Christians themselves. They were to let their light shine by not acting in the hateful, cruel fashion of an enemy. Even to that man they should apply Jesus' words:

You have heard that it was said, "Love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. (Mt 5:43-45)

### The Purpose of Scriptural Fellowship Principles

Simply put, how come? Why does God go to such lengths in his Word to spell out the principles of church fellowship? Why do Christians spend so much time trying to understand the principles and apply them correctly?

God answers the "How come?" question by pointing to the many people who are benefitted by right practices and harmed by wrong ones.

Sound fellowship practices benefit OURSELVES. They are means of keeping our Lord near to us and keeping his blessings in our lives. Consider some of the beautiful promises.

The Lord is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth. (Ps 145:18)

To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." (Jn 8:31-32)

If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love. (Jn 15:10)

Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it. (Lk 11:28)

Did you notice that all these promises are connected to God's truth and God's Word. Only when we hold to that truth and that Word will the promises be fulfilled in us. When we become lax in our practice of fellowship, we allow our hold on the Word and the truth to be endangered.

The Scripture clearly warns: "Bad company corrupts good character" (1 Cor 15:33). We need look no further than Peter on Maundy Thursday evening to see how association with the wrong crowd can quickly bring about a denial of Christ (cf. Jn 18:17-25). Or again the Old Testament gives ample evidence as we see Israel's continued troubles because it failed to drive out the heathen nations (cf. Nu 33:55; Jdg 16:4; 1 Kgs 11:2). On the other hand, the Scriptures extol the benefits of godly associates. Proverbs tells us: "He who walks with the wise grows wise, but a companion of fools suffers harm" (13:20). Remember Proverbs describes the wise as one who fears the Lord.

When we associate with errorists, false prophets or unrepentant sinners, we harm ourselves in two additional ways. "Anyone who welcomes him (the false teacher) shares in his wicked work" (2 Jn 11). We cannot associate with such individuals without becoming a partaker in their evil and taking on responsibility for what they are doing. Moreover, we are risking our souls for Paul warns: "Their teaching will spread like gangrene" (2 Tm 2:17). Once error gets rooted in us, it keeps working and growing until it destroys us altogether. Pieper comments:

A person is fortunate indeed if, ignoring the words of Scripture enjoining him to avoid those who teach another Gospel, he yet retains his faith in the words: "The blood of Jesus Christ, his Son, cleanseth us from all sin." 36

The scriptural principles of fellowship have been given to us also for the benefit of the BROTHERS and SISTERS WITHIN our church fellowship. Each individual in our fellowship will also receive the benefits we just described as receiving ourselves. Moreover, through godly Christian fellowship comes real spiritual strengthening for all.

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36 Pieper, op cit, III, p 426.



When Paul said that he longed to see the Christians in Rome, he gave the reason for his longing: "that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong -- that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith" (Ro 1:11-12). When Paul was brought as a prisoner to Rome and arrived in the vicinity of Rome at Puteoli, the brethren from the capital city traveled as far as Appii Forum and the Three Taverns to meet Paul. We are told what effect this display of fellowship had upon the Apostle: "At the sight of these men Paul thanked God and was encouraged" (Ac 28:15). In the same way to this very day Christians are refreshed and encouraged by their fellowship with one another. False doctrine causes strife and harm.

If anyone teaches false doctrines and does not agree to the sound instruction of our Lord Jesus Christ and to godly teaching, he is conceited and understands nothing. He has an unhealthy interest in controversies and arguments that result in envy, quarreling, malicious talk, evil suspicions and constant friction between men of corrupt mind, who have been robbed of the truth and who think that godliness is a means to financial gain. (1 Tm 6:3-6)

As I urged you when I went into Macedonia, stay there in Ephesus so that you may command certain men not to teach false doctrines any longer nor to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies. These promote controversies rather than God's work -- which is by faith. (1 Tm 1:3-4)

Sound fellowship practices do the opposite. They build up the unity of the true faith. When there is unity and peace, all will be strengthened and blessed.

Unclear fellowship practices can mislead the weak in our midst into believing that one doctrine is as good as another. Correct fellowship practices, on the other hand, benefit the weak brethren. Because we understand God's concern for the weak, we reach out in gentleness and love to the weak, patiently fanning the smoldering wick and bandaging the bruised reed. By applying God's Word in its truth and purity to our brother's weakness we are using the only means that can give him strength. And by consistent practice of God's truth we are letting him see clearly what is God-pleasing.

In a God-pleasing fellowship church discipline is practiced. This benefits our brother who has fallen into sin. We do not simply look the other way and permit him to stumble on to his doom. We come to him and call him to repentance. And we love enough to take firm action if necessary to call him to repentance. In this way we benefit the sinner by regaining him as a brother.

Sound fellowship practices benefit those inside the fellowship also by removing unscriptural leaven. "A little yeast works through the whole batch of dough" (1 Cor 5:6). God's goal in outlining how the church handles error is to remove the yeast before it can work through the dough. An important purpose of the proper practice of church fellowship is protection of the sheep. Paul gives that as a key reason for avoiding those who cause divisions and teach contrary to the doctrines you have learned when he says: "By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people" (Ro 16:18).

It may come as a surprise, but scriptural fellowship principles benefit THOSE OUTSIDE the fellowship as well. Refusing fellowship with error serves as a strong cry in defense of the truth and of warning to those who reject the truth. Paul says: "Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him" (1 Tim 3:10). Our cry is of little value if it has not been heard or has not been understood. Therefore Paul says give the warning not once, but twice. Make sure the cry is heard. Make sure the errorist knows why we must refuse fellowship. Then "have nothing to do with him."

The heterodox church and the false church need to hear Jesus' words: "They worship me in vain; their teachings are but rules taught by men" (Mt 15:9). It is for their benefit that we take our stand against their manmade rules and doctrines. The Christian is to be

salt, a preservative to slow down the decay. Jesus says: "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be pulled up by the roots" (Mt 5:13). Our salty confession helps to preserve the truth also beyond our fellowship. For example, certainly the strong voices of evangelical churches in the United States in recent years, as evidenced by groups like the Moral Majority, have had a preservative effect on our nation. One shudders to think where the Supreme Court and the Congress would have taken us by now if the right -- to a large extent conservative Christians -- had not exerted itself. In our interchurch relations we certainly believe our WELS stand had some preservative influence on Missouri as it embraced the ALC and then turned back to a more scriptural practice.

We recognize that there are true Christians in heterodox churches. Our practice of scriptural church fellowship is for their good also.

It is for the benefit of the true believers among the heterodox that we are to refuse fellowship. Thereby we are constantly reminding them that they are in the wrong place. Time and again people have thereby been led out from the false church into the true, where God wants them to be.<sup>37</sup>

Pieper makes an interesting observation:

Had the Christians always obeyed the divine order to avoid those teaching another doctrine, neither the Papacy nor other sects could have arisen. Where there are no buyers, there is no market.

Unionism is a mockery of Christian unity. Instead of healing the hurt, it makes it permanent.<sup>38</sup>

As with all God says, the scriptural principles of fellowship serve for the good of all who love him. Failure to practice these principles cannot but harm the believers. Only through faithful application of all God says can the church militant move toward that goal God has for his church, namely that it be "a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless" (Eph 5:27).

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37 Erlandsson, op cit, p 30. 38 Pieper, op cit, III, p 425.