

WISCONSIN LUTHERAN SEMINARY

Church Fellowship

To Guard against Persistent Errorists, to Cherish
Unity in Truth.

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Abstract

In order for a concept to be passed on to the next generation, it must first be well grasped by the generation that is passing on the concept. When the concept is the understanding of biblical principles, the passing on of the concept becomes vitally important. A brief examination of the biblical principles of church fellowship as well as its history in Lutheranism in America shows that this concept is not one that can be easily passed on from one generation to the next. In some situations applicatory decisions can be made for the sake of good order to make the biblical principles of church fellowship more easily understood. Whatever applications were established in one situation might be inappropriate to be passed on or applied to any other situation. Church fellowship is often spoken of in its negative sense, the “what-we-cannot-do” side. Church fellowship is a blessing; a blessing for which our Lord implores that we strive with constant, loving intent. Biblical principles of church fellowship need to be well grasped by each individual Christian, so that the principles can be well applied to each situation.

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Introduction

When people familiar with the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod and its teachings list an identifying mark of the Synod, the first doctrine that often comes to their minds is not universal justification or salvation by grace alone, but the doctrine of church fellowship or some aspect of it. For better or worse, this is the main impression that many people have of the Wisconsin Synod. Wisconsin Synod congregations in Michigan, Wisconsin and Washington invited people to take a survey on church fellowship. The results of this survey show that an alarming percentage of Wisconsin Synod members are not able to consistently apply church fellowship principles to real life situations.

There are some who see the doctrine of church fellowship as the defining doctrine of the Wisconsin Synod. If it does define us, then it is only because God has laid out fellowship principles in his Word to protect his people from false doctrine. The doctrine of church fellowship is not a list of laws of which we can test the limits. The doctrine of church fellowship is intended to recognize, express, and preserve unity in the church. The joy gained from this blessed privilege can be seen from church history. The doctrine of church fellowship protects the church from persistent error and serves the wellbeing of true believers. The doctrine of church fellowship is not a doctrine of separation. Since it is a doctrine for which our synod is judged, criticized and critiqued, the members of our synod ought to have a well-informed, mature understanding of this scriptural doctrine and its application in practice.

Family members come to visit, and they join us for church. Our members know that participation in the celebration of the Lord's Supper is to be limited to those with whom we share church fellowship (members of WELS or ELS). Many Wisconsin Synod members, however, often do not fully understand why. They are simply told that is what we do without ever being fully or properly informed of the love behind this practice. On the other end of the spectrum, it has also occurred that pastors in the Wisconsin Synod tell their congregations not to invite their friends and neighbors to the church social gatherings. Why? Well, the decision can be an issue of conscience. If the pastor was not comfortable with that situation, it was right for him to not allow them to do so. But why was he not comfortable? Does he know? Was it because of something that the Bible says, or something that his grandpa once said? The congregation is told that it is

because they'd be breaking fellowship. How? When our church has a bake sale, can we invite our neighbors? Why or why not? With whom can we pray, and when? Can I go to my friend's wedding or funeral?

Fellowship is a broad term that covers a variety of situations and circumstances. Church fellowship is a doctrine that needs continued careful study. How should we properly apply the love of God and our love for his Word to each situation and circumstance? Identifying some issues in Wisconsin Synod history from which misunderstandings and strong feelings on the topic of fellowship stem will be beneficial in an attempt to properly understanding the issues and differences on the basis of fellowship practices within our synod. Certainly a look at Scripture as it pertains to the topic will be most beneficial in an attempt to answer these questions which far too often weigh on the hearts of the redeemed in the Wisconsin Synod.

Church fellowship is a teaching for which the Wisconsin Synod is criticized and concerning which our own members are often confused. This happens among our members not only because they are often unaware of the issues of fellowship that may be at hand, but also because applications from other situations are sometimes imposed on them when there simply is nothing involved in their particular situation that necessitates those applications. A brief examination of some events in Wisconsin Synod history may help to explain why some staunch Wisconsin Synod members have the impression of fellowship principles which they do. With an understanding of the past from where some of the current issues come, we can then look at the doctrine of church fellowship and apply it with love for God and neighbor.

To understand how the Wisconsin Synod is to move forward in the future, it is beneficial to look back to its past to see from where it came. The break of church fellowship with the Missouri Synod must be placed near the top of any list of historically significant synod-shaping events that helped form the Wisconsin Synod as we know it today. The inter-synodical events of the mid-twentieth century and subsequent church history demonstrate the importance of passing on to the next generation sound church fellowship principles as well as applications and the motivation for them.

Literature Review

There certainly is no lack of writing on the topic of church fellowship available in the Wisconsin Synod. Essays and books have been continually produced by members of the Wisconsin Synod for more than 70 years. Dr. John Brug's book, *Church Fellowship: Working Together for the Truth*, is a must-read for any Wisconsin Synod member seeking to better grasp biblical principles of church fellowship. This book is really useful and quite helpful for any Wisconsin Synod member. It provides a thorough overview of the basic principles of church fellowship, its applications and some of the controversies that have been involved with it. Dr. Brug does not emphasize much on confession communicated by deeds, though he does address several situations to demonstrate differences in public and private expressions of fellowship.

Professor Richard Balge's paper, "Christian Fellowship In Principle And Practice," has an excellent concept as the basis for its assignment because it seems the point he was asked to address with the paper was how Jesus practiced fellowship and applied the principles. This specific point is not thoroughly addressed in the paper, but good church fellowship principles are communicated. Perhaps the most useful literature concerning church fellowship in the Wisconsin Synod is John Braun's, "Church Fellowship – Our Term, God's Teaching." Braun highlights the details of church fellowship principles which are often missed. Braun mentions that not only do private and public settings make a difference in establishing church fellowship, but also that when establishing church fellowship on the basis of one's confession; the confession is expressed in their words as well as in their deeds.

Many in the Wisconsin Synod who write about church fellowship reference a writing on the subject by Professor Carl Lawrenz. Lawrenz produced several valuable essays on church fellowship, especially "The Scriptural Principles Concerning Church Fellowship." Professor Wilbert Gawrisch in his "Levels of Fellowship' – Scriptural Principles or Rules of Men?" shows his strength of explaining the problems that arose in the Missouri Synod's teachings on church fellowship.

History

The Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod was founded as The German Evangelical Ministerium of Wisconsin in 1850 by three pastors: John Muehlhaeuser, John Weinmann, and William Wrede. When these men arrived in Wisconsin, they were not confessional Lutherans and did not fit in with other Lutherans. Two other Lutheran synods already had congregations in the Milwaukee area, but Muehlhaeuser, Weinmann, and Wrede had come from the Barmen Mission Society that served both Lutherans and the Reformed. The Barmen Mission Society minimized the differences in doctrine. John Muehlhaeuser saw church confessional statements as paper fences of separation from the blessings of fellowship with other Christians. Muehlhaeuser wrote, "I am in a position to offer every child of God and servant of Christ the hand of fellowship over the denominational fence."¹ Dr. C.F.W. Walther, the famous Missouri Synod theologian, had accused Muehlhaeuser and his associates of not even being Lutheran because of their relationship with unionistic German missionary societies and liberal Lutheran synods in the Eastern United States.

In the 1850s a number of pastors who had a better appreciation for Lutheran confessionalism than Muehlhaeuser came to Wisconsin and joined the Wisconsin Synod. In 1860, when Muehlhaeuser stepped down from the presidency, John Bading was elected president of the synod. As a young pastor, Bading had sought to leave the Wisconsin Synod and become a pastor in the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod for confessional reasons. Despite the Wisconsin Synod's weak confessional stance, Bading was encouraged to remain in fellowship with the Wisconsin Synod to be a leader toward true confessionalism. During the first synod convention of his presidency, Bading appealed to his synod to be willing to sacrifice "good and blood, life and limb and rather suffer all than depart one hair's breadth from the truth we have learned." Under Bading's leadership the synod indeed did become much more confessional in doctrine and tried to make its practice conform to its confessional position. In 1968 the Missouri Synod declared church fellowship with the Wisconsin Synod with President Walther saying, "All of our

¹ Braun, Together in Christ, p.4.

reservations about the dear Wisconsin Synod have not only faded but have been put to shame. God be thanked for his inexpressible gift!”²

In fellowship with each other the two synods, along with the Norwegian Synod, formed the Synodical Conference. Within less than a century, the big brother that helped the Wisconsin Synod grow up into a mature confessional Lutheran church body will become the wayward brother enmeshed in error. In the fourth and fifth decades of the twentieth century, the Wisconsin Synod found itself constrained to voice a protest against the rising tide of unionism and its attendant evils of indifference to biblical truth and undermining of confessional Lutheranism in the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod.

Wisconsin Synod leaders remembered experiencing loss of fellowship with brothers and sisters when many Wisconsin Synod members broke fellowship with the synod during the Protestant controversy only a generation before. The results of the Protestant controversy lingered. Congregations remained (and still do) outside the Wisconsin Synod as the Protestant Conference, though they consider themselves protesting members of the Wisconsin Synod. For Wisconsin Synod leaders, the experience of this loss of fellowship led them to feel strongly about not wanting to let any other break in fellowship to occur again.

Doctrinal differences, especially concerning the doctrine and practice of church fellowship, surfaced among the synods of the Synodical Conference during the 1940s and '50s. Problems first started to become apparent when the Missouri Synod began exploratory talks with leaders of the American Lutheran Church (ALC). The ALC differed, among other things, on its doctrine of predestination and therefore did not share doctrinal fellowship with the Synodical Conference. Since there had been no recent change on the ALC's doctrinal position, the Missouri Synod was then charged by some within the Synodical Conference of changing its position on church fellowship and its critical approach to the interpretation of Scripture. The Missouri Synod changed its position and became involved with the U.S. chaplaincy program as well as Scouting. The Wisconsin Synod had always refrained from any involvement with those institutions because of, among other issues, their religious participation with heterodox church members.

² Koehler, *The History of the Wisconsin Synod*, p.74.

The Missouri Synod rationalized and justified its new positions by establishing their teaching of “Levels of Fellowship.” The levels of fellowship depended on levels of doctrinal unity.

Levels of Fellowship or Levels of Inter-Christian Relationships³

Spiritual fellowship in the communion of saints
Pulpit and altar fellowship based on full doctrinal agreement
Various types of religious fellowship depending on the degree of doctrinal consensus
Social fellowship not based on religious considerations

These four main levels may have been further divided into more sub-levels. The levels-of-fellowship was an alternative to the Wisconsin Synod’s unit concept of church fellowship or the so-called all-or-nothing, either/or practice of church fellowship.

Addressing fellowship issues at hand with the Missouri Synod, Professor Edmund Reim, the chairman of the Wisconsin Synod’s Commission on Inter-Church Relations, wrote “We are confident, therefore, that in the trying times which seem to lie before us we shall stand firmly united, fighting, not to disrupt but to preserve the Synodical Conference – but to preserve it on the one basis on which it is worth saving, namely continued loyalty to the teachings on which it was founded, and – above all – unswerving faithfulness to the Word of God.”⁴

After years of continued talks, the Norwegian Synod severed its fellowship relations with the Missouri Synod in 1955 and withdrew from the Synodical Conference stating, “Whereas the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod has created divisions and offenses by its resolution, policies, and practices not in accord with Scripture, we, in obedience to the command of our Lord in Romans 16:17, 18, terminate our fellowship with the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod.”⁵ In response to this, Reim wrote, “The Norwegians are a small group, but they have met a major test

³ The diagram is adapted from that of Gawrisch, “‘Levels Of Fellowship’-Scriptural Principles Or Rules of Men?” p.3.

⁴ Reim, “Where Do We Stand?” p.64.

⁵ Resolution held in abeyance 1955.

magnificently. They have measured up! God grant that we do as well when the time for our discussion comes!”⁶

At this time, many Wisconsin Synod members hoped their synod would take similar action to that of the Norwegian Synod. However, the Wisconsin Synod decided in convention to maintain fellowship with the Missouri Synod and to continue discussions with them. The Wisconsin Synod resolved to delay a final decision until the Missouri Synod had more opportunity to address the issues in order to determine whether the Wisconsin Synod’s admonition of the Missouri Synod had been heard and rejected before breaking fellowship. Some felt that the Wisconsin Synod failed to be faithful to the Lord by holding the resolution in abeyance in 1955. For the sake of their consciences, they resigned their membership in the Wisconsin Synod and formed a new church body called the Church of the Lutheran Confession (CLC). Their chief complaint was that the Wisconsin Synod misapplied the principles of Christian fellowship by not breaking more quickly with the Synodical Conference and the Missouri Synod after it had publicly recognized the doctrinal differences. While the Wisconsin Synod broke fellowship with the Missouri Synod in 1961, the CLC and the Wisconsin Synod remain un-united to this day.

Among those to remove themselves from fellowship with the Wisconsin Synod was Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary president, Edmund Reim. In 1957 Reim addressed the Wisconsin Synod Convention saying,

Dear Brethren:

Two years ago I made the following statement to the 1955 Convention of our Synod, in regard to its action in matters of union at that time:

“The decision of the Synod to continue its fellowship with The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod pending a vote to follow the convention of that body in 1956 (even while recognizing that there is full reason for a separation now) compels me to declare that I can continue fellowship with my Synod only under clear and public protest. I hope and pray that the eventual decision concerning our relations with The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod will be such as to remove the occasion for this protest.”

⁶ Reim, “As We See It... The Norwegian Action” Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly July, 1955, p.216.

Last night's action of this current (1957) convention in rejecting the report and resolutions of its Floor Committee not only does not remove the occasion for this protest, but increases and confirms it. I have tried to make this protest clear and strong to this convention. Since it has been disregarded nevertheless, I find myself compelled to discontinue my fellowship with the Synod. I hope and pray that the Synod may yet return to its former ways and to full obedience to the Word of God, specifically Rom. 16:17, 18.

I trust that you will realize that I take this step, not in anger, but in deepest sorrow, and because I am constrained by the Word of God.⁷

Reim was like a watchman sighting a fire. He was the first to see the danger approaching and did not want to let it get too close. Others did not see the danger and did not see a need to react to it. He warned the people, and when they decided to not yet flee, he needed to save himself. Reim was one who felt that the Wisconsin Synod misapplied the principles of Christian fellowship by not breaking more quickly from the Missouri Synod after it had publicly recognized the doctrinal differences. The Wisconsin Synod still maintains that as long as an erring brother, whether an individual or a church body, continues to accept instruction he is not a persistent errorist and there is no necessity for severance of fellowship.

Maintaining church fellowship with the Missouri Synod was the main item on the agenda at several Wisconsin Synod conventions of the mid-twentieth century. The discussions of the topic were not ones that anyone took lightly. After a quarter century that brought its share of frustration and sadness, it was the application of the doctrine and practice of church fellowship which caused the termination of the Wisconsin Synod's fellowship with the Missouri Synod in 1961. For those who were Wisconsin Synod members in the middle years of the twentieth century and lived through the long struggle to maintain the Synodical Conference on its historic confessional foundations, that trial will always remain the most significant and traumatic episode of their church body's history. Even without the experience of the loss of the Protestant Conference only a generation earlier, this was a terribly emotional and personal loss for the people of the Wisconsin Synod. For many in the Wisconsin Synod, cutting the ties and bonds of church fellowship with the Missouri Synod meant cutting bonds with friends or relatives, even siblings, parents and children. Though these events profoundly affected the life and service of those who entered the public ministry before 1961, and its effect on them has in turn certainly

⁷ Wisconsin Synod Proceedings of the 1957 Convention, p. 145.

affected all of us, they did not incapacitate us or rob us of our joy in God's salvation and Christ's service.

After several attempts and prolonged discussions with the Missouri Synod as well as the CLC, the Wisconsin Synod remains without the bond of church fellowship which they formerly enjoyed with those brothers and sisters in faith. Still, all in the Wisconsin Synod hope and pray that this separation may be ended by a reunion in doctrine and practice of former allies in our privileged work of spreading God's gospel.

Examination of Doctrine

Fellowship by Faith

In Christ Jesus we are all children of God through faith.⁸ By faith, all believers are joined in fellowship with God. There are other forgiven sinners outside of the Wisconsin Synod whom the Holy Spirit has converted through the Means of Grace. There are others who have received the gift of fellowship with God. The one who added them was the Lord. They were passive; he was active. Oh, what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!⁹ The unmerited blessing of this fellowship with God through Jesus Christ ought to thrill our hearts as it thrilled the heart of St. John.

One Body

We are united with God as our Father through Christ. He is also the Father of many more children, who are our spiritual brothers and sisters. Those who are in fellowship with him are in fellowship with one another. God wants us to keep in mind that we stand before him not merely as individual believers, but as believers who are intimately joined together with all other believers here on earth and in heaven. This is why each Sunday we confess in our creeds that we believe in the Holy Christian Church, the communion (that is, the fellowship) of saints (believers). All true believers the world over are united in fellowship as members of the Holy Christian Church. This spiritual unity exists among all of Jesus' disciples. This unity crosses

⁸ Galatians 3:26.

⁹ 1 John 3:1.

denominational lines. It binds together all true Christians, all who believe in Jesus Christ as their Savior from their sins, regardless of what their denominational affiliation may be.

It is the individual believers themselves, rather than any visible assembly, who make up this church. The Means of Grace are the visible marks of the church. Where the Means of Grace are in use, there Christians will be and there the Holy Spirit will be working. The Holy Spirit will operate wherever the gospel is proclaimed, and wherever the gospel of Jesus Christ is being proclaimed, believers will be present.

One and the same Spirit dwells in the hearts of every member of the Holy Christian Church. The Holy Spirit has given them the same identical hope of salvation through the same Jesus Christ as their Savior from sin. Through their common faith in the one Lord and Savior, wrought in their hearts by the same Spirit through the same Means of Grace, they have one God and Father who is above all as the Creator and Master of all, who is through all using them to carry out his plans, who is living and dwelling in them through his Spirit.

This Spirit-wrought faith at the same time unites each of us in an intimate bond with all other believers. From the very moment that we sinners were received into this blessed fellowship with our God through faith in Christ as our Savior, we also entered into another fellowship that should likewise thrill our hearts. We were intimately united with one another, with every other believer in Christ. Faith in our Savior, which unites us individually with God, at the very same time unites us with one another, makes us spiritual brothers and sisters.

The Holy Christian Church is undivided. Christians are joined together into one body regardless of their gender, age, wealth, or nationality. Whether they are male or female; young or old; rich or poor; white or black; even Lutheran, Baptist, or Catholic, all who truly believe in Jesus as their Savior from sin are members of one family, the Holy Christian Church. “All believers the world over, regardless of race, nationality, age, sex, and station of life, together with those who have already departed out of this life in faith, constitute one spiritual family with Christ as its Head... Faith in Christ binds them closely together.”¹⁰ There is one body and one

¹⁰ Lawrenz, “The Scriptural Principles Concerning Church Fellowship,” p.2.

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.¹¹

To be sure, each Christian is in fellowship with all Christians of all time. This fellowship will be recognized and expressed when all Christians are liberated from the limitations of this life and united together in heaven.

Church Fellowship Defined

Church fellowship is a term that has been used to designate both a status and an activity. Church fellowship can be defined as the activity which includes every joint expression, manifestation, and demonstration of the common faith in which Christians, on the basis of their common confession, find themselves to be united with one another.¹² Church fellowship is a public announcement of the commitment to the truth and the desire to avoid all that is contrary to the Word of God.

Christian fellowship is expressed in action. When we are defining an expression of church fellowship, it is imperative that we simply define it as a joint expression of common faith. Church fellowship is any and every joint proclamation of the gospel in an expression of cooperation, because whenever one proclaims the gospel they express their Christian faith, and when they proclaim it with others they express their faith jointly with them. Joint celebration of the Lord's Supper is an expression of church fellowship, because in partaking of the Lord's Supper with others, one expresses agreement of faith with all those with whom the Lord's Supper is jointly celebrated. Christians are to worship and commune only with Christians with whom they are in complete doctrinal agreement. Christians should not celebrate the Lord's Supper with congregations or individuals who adhere to false doctrine. It is important to not lose emphasis of the fact that what God in his grace does for me and others through the Means of Grace is always more vital than our joint responses of faith.

The practice of church fellowship is not limited to joint participation in the Means of Grace. There are many more New Testament examples of Christians sharing what they have and acting in love as their expression of Christian fellowship. Christians are expressing Christian

¹¹ Ephesians 4:4-6.

¹² WELS Statement on Church Fellowship, Synod Proceedings 35th Convention, pp.205-208.

fellowship whenever they encourage one another by worshipping together. We cannot invite pastors who reject teachings of the Bible to preach in our churches, nor can our pastors preach in heterodox churches, or churches which reject teachings of the Bible or hold to error in their doctrine or practice. Those who are willing to include the heterodox or the heretic in the joint use of the Means of Grace do not deny that this is an expression of fellowship. Rather, they simply declare that they are in fellowship with the heterodox and the heretics. Of course, note that there is a difference between using the Means of Grace *with* someone and using the Means of Grace *for the benefit of* someone.

It is only natural that Christians will also give outward expression to their unity in God's family by joining with fellow believers in prayer. Since God-pleasing prayer always flows from faith, prayer is an act of worship. Prayer is always a religious act. Simultaneous, silent prayer within a group that is not united in doctrine is not an expression of fellowship. Praying with a person, however, is always an act of joint worship and therefore an act of church fellowship. All prayer, therefore, should be offered in accordance with the biblical principles of church fellowship. There is no middle ground. If true prayer is always an act of worship, joint prayer calls for the same unity of doctrine as any other act of worship. "‘Have nothing to do with them’ and ‘keep away from them’ cannot mean ‘pray with them.’ We, therefore, do not pray with Christians who are adherents of false doctrine."¹³

It is wrong for us to participate in prayers, hymns, or creeds in any worship setting that supports error, such as the services of a heterodox church or an ecumenical service. Use of the Means of Grace and prayer are by their very nature always expressions of faith, but other acts, such as a greeting, a handshake, extending hospitality, physical help to others or giving to charity, may also be done in a secular context and are, therefore, not always expressions of church fellowship. It depends on the context in which they are done. Hence, doing these things together with others does not necessarily make them joint expressions of faith. The problem arises when cooperation in external activities actually involves an individual or church body in joint religious work with individuals or church bodies not in their church fellowship.

¹³ Brug, Church Fellowship, p.115.

Church fellowship is a unit concept: all or nothing. Termination of church fellowship is termination of all activities which are joint expressions of faith. Every joint expression of faith with those who teach differently is to be avoided. The term church fellowship is used to apply to the uniting with fellow Christians and the avoiding of false teachers. The term labels a teaching of Scripture which asks us to be selective and discriminatory when we join with others to express our Christian faith.

We do not deny or confuse a person's public confession with the *fides qua*, the faith with which one believes. It is by such faith that we are justified. Subjective faith, though known to God, is hidden to man and therefore cannot serve as the basis for the acknowledgement and exercise of church fellowship between Christians here on earth.

Unity Recognized

Church fellowship must be recognized and expressed on the basis of confession. We must determine whether we can practice church fellowship with an individual by examining his or her confession of faith. We do not have divine knowledge of each heart we encounter. We can only act on what we perceive, namely, a confession. Because we observe only the outward appearance, we cannot know with certainty those who belong to the Lord. God alone can peer into the heart where faith resides. While we do not know for sure which people belong to the Lord, he does. Since we cannot see the faith in people's hearts, we must determine whether we can practice fellowship with an individual or a group by comparing their confession of faith with Scripture. Complete confessional unity is the necessary scriptural basis for all practice of church fellowship, that is, for pulpit, altar, and prayer fellowship.¹⁴

Groups of Christians, likewise, can only deal with other groups of Christians on the basis of their confession. Individuals, who belong to such a group, profess full acceptance of what the group to which they belong confesses. For groups of Christians, if they have no uniform confession, there should be no expression of uniformity. Scriptural principles on public church fellowship relations apply commonly to a congregation, church body, church federation, church

¹⁴ Confessional agreement held by the Synodical Council in 1872, Doctrinal Statements of the WELS, "Theses on Church Fellowship," p.25.

agency or cooperative church activity. Fellowship can only be practiced properly on the basis of the confession of an individual or church body.

In a public setting, confession is perceived and assumed according to the public statements and confession of the denomination of which one is a member. Selective fellowship, the idea that it is right and proper for each Christian to have fellowship with people who, based on their confession, are of the same faith as they, even if they belong to a church body which is not in fellowship with our own organization, is a complete disregard for the public perception according to one's denominational membership. The practice of selective fellowship is something that dates back to the early days of Lutheranism in America. As new Lutheran synods were being established, Lutheran pastors would find other Lutheran pastors and congregations of other synods, and they would naturally want to practice altar and pulpit fellowship with them. Because they had previously been, for the most part, unaware of each other's existence, church fellowship between the two synods had not been pursued, let alone confirmed. Often the two men who found each other would be in doctrinal agreement with each other. Therefore, they sometimes felt comfortable inviting one another to preach from each other's pulpits. Some Christian denominations, even some Lutherans, practice selective fellowship. In public settings this is not an acceptable practice. In public, impressions are made, assumptions are made. Denominational fellowship is recognized and maintained for a reason. By one's denominational membership it can be understood what instruction they have received and what doctrines they believe to be true.

In private, it can be a different situation.

The one practical difference between the two situations, however, is that when religious fellowship with family or friends involves only private actions that will not give public offense, we may consider not only the public confession they make through their church membership, but also their private, personal confession. It is the public confession of their church that governs our public fellowship relationship with our family or friends... In our private relationships with them, we may also consider their personal confession.¹⁵

In private situations, the issue of church fellowship is an issue of conscience. When individual Christians find themselves in a private setting together with another Christian of another

¹⁵ Brug, Church Fellowship, p.147.

denomination, they are to establish church fellowship as they desire on the basis of their common confession of agreement in doctrine. Once church fellowship has been established on the basis of a common confession in this private setting, Christians can enjoy all the blessings of church fellowship that a private setting allows.

Faith is confessed in words. While no one through normal observation is able to see the faith which may live within the heart, we are able to perceive and understand the confession that is spoken or written. Faith is also confessed in actions. We respond to confessions of words as well as actions. This is an important point which is often unknown or overlooked. If church fellowship between individuals in a private setting is established on the basis of their verbal confession, but their actions fail to produce fruits in keeping with the confession they had given, the basis for church fellowship with them would need to be reexamined. Church fellowship can be based only on confession of faith by word and deed. "As long as a person is affiliated with a synod with an impure confession, he shares the responsibility for the error."¹⁶ Nevertheless, the Lord knows those who are his.

We are not allowing anyone into nor are we excluding anyone from the Holy Christian Church by the practice of church fellowship. No one has the right or power to do so. We are maintaining a close confessional unity based on a common understanding of God's Word. Christians ought to be ready to give their lives for what they believe to be the true Word of God, and to cherish that truth by expressing unity of that faith with only those who believe and confess as they do. It should be clear that the faithful Christian can exercise church fellowship only on the level of the visible church, on what is known and able to be perceived. Without a common confession, the spiritual bond of union among all true Christians is still present but invisible and for all practical purposes impossible to be of value in recognizing unity.

It would not be wholesome to think of church fellowship too exclusively in terms of what we might call its negative side; the limitations and restrictions which God in his Word has placed upon the outward exercise of church fellowship. The doctrine of church fellowship is not a set of dry, formal, man-made church rules or regulations which hinder the work of the Holy Spirit and make it difficult for pastors, missionaries, and evangelists of every kind to witness for Christ and

¹⁶ Meyer, "Unionism," p.85

to bring the gospel to mankind. The task before every Christian is to adhere to the Word of God faithfully and to proclaim its whole truth proudly. We pray that by God's grace he give us the willingness and the wisdom to apply these principles faithfully.

Error Addressed

The unity of fellowship is to be maintained and demonstrated by an alert assembly of believers who know what the Word of the God says and who turn away from all which is false. We are eager to work together with fellow Christians, but we must avoid working with those who teach or tolerate error. Jesus directed his sheep to be careful as they sought out fellow Christians. "Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize them."¹⁷ The Lord tells us in his Word that we can no longer recognize and treat as brothers those who in spite of earnest admonition persistently cling to an error in doctrine or practice, who demand recognition and toleration for their error or make propaganda for it. "All Christians are required by God to discriminate between orthodox and heterodox church-bodies, and, in case they have strayed into heterodox church-bodies, to leave them."¹⁸

The Christian longs to keep the Word of God pure and without error. It is a joy and delight to do so. We express our concern for doctrine each time we pray "hallowed be your name." A confession on the basis of Scripture includes confession of complete faithfulness to the entire Word of God, not only part of it. We dare speak and do nothing more than what God gives us a right to say and do. No one has the privilege, and to no one may the privilege be granted, to believe or to teach anything other than what God has revealed to us in his Word, no matter whether it pertains to primary or secondary articles of faith, to fundamental or non-fundamental doctrines, to matters of faith or of practice, to historical items or other matters subject to the light of reason, to important or seemingly unimportant matters.

We should be indignant when God's Word is twisted in support of all sorts of false teaching and shameful conduct. We cannot allow what is contrary to God's Word to stand unchallenged or unopposed. Christians must testify to the truth and warn against error. We are to

¹⁷ Matthew 7:15-16.

¹⁸ Gawrisch, "Romans 16:17, 18 and Its Application to Individual Fellowship," p.1.

warn and alert the saints to dangers of error and to protect souls from error. We are to warn all who are holding. “Warn a divisive person once, and then warn them a second time. After that, have nothing to do with them.”¹⁹

False teaching that is tolerated in a church is always dangerous to people’s faith. Christians are responsible to separate themselves from such error in order to protect themselves from it and to warn others against it. It is not the church’s business to discipline unbelievers who are outside their church fellowship, but rather to deal with impenitent sinners who claim to be Christians in spite of their impenitence. If they cling to false doctrine in spite of admonition, we must not join them in any way that would express any unity of faith, or church fellowship with them. We must determine whether our admonition has been heard and rejected before we terminate our church fellowship with them. Separation from error and errorists is absolutely necessary, both to protect the redeemed and to vindicate God’s honor.

We do not join with heterodox churches in charitable work nor in the operation of charitable institutions. It is, of course, possible to do charitable work outside of the framework of religious fellowship, as is done in many secular charities. We obviously cannot let a false teacher preach in our congregations. We do not participate in religious studies and consultations with heterodox churches, except in efforts to eliminate their errors which separate them from us.

As the Apostle Paul wrote to his beloved brothers and sisters in Rome, “I urge you, brothers and sisters, 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. For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people.”²⁰ This is the most common passage cited in reference to church fellowship. Though it certainly applies, it should not be the first one that comes to mind. Church fellowship should be expressed in the positive sense (as has already been explained and which later will be explained further), rather than the first step being to express church fellowship in the negative sense. These two verses from Romans are only one of the key *sedes doctrinae* which address an important aspect of the doctrine of church fellowship.

¹⁹ Titus 3:10.

²⁰ Romans 16:17-18.

Still, our God has instructed us to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in the believers' way. Keep in mind that we are not instructed to keep away from those who have *been divided*, only from those who *cause divisions*. Romans 16:17-18 describes people who "are causing divisions and setting up traps which cause people to fall into sin, contrary to the teaching you have learned." The passage clearly is a warning against those who *cause divisions* and scandals. The Greek participle ποιοῦντας which is translated "are causing" describes an action that is continuous and habitual. They are not naïve or uninformed victims who unknowingly follow false doctrine. They are teachers who are aware of and persist in their false doctrine and their sinful conduct in spite of warnings against it. Obeying the Lord's command "avoid them" is vital for the health of the church and the Christians in it. Therefore, we should never be embarrassed by church fellowship or apologize for it, but should practice it eagerly.

It is clear that proper application of the principles of church fellowship will keep us from practicing church fellowship publicly with all those who follow adherents of false doctrine and practice and who identify themselves with them, whether they themselves are fully conscious of what they are doing or not.

We object to our members joining in worship services of the heterodox because this gives the appearance and impression of supporting their false teaching. Our services are not such a compromised setting as long as no rights or recognition are being given to error. Visitors of other denominations who are present are not providing their own input to our services; they are receiving our doctrine. Our services are our services, not joint services. We do not have the same objection to visitors appearing to give assent to our services, because our services do not promote false doctrine.

"Persistent causers of divisions and offenses contrary to apostolic teaching the Roman Christians are to avoid, and that means cease all further fellowshiping with them, every further joint expression of faith. That Paul does not mean social contact or any other ordinary contacts of life is evident from what he told the Corinthians when they misunderstood his exhortation that

they should have no company with fornicators.”²¹ The Scriptures require us to recognize the distinction between truth and error and to act accordingly. We have a responsibility to deal patiently with the weak person who has fallen into error, but we have an equal responsibility to avoid giving offense to other weak Christians who might be misled by the error. We must not regard our responsibility to practice the principles of church fellowship as a burden or a handicap, but as a privilege and an opportunity. It is an opportunity to show love for God and for our neighbor, an opportunity to suffer for the truth if it is God’s will that we do so.

Church fellowship principles are not ends in themselves. God gave them for the good of people’s souls. We must pray for courage and confidence in dealing with the adherents of error. We ask God to take away any timidity or desire for the approval of men, which may make us hesitant to testify clearly against error or make us willing to yield to false teachers and their followers. The goal of this command is love: love for the errorists, love for their victims, love for anyone who is threatened by false teachings, and love for God and his truth. “Those who are true disciples of the Good Shepherd will, of course, show Christian love and concern toward all their fellow human beings, including those who profess to be Christians but are enmeshed in error.”²² The doctrine of church fellowship is a doctrine about love; God loves us, we love each other, we love his truth, we love the opportunity to express together our faith in his truth, and we love the opportunity to tell others about his truth. To withhold the truth from someone who needs it, to passively go along with error can never be love.

Unity Cherished

“Such differences are serious. When unbelievers see that the churches disagree, they scoff. But it is also a serious matter to be silent when God’s Word and our consciences require us to speak. It is also a serious matter to break off fellowship relations without first having exhausted all Christian means of preserving unity of teaching and practice.”²³

²¹ Lawrenz, “The Historical Background And The Comparison in Thought of the Biblical Commands In Matthew 18:17; Romans 16:17, 18; 2 Corinthians 6:14; and 2 Thessalonians 3:14, 15,” p.8. The passage referenced in this quote is 1 Corinthians 5:10, “Not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world.”

²² Gawrisch, “‘Levels Of Fellowship’-Scriptural Principles Or Rules Of Men?” p.7.

²³ Kowalke, *You and Your Synod*, p.39.

“How good and pleasant it is when God’s people live together in unity!”²⁴ As there is a gift of fellowship with God which all believers enjoy, so it is God’s intention that all believers together share the enjoyment of that fellowship. We are one body. The world hates the gospel and our environment is Christ-despising, Christ-ignoring. But in the midst of this hostile culture, Christians gather to be strengthened in faith toward God and in fervent love toward one another. This opportunity is precious and this unity is to be cherished and protected. Jesus desires all of us, his believers, to be united. In his words,

My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world. For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified. “My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one—I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.”²⁵

We cherish this fellowship with God and all believers as a great blessing. Wherever Christian faith manifests itself and expresses itself, the Lord would have us strengthen and encourage it. We want to express our fellowship or unity with those who believe as we do. Agreement in doctrine draws people together into unity. The desire of each Christian should be faithfulness to the entire Word of God.

Weakness of faith is in itself not a reason for terminating church fellowship. How can we determine if we are dealing with weak brothers and sisters or with persistent adherents of false doctrine? We can determine this only by examining their confession. What do they say? What do they do? Does their confession contradict Scripture? Are they making propaganda for their error? Are they willing to accept instruction and correct their errors, or do they reject correction and hold to their error?

The recognition of fellow Christians is not an academic exercise. It is a vital part of our lives as believers. It is often difficult for a Christian, in spite of the clear instructions of Jesus and

²⁴ Psalm 133:1.

²⁵ John 17:15-23.

his apostles, to know whom he can recognize as a fellow believer and with whom he may give expression to that fellowship. Weakness of faith is not cause for suspension of fellowship. Patient evangelical admonition comes from concern for souls. If admonition is refused after its patient application, then the error is not repented of and there is cause for separation. Such separation follows when an individual persists in error. We are not to associate with persistent errorists. The time when the separation is to take place may result in painful difference of opinion.

We should try not to offend, or create spiritual stumbling blocks for anyone, especially those who believe in Jesus Christ as their Savior from sin, and who by their confession lead us to assume that they do believe in him, even though they may still be weak in Christian understanding and judgment. We should do all in our power to build them up in their faith and Christian understanding. “Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.”²⁶ We must work together for the truth. We can do nothing against the truth.

It is not necessary for the true unity of the Christian Church that ceremonies, instituted by men, should be observed uniformly in all places. The Formula of Concord says “ceremonies or ecclesiastical practices that are neither commanded nor forbidden in God’s Word, but have been established only for good order and decorum, are in and of themselves neither worship ordained by God nor a part of such worship.”²⁷ The problem occurs when such ceremonies or ecclesiastical practices are being forced or required and unnecessarily burdening on consciences.

We can be quick to criticize and slow to remember that no one “should condemn another because the one has fewer or more external ceremonies not commanded by God than the other has, when otherwise there is unity with the other.”²⁸ As long as these ceremonies are not commanded, they can be commended. We shouldn’t forget that fellowship principles were made for man; man wasn’t made for fellowship principles. It is always God’s doctrine that is at stake, never our own.

²⁶ Galatians 6:10.

²⁷ Formula of Concord, Epit. X, 3, p. 515, Kolb, Wengert.

²⁸ Formula of Concord, Epit. X, 7, p. 516, Kolb, Wengert.

By study and evangelical application of church fellowship principles, we want to preserve the clear Word of God free from error for ourselves, others, and our children. Church fellowship is not only being *with* one another in faith, it is also being *for* one another, even for those who are strangers. Fellowship is for you and for the person next to you, not merely an abstract concern in principle for the communion of saints. As the loving father in Jesus' parable was eager to regain his lost, prodigal son, so we are eager to regain a lost brother.²⁹

Gospel Proclaimed

There is a difference between the deceiver and the deceived. If a prophet turns people away from Christ and his righteousness, away from God and his grace, away from the wisdom of the Holy Spirit in his Word, away from the Means of Grace, he is a false prophet. If not, then you can't say that he is, no matter how much time he may spend with those who are. "The Scriptures most emphatically denounce unionism with errorists in any form, they just as emphatically insist on the most tender consideration for the weak."³⁰

We pray for the salvation of all mankind, including errorists. It might be in place to remind ourselves that termination of fellowship is a *religious* function. It does not mean social ostracism or boycotting those with whom we are not in fellowship. If we are to say that we cannot with good conscience conduct business of any kind with those with whom we are not in fellowship, then we will be left unable to continue the vast majority of business transactions that are a part of our regular routines and way of life.³¹

The Lord recognized also those of weak faith as his believers; and we will want to do likewise. Weak believers distinguish themselves from mockers and unbelievers in their willingness to receive spiritual help and instruction. If they are unaware of the unscriptural beliefs or practices of their church and, thus, are not knowingly adherents of false doctrine, we will urge them to become accurately informed about the teachings and activities of their church, which they are supporting. The Savior's heart went out to such as these, so must the heart of any shepherd who love for God's truth and love for God's people. "Accept the one whose faith is

²⁹ Cf. Luke 15:11-32.

³⁰ Meyer, "Unionism," p. 80.

³¹ Cf. 1 Corinthians 5:9-11.

weak, without quarreling over disputable matters.”³² Finally, all Christians here on earth are in reality still weak and imperfect. Weakness of faith is in itself not a reason for terminating church fellowship, but rather an inducement for practicing it vigorously to help one another in overcoming our individual weaknesses.³³ Weakness of faith on the part of others is also not a reason to not pursue fellowship with them. Wherever Christian faith manifests and expresses itself the Lord would have us strengthen and encourage it.

Church fellowship is to be practiced in Christian love. Jesus reserved his harshest tones for false teachers; he sympathized with their victims.³⁴ Church bodies, like individual Christians, are to live up to the dictum of the law’s second table, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” We ought to pay fully the great debt of love to all who are still weak in faith and Christian understanding. Then we will also gain new strength to observe the limitations which our Lord has placed upon the exercise of Christian fellowship in a faithful yet evangelical manner. Showing love for the weak does not mean that we will be weak in acting against the error, even when our actions may not be fully understood by those who have a weak understanding of church fellowship principles.

God considers mission work the most important thing we do on earth. If we know the truth, but do not have enough love to share it with others, our ability to share that truth is worthless and the truth cannot accomplish its purpose. If we know the gospel, but withhold it from those crushed by the burden of sin, our ability to spread the gospel is pointless and the gospel cannot accomplish its healing purpose. We must always share the truth in a gentle, tactful way. To withhold the truth from someone is never love. Love which is living by the truth must fight for the truth. If we love God’s truth, we will share all of it with everyone, especially when they are in danger of being led astray by false teachings. Sharing God’s truth is the highest expression of love. Let us reflect the Savior’s love reaching out to sinners everywhere.

³² Romans 14:1.

³³ Doctrinal Statements of the WELS, “Theses on Church Fellowship,” p.32.

³⁴ Cf. Matthew 23.

Practical Application

Church fellowship is defined as the activity which includes every joint expression, manifestation, and demonstration of the common faith in which Christians, on the basis of their common confession, find themselves to be united with one another. Church fellowship is limited to only those activities which are about expressing unity of faith, not about family, business, social or political relationships, but about religious and spiritual relationships. Scripture does not prohibit cooperation in externals, such matters that do not involve a joint confession of faith. Hence doing such things together with others does not necessarily make them joint expressions of faith.

Levels of church fellowship there are not, but several separate things are referred to as “fellowship.” Sharing a pot-luck together in the church basement is fellowship, but joining together at the Lord’s Table for communion is also fellowship: one much more intimate than the other, both different than the other. We call things like potlucks “fellowship” too. We can’t give the impression through confusion of terms that we can’t encourage potlucks with people outside our denomination. “It is important, then, to distinguish three aspects of fellowship: the spiritual fellowship that all believers have with God and with each other through faith in Christ, the doctrinal fellowship that is recognized by a shared confession of the truth, and the fellowship that is expressed by joint activities.”³⁵

We must remember that there are hard cases, cases of casuistry, in which it is difficult to determine which scriptural principle applies. In such cases, like-minded Christians may not reach the same conclusion at the same time. We should recognize that exceptional cases may lead us to depart from our normal practice, but we should be on guard that exceptions are not used to undermine the principles. We must be careful that we do not allow difficult cases to establish or modify the principles. We must not let feelings, emotions, or human reason pressure us into a particular application that would reshape our principles in order to condone our actions.

We must guard against allowing specific previous applications or historical precedents to become rigid rules that govern all similar cases. We must evaluate each case in the light of the

³⁵ Brug, Church Fellowship, pp.20-21.

scriptural principles. In hard cases we should always ask ourselves, “How can I best give a clear testimony against error to the false teacher, to his adherents, and to everyone else who observes my action? How can I best win them for the truth?”³⁶

Subtle heresies affect not only those outside the church. To them, who know nothing else, man-made practices can become “the way that things *need* to be.” Thus, they form their own theological opinions based on man-made practices. They form their own opinions of what the church can and cannot do. They form their opinions based on what they have experienced and not on Scripture. Usually, these opinions formed are in and of themselves not wrong, but because they are not based on Scripture the opinions cannot be imposed on others. When people start making their own opinions known to others and imposing them as if they were the opinions of God, then they are teaching heresy. In the Wisconsin Synod we find such strong opinions about what is right and wrong concerning, among other things, fellowship practices. The work of the church, the great commission and the spreading of the gospel is something that Christians take very seriously. Because they take it so seriously, they establish strong feelings about it. Christians can get very emotional about how they feel the church should operate and be run, and how the church should or can best reach people with the gospel. But no matter what any church does, we judge them based not on their ceremonies,³⁷ but based on their confession.

We must reject any subjective standard for the practice of church fellowship. Subjective standards achieve only the loss of our sensitivity to error and our appreciation of the truth. A set of rules can be easier to follow, but church fellowship principles must be applied uniquely to each unique situation. We must seek spiritual benefit for all involved and attempt to avoid offense. The Formula of Concord says that “all frivolity and offense must be avoided, and special consideration must be given particularly to those who are weak in faith.”³⁸

If one were to look at our practices throughout the country and attempt to establish any sort of rule by drawing a line between what is right and what is wrong in any given situation, the Wisconsin Synod would be made out to look pretty hypocritical once that newly established rule of right and wrong is applied to any other situation. Any applications that have been established

³⁶ Brug, Church Fellowship, p.118.

³⁷ Cf. Colossians 2:16.

³⁸ Epit. X, 5, p. 515, Kolb, Wengert.

as guidelines for church fellowship practices where church fellowship is an issue of conscience are but rules taught by men.³⁹ Applications of church fellowship in any situation cannot be automatically applied to every other situation. Applications of doctrine and practice of church fellowship principles must be reconsidered in every situation. For, no situation is ever exactly the same as another.

Scriptural church fellowship principles must be maintained and applied to every situation. Carrying the demands of the Scriptures is never easy. It will produce difficult family situations. It will put us on the spot in group settings. It has placed us against the popular idea that we all believe the same thing about the Supreme Being. When pastors give careful, loving, and ongoing instruction about the biblical principles of church fellowship, it is less likely that these problems will have to be dealt with at emotional occasions such as weddings and funerals, when there is great pressure to compromise to avoid conflict. It must be granted, however, that our principles and practices of church fellowship will remain offensive to many people, just as many other parts of God's Word are.

Members of the Wisconsin Synod may at times experience not only a lack of adequate instruction on the biblical principles of church fellowship, but they also experience misguided or close-minded application from their leaders. If the issues that cloud our understanding truly do exist still as results from synodical controversies of the past, then those issues naturally affect the people of our synod who have strong family ties to the ministry and history of our synod. Often, the people of our synod who have strong family ties to the ministry and history of our synod are our called workers. The danger is that they, then, may be imposing upon their people specific applications of church fellowship that were taught to them by their grandfathers, rather than by Scripture. Can we invite people, who are not members of a congregation in church fellowship with us, to a church bake sale? Can we invite them to join our church choir? Can we hire them to be musicians in our congregations?⁴⁰ Members of the Wisconsin Synod are not united in their answers to these questions. Some try to answer these questions with preconceived notions stemming from previous experience. Some try to answer these questions with their own

³⁹ Matthew 15:9, Isaiah 29:13.

⁴⁰ Cf. Appendix

rationalism. The right way to answer these questions is to apply church fellowship principles to each situation in order to discern to best answer.

Many people with whom we are "walking together" have unnecessarily sensitive consciences in regard to issues of fellowship. Their consciences cause confusion for those whose consciences were not previously burdened, and, at times, hinder outreach efforts. This can be avoided if the spiritual leaders of the Wisconsin Synod nurture the people of their congregations to become mature Christians who are concerned only about the desires of God rather than the desires of men, and who demonstrate their love for God and his Word by showing his love and his Word to all those around them.

Church fellowship principles are not intended to provide a rule book or a set of legal precedents for dealing with all similar cases in the future. Again, we do not practice "selective fellowship" as some church bodies do, yet the application of church fellowship principles should not be applied mechanically, but evangelically.

In our private contact with individuals who happen to be affiliated with a denomination with which we are not in fellowship, especially also erroristic Lutheran synods, it will often be a matter of earnest, conscientious judgment which Word of the Lord applies, or at least applies for the time being. Through friendship or family relations we may often be thrown together with such individuals, who in these intimate contacts make a fine confession of Christian faith, who in many ways by word or deed give evidence that they profess to cling as humble sinners to the Savior and his grace alone. We find ourselves one with them in all the simple Catechism truths, which have an opportunity to come up for discussion. They assert that they want to do nothing less than to disobey their Lord or to do anything contrary to His Word. Yet they are weak in understanding the implication of their church and are not conscious of the inconsistencies in which it involves them. The doctrinal errors, the false practice, the unionism to which their denomination is committed may not be even so apparent in their own church group or at least escapes their detection. You will, of course, be interested in getting them to see it and untiring in your effort to accomplish that as opportunity presents itself. . . In the meantime these intimate contacts and relations give natural occasions to join in prayer at meals, in private devotions, in singing of Christian hymns. Are we then simply to say that we cannot recognize them as fellow Christians because of their church affiliation, even though we are not yet in a position to convince them of the wrong in which they are involved?⁴¹

⁴¹ Lawrenz "A Statement on the Application of Our Fellowship Principles."

Human judgment must evaluate each situation to see which principles apply at a particular moment. Thinking the issues through and seeking to apply them evangelically rather than mechanically is the proper mode of application for church fellowship principles.

Leaders of Wisconsin Synod churches and schools are responsible to encourage all to seek to establish in our members a sense of unity, pride and appreciation for our fellowship principles, applications and church body. The leaders should provide excellent ongoing instruction in the meaning of the Lord's Supper so that members understand why we treat it so carefully. We should train the members of the congregations to inform visitors whom they bring with them about our practices in advance so visitors are not surprised to find they cannot receive the Lord's Supper in our congregations. We should make announcements in the bulletin and before the celebration of the Lord's Supper so that visitors understand the loving concerns that lie behind our practice.

The apostle John wrote, "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."⁴² From these words we can understand that Christians are not to support false teachers in any way. This would include financial support, so we should not give money to heterodox churches. John's words also make it clear that anyone who supports a teacher expresses unity and agreement with their teaching. This is true whether this teacher is one's own pastor or someone whose work is being done elsewhere. We, therefore, do not provide financial support or any other form of assistance to pastors, missionaries, or professors outside of our church fellowship or to any form of church organization that persists in false teaching in spite of admonition. At the same time, we need not reject offerings made by visitors, but we should be very careful that non-members are giving for good reason with proper motivation and not receiving a faulty impression concerning the motivation for Christian giving. Fundraising efforts of any kind are often denied and rejected by pastors or teachers in the Wisconsin Synod because of church fellowship issues. Concern over fund raising efforts is more of an issue of stewardship than fellowship.

⁴² 2 John 10-11.

One area where people often are troubled applying church fellowship principles is concerning prayer. A Christian's conscience should not ever be burdened when faced with the desire or opportunity to pray. Yet, because of fellowship principles, we are not always sure whether we should pray with those who may be around us. There is no reason for a Christian family to abandon prayer and family devotions when others are present with them in their home and at their table. In fact, this situation can be a good opportunity to proclaim the truth. What should be done when asked to join in prayer at a community group meeting? Again, prayer can be a good testimony and example to others. In each situation, what needs to be determined is what would be most beneficial. Is there benefit in politely remaining silent while the others pray? Is there benefit in speaking up and explaining why it would be against conscience to join in pray in a secular public setting? Is there benefit in taking the lead, acknowledging differences in confession, and explaining that you are about to say a prayer for yourself and anyone who agrees with the words of your prayer is welcome to make it their own prayer as well? Apply church fellowship principles to each situation will determine what is most beneficial. Praying in the presence of a person is not the same as praying with a person.

“Let us be honest to admit that... we can become pre-occupied with doctrinal controversies to the loss of missionary zeal and endeavor.”⁴³ “The evangelical practice of scriptural fellowship principles is not the focal point of our ministry, not the stone which gives all the other stones their direction. But the very phrases ‘evangelical practice’ and ‘scriptural principles’ testify that these concerns are not far removed from the central business of preaching Christ crucified and risen.⁴⁴ Consider how Jesus acted toward those who were weak in their faith. He never said, “Because you don’t believe in me I can’t talk to you.” No, he said, “Come, walk with me, let me tell you what you need.” We must remember, “I am a Lutheran and proud of it, but I am a Christian first.”

Pastors should also make every effort at weddings and funerals to evangelize the heterodox relatives while they are still alive, when speaking the gospel to them can still do some good. “When we are presented with an opportunity to give a clear testimony and to win people for the truth, we should give a greater priority to the opportunity to win those in error than to the

⁴³ Franzmann, “Being Made All Things to All Men-1 Corinthians 9:19-22,” p.5.

⁴⁴ Balge “Christian Fellowship In Principle And Practice,” p.1.

possibility that someone somewhere might take offense that we spoke there. For those who are caught in error, the opportunity to hear and heed our testimony might be a matter of spiritual life or death. We must exert every possible effort to bring even one lost sheep back to the fold.”⁴⁵

We don’t want to give anybody the false impression that what they hold on to contrary to Scripture is satisfactory. “Two Christian principles need to direct us: the great debt of love which the Lord would have us pay to the weak brother, and His clear injunction (also flowing out of love) to avoid those who adhere to false doctrine and practice and all who make themselves partakers of their evil deeds.”⁴⁶ Let us not ever forget that first principle.

“Wherever Christian faith manifests and expresses itself the Lord would have us strengthen and encourage it... We are not to ‘offend’ those who believe in Him, and who by their confession lead us to assume that they do believe in Him, even though they may still be weak in Christian understanding and judgment. We are rather to do all in our power to build them up in their faith and Christian understanding.”⁴⁷

In a situation that gives pause because of issues of church fellowship, we can ask ourselves, “What can I do to give a clear presentation of the truth to those who need to hear it? How can I avoid the impression of compromise with error? Are consciences unnecessarily burdened, or are consciences too free? How can we give the clearest testimony to the truth, both to the weak and to the strong, to the errorists and to the adherents of the truth?” and “What is most beneficial?”

The scriptural intention of fellowship is to protect and build the church, not separate it, not offend it, not confuse it. The role of the church is to win and nurture souls with the gospel. Being faithful servants of our God is what matters.

⁴⁵ Brug, Church Fellowship, p.146.

⁴⁶ Doctrinal Statements of the WELS, “Theses on Church Fellowship,” p.34.

⁴⁷ Lawrenz, “A Statement on the Application of Our Fellowship Principle.”

Conclusion

No matter what action is ever decided, the necessity remains the importance of passing on to the next generation sound church fellowship principles as well as potential applications and the motivation for them. Educate God's people who look to you and who trust you. Inform them of why you did what you did, why you made the decisions you made, and instruct them on the scriptural principles of church fellowship that they may grow to be mature Christians ever-ready and ever-willing to apply them to every situation. The results of the survey conducted as part of my research show that sound church fellowship principles are being not consistently passed on well. One interesting insight gained from the responses to this survey is that the people who seem to do the best in answering questions of church fellowship are people who regularly attend Wisconsin Synod congregations, but are not members of the Wisconsin Synod. One can perceive that people who regularly attend Wisconsin Synod congregations as visitors have sensitively been instructed on church fellowship principles and reasons for practicing close communion. When those principles are lovingly applied to any other situation doctrinally sound answers are produced.

Always remember that there are Christians in heterodox churches too. Do not allow yourself to think of Christian fellowship too exclusively in terms of what we might call its negative side. Rather, remember passages like, "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."⁴⁸ "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace."⁴⁹ "Be merciful to those who doubt."⁵⁰ "It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. The latter do so in love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains. But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice. Yes, and I will continue to

⁴⁸ 1 Corinthians 1:10.

⁴⁹ Ephesians 4:3.

⁵⁰ Jude 1:22.

rejoice”⁵¹ “How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity!”⁵² “If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.”⁵³ For even Jesus himself prayed for our absolute unity.⁵⁴

Because it is an issue of conscience, not everyone will be comfortable applying the principles in the same way. That was made evident from the inter-synodical events of the mid-twentieth century and subsequent church history. Because of the Missouri Synod was becoming too lax in their practice of church fellowship, the Wisconsin Synod decided it was not good for them to express church fellowship with the Missouri Synod any longer. Members of the Wisconsin Synod were encouraged to cease fellowship with their friends and family who were members of the Missouri Synod. This was encouraged to communicate the seriousness of the issue. However, the seriousness of the issue was not always clearly communicated to those in the Wisconsin Synod who were being encouraged to cease fellowship with their Missouri Synod friends and family. Church fellowship applications were instructed without the church fellowship principles always being explained, thus demonstrating the importance of passing on to the next generation sound church fellowship principles as well as applications and the motivation for them.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with all his children.

⁵¹ Philippians 1:15-18.

⁵² Psalm 133:1.

⁵³ Philippians 2:1-4.

⁵⁴ Cf. John 17.

Appendix

Survey Questions:

1. Life-long WELS member/ Joined WELS as an adult/ Not WELS member
2. In 1961, the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) broke fellowship with the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod (LC-MS). Do you know what differences or issues arose to cause this break of fellowship?
3. Shortly before the split between WELS and LC-MS, a group of WELS pastors, teachers and lay-people left our synod and founded the Church of the Lutheran Confession. Were you aware of this?
4. Our synod practices “close communion.” Define or describe your understanding of “close communion.”

Consider some scenarios;

Someone whom you know is not a member of a church in our fellowship attends a worship service at your church and is ushered up for communion.

5. Are you comfortable joining that person to receive communion in your own church?
6. What should you do in that situation?
7. How often do you think this happens at your church?

A WELS member attends a worship service at a church outside our fellowship and partakes of the Lord’s Supper at that service. The WELS member has a proper understanding of the Real Presence in the Lord’s Supper, and the WELS member examined himself before communing.

8. Should the WELS member have communed at this service?

Prayer is an act of worship. That is why we respectfully observe the prayers of people of other denominations or without a denomination rather than join them in their prayer. However, whenever someone joins us for worship in our church, we never think twice about offering public prayers in their presence.

9. If you go to the house of friends who are not WELS members and those friends ask you to pray with them before the meal, what should you do?
10. Does it make a difference if you have those same friends over to your house?
11. If students from one of our synod’s schools conducted some sort of a fundraiser to support a secular school event or activity, would this give you any cause for concern?

12. It certainly is a joy to invite friends to church with us. Would you find it more or less difficult to invite a friend to your church bake sale?
13. Would it be alright for the church to accept money from your friend for purchasing something at the bake sale?
14. Does your answer to that question depend on how the bake sale funds have been designated?
15. There is no room for debate on whether or not our preachers and those who lead our worship services must be members in WELS fellowship, but what about musicians? Do musicians lead worship?
16. Must the organist be a WELS member, or could the organist be someone hired from outside the church?
17. Is there a problem with having a non-WELS trumpeter play at their brother's wedding in a WELS church?
18. Must all members of our church choirs be members, or could inviting people to join our choirs be an evangelism opportunity?
19. Around the country our WELS grade schools enroll children who are not members of our churches. Should those children be allowed to join their class (or their choir) when they sing for a worship service in one of our churches?
20. Does the matter change for high school or college levels?
21. Should the choir director be required to be a WELS member?

Responses to this survey show that members of the Wisconsin Synod frequently disagree on issues of church fellowship and sometimes their reasons for their answers. I believe that the results to this survey show that attention needs to be given to the instruction of church fellowship principles in the Wisconsin Synod.

To view survey responses go to

<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/pub?key=0AmfPwyAnYHwdHNZUTJvRl83RmxyZFBW WJPDVDFbFE&output=html>

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