

God Protects His People: The Doctrine of Fellowship for Today

[Presented to the Kettle Moraine Circuit October 5, 1992]

by *Daniel S. Drews*

“Kyle, I don’t care for those friends you’ve been hanging around with! The language they use! Their attitude toward authority! I want you to stop seeing them. They are a bad influence on you and your character.”

“Aw, Mom, they’re my friends! I don’t see anything so bad about them! They’re just like me! If you tell me they can’t be my friends, how can I be a good influence on them?”

“If you tell them you’re not going to be their friend until they turn their lives around, maybe they’ll see where they’re wrong and you can have friendships based on something worthwhile!”

“Aw, MOM!”

If you’ve ever experienced this conversation, either as the parent or the child, you probably know the outcome. In spite of Mom and Dad’s best efforts to warn against bad company spoiling good character and the like, Kyle is probably going to stubbornly cling to his friendships. But Mom and Dad love him. They know. They see what a negative effect on their child’s life influences like TV and movies have had. They just hope against hope that the values they have instilled in him will be his anchor when wave after wave of peer pressure threaten to overwhelm his life’s vessel.

An analogy could be made to the Biblical doctrine of church fellowship and the way some Christians (without understanding clearly) view it. Put the voice of God into the voice of the concerned parent. False doctrine, its manifold purveyors and adherents are the “friends.” God wishes to protect the souls of his children from those influences which can lead a person astray from the Bible’s teaching. But we wonder, “What is so awful about other Christians?” We question our loving Father’s command to avoid them and think we should practice a type of fellowship, postulating that we can be the influence for the good. But God knows—even more than Kyle’s parents, who only know about bad influences from their own experience—God knows omnisciently the insidious working of the yeast of false teaching. And he commands us to rid ourselves of it, to watch out for those who cause divisions and offenses that are contrary to the teaching we have learned and to keep away from them.

Most WELS Christians know something about the doctrine of church fellowship. Some historians of prominence have even dared call the doctrine of fellowship the defining doctrine of the Wisconsin Synod’s colorful existence. Although “fellowship” is a beautiful word, expressing the unity, togetherness, and commonality we have in Christ on the basis of God’s Word, the tendency is to think of the practice of fellowship negatively. People who are not in our fellowship may not take communion at our altars; non-WELS/ELS members may not sing solo at weddings; our pastors do not join the local ministerial association; and the like. And, as is true in other areas of our lives of sanctification, God has given us principles to guide us, without setting forth a new ceremonial law in which every rule is supplied for every imaginable situation.

The intent of this, essay is to consider the spirit of the doctrine and practice of fellowship. It is not to legislate a series of do’s and don’ts. All too often, people who view the doctrine of fellowship in such a legalistic fashion are inclined to test the limits, so to speak, of the law. In this respect, they resemble the teenage boy who wants to know “how far he can go” with his

girlfriend without fornicating. He has effectively violated the spirit of the law already in his heart. So it is with those who wish to live on the edge as pertains to the doctrine and practice of church fellowship. In their disdain for a loving God who wishes to protect their souls from destructive heresy, they seek loopholes and gray areas, they invent “levels of fellowship,” they call joint worship services “celebrations,” they call unionism permissible as long as it happens “outside the context of church fellowship,” and so on. They truly miss God’s loving intent.

Through following what the Bible teaches us regarding our relationship to the false teacher and his disciples, we show love for our God by honoring his name and revering His Word. We show love for ourselves by continuing to allow God to protect our souls through His Word. We show love for the false teacher and his disciples by showing that wandering from any part of the truth is a serious offense, not a trivial difference of opinion. So, to the Word and to the testimony! What does the Bible say about this loving practice of fellowship? What is God’s gracious purpose in commanding us to live accordingly?

Almost from the moment God draws lines of demarcation around the nation of Israel by giving them His holy law, and designates her as the nation to bear the promised Messiah, He protects His people—physically and spiritually. The physical protection from, e.g., the Egyptians, is quite well known to us. But listen as the LORD speaks to Moses, who on Mt. Sinai was about to receive the new tablets of stone recording the words of God’s covenant with Israel:

Then the LORD said: “I am making a covenant with you. Before all your people I will do wonders never before done in any nation in all the world. The people you live among will see how awesome is the work that I, the LORD, will do for you. Obey what I command you today. I will drive out before you the Amorites, Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites. *Be careful not to make a treaty with those who live in the land where you are going, or they will be a snare among you. Break down their altars, smash their sacred stones and cut down their Asherah Poles.* Do not worship any other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God. *Be careful not to make a treaty with those who live in the land: for when they prostitute themselves to their gods and sacrifice to them, they will invite you and you will eat their sacrifices.* (Exodus 34:10-15)

When God would deliver the Israelites to the promised land, they were not to “make a treaty” with the idolatrous nations. Why not? Is not God a God of peace? No, God knew that the idolaters would be a snare. The souls of the Israelites would be trapped by the idolatrous practices of the pagans, practices which exalted and indulged the sinful human nature. Out of love for the Israelites, God protected them with this “unreasonable” command.

After wandering in the wilderness for forty years, the Israelites finally entered Canaan. Immediately prior to the invasion, God gave His people Israel His law for the second time. This second giving of the law is recorded for us as the book of Deuteronomy. This book has also been called the valedictory or farewell address of the prophet Moses. Since Israel’s encounters with the idolatrous Canaanites and the occupation of the promised land were now immediately at hand, the LORD through Moses more thoroughly reiterates his protective warning of before:

When the LORD your God brings you into the land you are entering to possess and drives out before you many nations—the Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites, seven nations larger and stronger than you—and when the LORD your God has delivered them over to you and you have defeated them, then you must *destroy them totally. Make no treaty with them, and show them no mercy. Do not intermarry with them. Do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons, for they will turn your sons away from following me to serve*

other gods, and the LORD's anger will burn against you and will quickly destroy you.

This is what you are to do to them: break down their altars, smash their sacred stones, cut down their Asherah poles and burn their idols in the fire. For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession... *You must destroy all the peoples the LORD your God gives over to you. Do not look on them with pity and do not serve their gods, for that will be a snare to you.* (Deuteronomy 7:1-6, 16)

No, the Israelites were not to have any “fellowship” with the pagans in the land. Why not? God did not want the precious souls of his people to be ensnared and led astray from him and his promises of the Savior.

Occasionally, a false prophet or dreamer would arise among God's people. Why would God allow this to happen?

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. (Deuteronomy 13:1-5)

Would the Israelites hold fast to all of the commands of the Lord their God, even in the face of signs, wonders, and dreams that seemed to confirm the veracity of the performer? Passing this test of faith would mean scrutinizing the teaching of the prophet or dreamer in the light of God's objective word and purging the evil from Israel.

Certainly other references to this commanded destruction of the Canaanite idolaters might be cited. There can be no question *that* God commanded the utter extermination of the pagans; nor can there be any question *why*. God wished to protect the souls of his people from being led astray from Him and His Word. But Moses' farewell sermon to his beloved Israel ends with the LORD's appearance at the tabernacle in a pillar of cloud and His ominous prediction:

You are going to rest with your fathers, and these people will soon prostitute themselves to the foreign gods of the land they are entering. They will forsake me and break the covenant I made with them. On that day I will become angry with them and forsake them; I will hide my face from them, and they will be destroyed. Many disasters and difficulties will come upon them, and on that day they will ask, “Have not these disasters come upon us because our God is not with us?” And I will certainly hide my face on that day because of all their wickedness in turning to other gods. (Deuteronomy 31:15-18)

What seems like a divine attempt at reverse psychology was actually a warning that was precisely on target. Ignoring the command to destroy the pagans, Israel was ensnared and led astray to chase after other gods.

In Joshua's time, the conquest of Canaan was partially carried out by the death of that faithful servant of God. The task of extermination of all of the Canaanite influence remained. So Joshua exhorted the people:

Be very strong; be careful to obey all that is written in the Book of the Law of Moses, without turning aside to the right or to the left. *Do not associate with these nations that remain among you; do not invoke the names of their gods or swear by them. You must not serve them or bow down to them.* But you are to hold fast to the LORD your God, as you have until now...*But if you turn away and ally yourselves with the survivors of these nations that remain among you and if you intermarry with them and associate with them, then you may be sure that the LORD your God will no longer drive out these nations before you. Instead, they will become snares and traps for you, whips on your backs and thorns in your eyes, until you perish from this good land which the LORD your God has given you.* (Joshua 23:6-8, 12-13)

Upon the death of Joshua, as the book of Judges records, the men of Judah experienced a measure of success in repelling and destroying the remaining Canaanites. However, the record of obedience soon becomes the catalog of compromise. Sadly we read:

But Manasseh did not drive out the people...they pressed the Canaanites into forced labor but *never drove them out completely.* Nor did Ephraim drive out the Canaanites...Neither did Zebulun drive out the Canaanites...nor did Asher...neither did Naphtali...(Judges 1:27-36)

And the Lord's anger burned at this disobedience and faithlessness. The angel of the LORD went up from Gilgal to Bokim and said, "I brought you up out of Egypt and led you into the land that I swore to give to your forefathers. I said, I will never break my covenant with you, and you shall not make a covenant with the people of this land, but you shall break down their altars." Yet you have disobeyed me. Why have you done this? Now therefore I tell you that I will not drive them out before you; they will be thorns in your sides and their gods will be a snare to you...I will use them to test Israel and see whether they will keep the way of the LORD and walk in it as their forefathers did. (Judges 2:1-3, 22)

Even a cursory reading of the book of Judges reveals the dismal spiritual conditions that resulted from failure to keep the Lord's commands to exterminate the Canaanite influence from Israel. Even the "heroes" include Gideon, who fashioned a golden ephod (priests' garment) which became an object of idolatrous worship, Jephthah, he who made a vow in uncertain things to sacrifice the first thing that entered his house (his daughter), and Samson, who was brought into conflict with the Philistines more over his powerful libido than in defense of the LORD God. "In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit. (Judges 21:25)"

The historical account of God's people paints an almost bleaker picture during the days when Israel did have kings. After building a house to the Lord "So that all peoples of the earth may know Your name and fear you, (I Kings 8:43)," the record states with foreboding sadness:

King Solomon, however, loved many foreign women besides Pharaoh's daughter— Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonians, and Hittites. They were from nations about which the LORD had told the Israelites, "You must not intermarry with them, because they will surely turn your hearts after their gods." Nevertheless, Solomon held fast to them in love. He had seven hundred wives of royal birth and three hundred concubines, and his wives led him astray. As Solomon grew old, his wives turned his heart after other gods, and his heart was *not fully devoted to the LORD his God.* (I Kings 11:1-4).

Solomon's case is so significant because it so well bears testimony to the Scriptural admonition, "If you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall." For all of his God-given wisdom, the mighty king was led astray because he did not take seriously God's command to

avoid those who would do the leading. As Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come. (I Corinthians 10:11).” Shall we not heed the warning God gives us via the awful example of Solomon? God wants to protect our hearts and souls even as He did Solomon’s.

We know the tragic end of the history of the northern kingdom of Israel. There was never a king in Israel who shepherded the people spiritually. Scoundrels like King Ahab, who joined the worship of Baal to the worship of the LORD, are confronted with bold prophets like Elijah, who confronted the idolatrous practices with stern warnings and pleas for repentance. But in the end,

They would not listen and were as stiff-necked as their fathers, who did not trust in the LORD their God. They rejected his decrees and the covenant he had made with their fathers and the warnings he had given them. They followed worthless idols and themselves became worthless. They imitated the nations around them although the LORD had ordered them, “Do not do as they do,” and they did the things the LORD had forbidden them to do (11 Kings 17:14-15).

Such was the LORD’s charge against those who rejected His Word. His just judgment was to remove them from their homeland into exile in Assyria, where they are never heard from again.

To this point we have mainly considered how God intended to protect his people from the idolatrous practices of the Canaanites. Perhaps it may be wondered what connection this has to the practice of fellowship. After all, aren’t we more concerned with what our relationship is to be toward members of other Christian church bodies? Don’t we all know we should stay away from those who are brazenly non-Christian? The sad truth is that the same spirit of unionism that caused the splintering of the erstwhile champion of Confessional Lutheranism, the Synodical Conference, has reached extreme proportions. From the New Age movement’s conspiracy to unite all world religions under the umbrella of Hinduism, to the papal pronouncements that Jews, Christians, and Moslems all worship the same God: from the Masonic denial of the Trinity to the World Council of Churches’ syncretistic incorporation of even spiritists and witch doctors into their ecumanic mess, Christians are being led astray to the worship of false gods. And this all in the name of love, unity, and brotherhood. Can it be more obvious to us from Scripture, both from God’s prescriptive commands and the negative descriptive examples of what happened to the Israelites, that faithfulness to the Lord and glorifying the one true God means not having any or declaring the equality of any other gods beside the one true and Triune God? Does not that same faithfulness demand that we confess Jesus Christ and God-given faith in Him alone as the only hope mankind has for salvation?

But does it get more difficult for us to apply the doctrine of church fellowship with those who at least confess to be Christian? We don’t want to call Christians of other faiths idolaters, do we? It would be a mistake to think that God’s word does not address the issue of our relationship with those who at least in some measure deny the truth of God’s Word. Consider the following Scripture passages in which God reveals His attitude over against false and lying prophets.

“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. They keep saying to those who despise me, ‘The LORD says: You will have peace. And to all who follow the stubbornness of their hearts they say, ‘No harm will come to you.’ (Jeremiah 23:16-17)

“Yes,” declares the LORD, “I am against the prophets who wag their own tongues and yet declare, ‘The LORD declares.’ Indeed, I am against those who prophesy false dreams,” declares the LORD. “They tell them and lead my people astray with their reckless lies, yet I did not send or appoint them. They do not benefit these people in the least.” (Jeremiah 23:31-33)

The word of the LORD came to me: “Son of man, prophesy against the prophets of Israel who are now prophesying. Say to those who prophesy out of their own imagination, ‘Hear the word of the LORD! This is what the sovereign LORD says: Woe to the foolish prophets who follow their own spirit and have seen nothing! Your prophets, O Israel, are like jackals among ruins. You have not gone up to the breaks in the wall to repair it for the house of Israel so that it will stand firm in the battle on the day of the LORD. Their visions are false and their divinations are a lie. They say, “The LORD declares,” when the LORD has not sent them; yet they expect their words to be fulfilled.” (Ezekiel 13:1-6)

False prophets do not come to us and announce, “Hey, everyone, I’m a false prophet, don’t listen to anything I say!” The false prophets condemned by the LORD in Jeremiah and Ezekiel’s time dissembled their true colors by feigning to speak for the true God. And though they sincerely believed their falsehood to be true, their expectations that their words would be fulfilled did not soften God’s condemnation of them nor of those who allowed themselves to be led astray by their lies. Sincerity in believing and proclaiming falsehood is not a trait to be respected as virtuous.

Because so much of the New Testament was written for people who were thoroughly acquainted with the Old, it is not surprising that we read nearly identical warnings against identically labeled evildoers: the false prophets and false teachers. Jesus Himself warned his disciples in the Sermon on the Mount:

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. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them. Not everyone who says to me, “Lord, Lord,” will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, “Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?” Then I will tell them plainly, “I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers.” (Matthew 7:15-23)

Certain conclusions virtually beg to be drawn: (1) False teachers will, to man who looks at the outward appearance, look like “sheep.” They won’t look like Hitler or the devil incarnate, but will seem to be, claim to be, and talk like followers of Jesus. (2) Jesus gives us only one way to identify the false prophets, and that is by their fruit—and the “fruit” of a teacher is his teaching. (3) Although Jesus gives only one command, namely, to “Watch out” for false prophets, the imagery suggested by the wolves in sheeps’ clothing allows for only two courses of further action. No shepherd, having discovered a wolf in the fold, would allow it to stay for dinner. He must either drive the wolf away or take his flock away from the wolf. Depending on the situation, so will Jesus’ obedient sheep be protected by their good shepherd by either removing the false teacher from their fellowship or by removing themselves from exposure to the false teaching.

The inspired apostles join in the steady chorus of warnings. Wrote Peter, But there were also false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you. They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them—bringing swift destruction on themselves. Many will follow their shameful ways and will bring the way of truth into disrepute. In their greed these teachers will exploit you with stories they have made up...Therefore, dear friends, since you already know this, be on your guard so that you may not be carried away by the error of lawless men and fall from your secure position. But grow in grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. (II Peter 2:1-3, 3:17-18)

Denying the redemption of the Lord is here presented as the nadir of destructive heresies, not a mere minor disagreement. God would not have us be carried away and exploited by those who deny the person or the work of Jesus Christ. He tells us to be on guard against them. What kind of guard allows the enemy to come into camp without sounding the alarm and expelling the forces of destruction? Or shall we, as foolish Trojans, bring the gift horse into our midst, only to be secretly destroyed by the invaders inside? To do so would be to tempt the Lord, in a frivolous “See, God, I can take a little false doctrine and it’s not hurting me!” manner. Be on guard. Watch out. Warning! Danger! False teaching may not carry the impressive force of a hurricane Andrew, but its destructive wake is worse because its effect is eternal.

The inspired epistle of Jude stands as a firm warning against the toleration of false teaching and false teachers. Although Jude was “very eager to write...about the salvation we share,”

I felt I had to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints. For certain men whose condemnation was written about long ago have secretly slipped in among you. They are godless men, who change the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord...These men speak abusively *against whatever they do not understand*...They are clouds without rain, blown along by the wind...These are the men who divide you, who follow mere natural instincts and do not have the Spirit (Jude 3-4, 10, 12, 19).

As far as Jude was concerned, these men were not part of the flock of Christ, but posed a dangerous threat to his beloved congregation’s spiritual well-being. And how could they be recognized, even though they had secretly slipped in? They changed the grace of God into a license for immorality. Do we hear echoes of the past in the claim, “If you teach that salvation is by grace, you can’t get people to live Christian lives!”? They spoke abusively against things their reason could not grasp (perhaps the Real Presence of Christ’s body and blood in the Lord’s Supper, the doctrine of Election, and the like). As a farmer looks at a cloudy sky with the eager expectation of a soaking, growth-giving rain, people might look to these men expecting living water—and leave without hearing the gospel. And, note this well, it is the adherent and the proponent of false teaching that divide the church. It is not brought about by those who by holding faithfully to God’s Word, expose and separate from the false prophets and their followers, even if charged with lovelessness and intolerance.

What brotherly advice does the Apostle Paul share with Timothy in this matter?

If anyone teaches false doctrine 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...But you, man of God, flee from all this...Timothy, guard

what has been entrusted to your care. Turn away from godless chatter and the opposing ideas of what is falsely called knowledge, which some have professed and in so doing have wandered from the faith. (I Timothy 6, passim)

Flee from all this. Guard the flock from it. Turn away from anyone who teaches false doctrine and does not agree with godly teaching.

True unity in the church does not appear when we decide to compromise and agree to disagree on matters of doctrine, or make ambiguous confessional statements which can be subject to untrue interpretations. And it is God's will for the church to have unity, as Paul wrote the Corinthians, "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 (I Corinthians 1:10)." Jesus prayed for his disciples on the same night in which he was betrayed, "Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name—the name you gave me—so that they may be one as we are one (John 17: 11)." Paul encouraged the Philippians, "Whatever happens (i.e., to Paul the prisoner), conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you (Philippians 1:27-28)." Doctrinal differences in the church do not please the church's head, for they make it apparent that some are exalting their reason, experience, or opinion above the clear word of God.

On what basis, then, do we have the unity required for the practice of fellowship? John writes in his first epistle, "We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us." God will grant the unity that expresses itself outwardly in fellowship—joint worship, prayer, communion, proclamation of the gospel, and carrying out of Christ's great commission to make disciples of all nations—on the basis of the proclamation of His Word. It is God's Word that produces unity.

Consider finally St. Paul's letter to the Romans. Within this epistle we have the most thorough presentation of the most important doctrine in all of Scripture—justification by grace through faith in Jesus alone. It was Paul's intention to make the Roman congregation a doctrinally solid and strong base for future mission expansion into the western Mediterranean. And God would give them such needed strength and unity on the basis of his word:

For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of Scripture we might have hope. May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Jesus Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. (15:4-6)

God gives endurance and unity—a God-glorifying unity of inward faith (one heart) and outward confession (one mouth)—through Scripture, and all of it: everything that was written. And what ought the Romans do when that unity was threatened by those who refused to agree with all of Scripture's doctrines, and in so doing were causing divisions?

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. 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 (16:17-18).

The doctrine and practice of church fellowship, then, is nothing more than a loving response to the God who in Christ has loved us first. We show our love for God by not allowing false doctrine an equal voice with God's Word. We show love for ourselves and our fellow believers

by protecting our souls from misleading error. We show love for the false teacher and his followers by not trivializing departure from God's Word but highlighting the serious nature of that offense by separating from them.

The church always understood that this was the clear teaching of Scripture. The first ecumenical or universal church councils were called to identify and exterminate heresy from the visible church. The Arians (who called Jesus "Son of God" but not "God the Son") were considered heretics from whom true Christians should separate. Today, they'd fit nicely in many liberal mainline denominations. The Nestorians (who couldn't grasp how Jesus could be fully God and fully man and made him a sort of jigsaw-puzzle Christ) were condemned as heretics and ousted from the church. The Great Schism between East (today's Orthodox) and West (Roman Catholic) ended in the mutual excommunication of the other because of disagreements over the date of Easter, the use of unleavened bread in the Lord's Supper, and the word *filioque* ("and the Son") in the Nicene Creed. The church of the Middle Ages did not tolerate heresy. The reason we don't hear of unionism/fellowship issues in the church of that time is that those who deviated from the Church's teaching were usually burned at the stake as heretics, not separated from and tolerated. Martin Luther himself was often threatened with this intolerant and extreme practice of "fellowship."

Martin Luther's practice of church fellowship was exactly what Scripture teaches. God-given unity of confession on the basis of all of God's Word is necessary before outward expression of unity (fellowship) can be practiced. At the Marburg Colloquy, a meeting arranged by a prince interested in achieving a coalition between all those opposed to Rome, Luther discussed doctrine with Huldreich Zwingli, leading theologian of the Swiss Reformed. Out of fifteen articles presented for discussion, Luther and Zwingli disagreed only on the one pertaining to the Real Presence of Jesus' body and blood in the Lord's Supper. When it became apparent that Zwingli would not accept that the words "This is my body" meant just what they say, Luther said, "You are of a different spirit," a spirit that exalts human reason over Scripture, and would not join with the Swiss. "Leave me alone," said Luther to anyone who would not accept all of the teachings of God's Word, "and expect no fellowship from me."

And this was also the practice of those who subscribed to the Augsburg Confession, aka Lutherans. Even though King Henry VIII of England would have contributed considerable military and naval strength, the Smalcaldic League refused to admit him to membership because he would not subscribe to the Augsburg Confession. The Augsburg Confession (1530) stated, "It is sufficient for the true unity of the Christian church that the Gospel be preached in conformity with a pure understanding of it and that the sacraments be administered in accordance with the divine Word. It is not necessary for the true unity of the Christian church that ceremonies, instituted by men, should be observed uniformly in all places." (AC VII)

Although some would later claim that the Augustana here permitted fellowship to be practiced with anyone who didn't deny the redemptive work of Christ, it is clear from the context that "Gospel" is here contrasted with "adiaphora." The Lutheran confessional stance is that diversity of belief or different levels of weakness/strength regarding adiaphora are to be tolerated, but that divisions and offenses contrary to the clear word of Scripture are not.

After the 30-years' War (1618-1648) in central Europe, it was clear that neither the Catholics nor the Lutherans nor the Calvinists would be able to exert absolute power through military might. One of the results of this war was the first feeble foreshadowing of the modern politically practical view of toleration of people and churches of other faiths. Although the

strategy of “Cuius regio, eius religio” (His region, his religion—the prince’s religion was the religion of the province) eventually led to the fossilized European state churches of today, it was the best solution to the “problem” of different religious confessions that was adduced.

Our country’s first settlers and founding fathers did not wish to be dictated to when it came to what religion they were to belong to in the area in which they chose to reside. So the first amendment clause guaranteeing that Congress shall make no law respecting the establishment of religion also guaranteed that, under the law of the United States, all religious faiths would be tolerated as equal. What makes the practice of fellowship more difficult for the twentieth-century American Confessional Lutheran is his citizenship in two kingdoms. In the one, as an American, we must tolerate and respect the rights of others to worship as they please and believe whatever they wish to believe. In the other, as a Christian, we neither tolerate nor respect lies that pass themselves off as truth. When we therefore put into practice what the word of God teaches, we know that we may be labeled as “intolerant” and therefore “unAmerican.” But faithfulness to the Word of God and to the law of love is our gospel-motivated goal, and not the approval or commendation of modernist man.

As we seek to apply the Scriptural principles of fellowship in today’s society, these questions present themselves to guide our actions. Will this show love for God and his Word, or will I be guilty of allowing reason and experience equal or greater sway? Secondly, will this show love for my own soul and my fellow Christians’ souls, or will it expose us to false teaching’s leaven, which may perniciously permeate our body? And will the false teacher become hardened in his denial of God’s Word, his followers more obdurate in their doctrinal indifference and convinced that they and we have mere difference of opinion, to which everyone is entitled and which we must respect as good Americans? As Christians who are convinced that Word of God is clear, we will want to give a loud and clear witness by marking and avoiding them until unity of confession can be established on the basis of Scripture. To do this in love will mean more than legalistically saying, “You can’t do that because we’re not in fellowship,” or “It’s against church policy to do that,” or even “I don’t really understand it or agree with it, but it’s what the synod says.” It will mean to evangelically explain where the false teacher and his followers depart from Scripture and eagerly express hope for a real unity based on Scripture, not an artificial one created by compromising away God’s Word or by pretending that differences don’t exist.

If we fail to do this, we may become enablers. A family member “enables” the alcoholic to continue in his sin by covering up the wickedness and excuses this camouflage in the name of “love” or to avoid an ugly confrontation with the dipsomaniac. In the same way is a person who practices unionism with the heterodox an enabler of one whose sin is the denial of God’s Word. To avoid an ugly confrontation, the enabler whitewashes the sin by acting as if it didn’t exist at all, and rationalizes it away in the name of “love.” But the answer to alcoholism will never be found through the seemingly well-intentioned coverup of the codependent enablers; God will give it only through the “tough love” approach of confrontation and confession, repentance and rebirth. May our gracious God strengthen us to not be enablers of the adherents of false doctrine, and to ever remind us that we are not to be motivated by a spirit of malice but by one of love—tough love, perhaps, but true Christian love that seeks repentance.

With that in mind, let us consider the practical application of the principles of the doctrine of church fellowship. Sometimes a person will ask, “How far can I go without sinning?” Much soul-searching is required if that question is asked by the heart that really doesn’t like what God’s word says about church fellowship, feels it turns members off and impedes the

numerical growth of the church, and the like. Remember that the command to watch out and avoid the false teacher and errorist is intended to protect the most precious possession we have, our God-given faith in Jesus Christ through which we are justified and possess eternal life.

But the question might well be asked, “Where does casual and social friendship/”fellowship” end and where does unionism begin?” To aid the reader in making that determination, let us consider the following:

1. *Unionism begins when the impression is given that doctrinal differences are unimportant.*
2. *Unionism begins when celebrations, occasions, events, etc. highlight “unity” and ignore differences.* (e.g. Life chains and other Pro-Life efforts in which unity against abortion is considered the highest good)
3. *Unionism begins when false doctrine is treated as just another interpretation or opinion and not, as it truly is, the exaltation of man’s reason and experience above the clear word of God. Error always first demands tolerance, then when it has received tolerance, it demands equality, and when it has achieved that, demands superiority to the Word of God.*
4. *Unionism begins when false doctrine is introduced to and encouraged in a congregation or household through an uncritical or even glorified use of heterodox books, videos, recordings, songs, etc., and justified on the grounds that “at least we’re not taking communion or praying with the false teacher.” Why wouldn’t we let Dr. Dobson preach at one of our church services? Not primarily because he’s “Not in fellowship with us,” but because his unscriptural views on original sin and inability to comprehend Gospel motivation in the life of a Christian would be leaven which could lead our souls astray. If we wouldn’t let the false prophet preach in our pulpits, why should we give him access through the back door to preach to us through books and other media?*
5. *Unionism begins when shame for what the Scriptures teach and the Lutheran Symbolical books confess is expressed or implied. Scriptural positions on scouting, lodges, and the role of man and woman in the church and home immediately present themselves as “peculiar Wisconsin Synod positions” that some feel we need to keep quiet about so we don’t offend prospective members. This attitude also appears when a worship service designed for the unchurched is devised and it is not a communion service (close communion would turn them off) and it avoids a confession of sins (keep things upbeat and positive).*
6. *Unionism begins when a false or unclear statement is allowed to stand unchallenged by the truth.* (Letters’ column?) Allowing unscriptural comments to be made without correction is interpreted as acceptance and agreement. “What I said must be right because Pastor didn’t say anything.”
7. *Unionism begins when today’s freedom from the legalistic excesses of the past is used as - justification for denying God’s Word in the present.* Women used to have to wear hats and sit on a separate side of the church from the men; they don’t any more today; therefore, other ecclesiastical positions on male/female relationships and human sexuality ought to be considered as anachronistic and we need to adapt to accepted and politically correct modern culture.
8. *Unionism begins when false doctrine is seen as the lesser of two evils and therefore preferable.* We never are confronted with a choice between old-fashioned vice and false doctrine. This is a false dichotomy. A person who would say, “I’m so glad my son enjoys Amy Grant music and doesn’t listen to that awful Heavy Metal devil music” might as well be saying “It’s better to be a Pharisee than a Satanist.” That’s nonsense. The self-righteous will end up in the same place as the immoral.

9. *Unionism begins when special or occasional worship services are considered human-honoring events rather than primarily God-glorifying ones.* A bride and groom honor their friends or family members by asking them to participate in a special way in their wedding; confrontations occur when Bride's desire to honor her heterodox cousin by asking her to sing a solo conflicts with the concept of the wedding service as joint worship. A priority in premarital counseling is to plan the wedding service, guided by the principle that we are gathering to worship God. If that principle is established early on, the pastor and couple will have little trouble in planning if they ask at every turn, "Will this glorify God or is it intended to honor man?" One condition will be acceptable, the other will not.

This list of theses is not meant to be exhaustive. It is the essayist's intention to show how the Biblical principles ought to be applied in many common situations. Knowing the principles, a Christian will use his sanctified judgment in other areas, such as considering what to do when attending a wedding or funeral at a heterodox church, or prayers with family members of a different faith, etc. This essayist believes that a person ought to ask himself. "Will the impression be left that I am not serious about my professed convictions? Will the impression be left that, although we attend different churches, deep down we're all Christians who disagree on a few minor points? Will my actions encourage doctrinal indifference? If so, I will not participate." Even if I'm the Synod President meeting with the heads of the LC-MS and ELCA, I may think I can make it clear that we are meeting "outside the context of church fellowship." But if they get the impression, "Wow, it looks like the WELS is softening its rigid legalism on church fellowship," I have caused offense to the Gospel of Christ and ought to repent.

Before closing, it would perhaps be fitting to briefly address a few arguments of objection which are often raised to the Scriptural doctrine and practice of Church fellowship. Again, the list is not exhaustive, but time and space do not permit the analysis of every possible hypothetical case.

1. *It's judgmental.* God does wish us to judge the fruit of those who claim to teach God's word according to its conformity with Scripture. We do not claim to be able to see into a person's heart to ascertain the status of their faith; all that we can go on is the person's outward confession, including a confession made by membership in and/or fellowship with a heterodox church body.
2. *It gives the impression that you think you'll be the only ones in heaven.* That all depends on what kind of a witness is given. We will always want to be evangelical in our practice, explaining differences that divide us and expressing hope that we could agree on what God's word says. We believe that where God's gospel is heard, there the Holy Spirit is busy creating true believers. But we dare never make the conclusion that since there are Christians in heterodox church bodies, we may be indifferent to the divisions and offenses they are holding to which are contrary to the teaching we have learned.
3. *It's loveless.* Au contraire! We have already established that this practice shows true love for God, ourselves and our fellow Christians, and for the false teacher and his followers.
4. *It hinders church growth and drives people away.* God commands us to be faithful to his word and leave the growth and increase to him, in his measure and in his time. Again, the way the doctrine is presented can make a world of difference. If we refuse communion to someone with a cold, "You're not in fellowship with us," it is not the doctrine that has driven them away, is it? But if we explain that before a person communes with us and participates in this act which expresses unity, we'd like him to know who we are and what we believe, teach, and confess so that he can make an informed confession on the basis of God's word.

Then he'd know if he really was one in confession with us. Again, evangelical and kind explanation is the key.

5. *God only wants us to mark and avoid non-Christians, not other true believers.* If that were the case, the New Testament would be full of warnings not to worship with those who followed Jupiter and Apollo. Instead, the warnings are to watch out for those who appear to be sincere Christians on the outside but who add to, subtract from, or distort God's Word.
6. *We'd be better able to fight the devil, the world, and sin if we work together with all Christians against our common enemy.* False doctrine is a tool of the devil to undermine and destroy faith and confidence in Holy Scripture. Satan himself used the very word of God to tempt the very Son of God. We want to recognize the devil in all of his manifestations and fight against him.
7. *There really isn't unity of faith in the WELS.* Perhaps not on some issues of doctrine and practice; but it can be safely said that there is a unified desire to resolve any questions on the basis of Scripture in conformity with the Lutheran Confessions. There is a unified desire to learn, teach, admonish one another, to gladly accept rebuke when confronted, and give each other Scriptural insight and encouragement to be faithful to God's Word in carrying out our ministry.
8. *Surely we can have different levels of fellowship depending on how much agreement we can arrive at.* This sounds good to human reason but disagrees with Scripture. God's will is that we have complete unity and agreement in all of Scripture's teachings and then we properly practice fellowship. Practicing fellowship without such God-given and Scripture-based unity is the sin of unionism.
9. *Don't pastors have a lot of Reformed or non-WELS books in their libraries? Isn't that the same thing?* Having the book may not necessarily be a problem: using the false doctrine contained in them is.

As previously mentioned, it has been suggested that to understand the Wisconsin Synod, a person must understand its "defining doctrine" of church fellowship. It is unfortunate that this Scriptural doctrine and practice, commanded by the Lord and carried out by his apostles, adhered to by the church for centuries, is now seen as WELS peculiarity. With the help of and by the grace of God, our church will continue to maintain its Scriptural position on church fellowship, despite the opposition of the champions of toleration and compromise in today's world. May our gracious God also enable us to practice our confessed doctrine in an evangelical manner, ever reminding ourselves to LOVE: *God* by letting His Word be true and that of man a lie; *Ourselves and our fellow believers* by protecting our souls from error; and *The false teacher and his followers* by not pretending that deviation from God's Word in any point is trivial. And may God continue to lead us to thank and praise him for the blessing of unity he has given us on the basis of and through his own word, and to treasure the opportunities we have for joint worship, prayer, and carrying out of the Great Commission.

SOLI DEO GLORIA