

# Living Church Fellowship

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This Sunday we shall have the opportunity to observe again the Festival of Reformation. Your heart and mine should be filled with gratitude to God for His grace showered upon us. It was His grace that caused you and me to be born into or brought into a Christian Lutheran Church in which we still have His inspired Word in all its clarity, sweetness and purity. Ours is not only a spiritual heritage to cherish and guard but also to share. I say this because today the Holy Scriptures are not the one and only source of faith, doctrine and practice in so many churches and denominations. You and I hold fast to the truth that the Holy Scriptures are God's revelation to us that clearly sets forth all that a person must know to have everlasting life. We anchor our faith upon and defend the truth that "all Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (II Timothy 3: 16-17). It is God's holy and inerrant Word and His precious promises that make you and every believer so absolutely certain that we are saved by grace through faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. Do you always appreciate how blessed you are among the people of this generation that you have in your heart and soul the certainty of your own eternal salvation and the comforting knowledge that your Savior has prepared mansions for you in His heavenly Father's home? Not all people who even profess Christianity have this absolute assurance of their eternal salvation to cheer their souls and give joy to their lives.

The Holy Scriptures should be precious to each of us because they also guide us in our lives and practice. If we as individuals, as a church, as a Synod want to be a light to the world, then we must remain faithful to God's holy Word. It's not the external things as pleasing orders of service, proper appointments in our churches, active voting memberships, long membership lists, flourishing schools, filled classrooms, modern up-to-date educational facilities, or overflowing treasuries - not these will guarantee a truly God-pleasing and successful congregational or Synodical life and activity. These will be the results when the essentials of God's Word and its proper knowledge and application to the lives of individual members is prime! The first thing must still be: to know and teach the Word of God from which all blessings in the church flow. Our entire work of saving souls, of extending our mission outreach, of internal unification, of presenting; a united front against error and Satan, of really doing God's work on earth, must be based only on the Word of God and its use. The personal Christianity of each member, the joining of these members into the Christian community of the congregation, the union of such congregations into larger groups for carrying out the Lord's work, is right, blessed and eternally successful only in the measure in which the Holy Scriptures are properly used. This means simply that at home, at school, at church, as an individual, as congregations, as a Synod, the less we use the Scriptures properly, the less the work of the Lord will be done and flourish. The more we abide by and use that Word, the more will those things that God wants and which He can and will bless, reveal themselves in our thinking, speaking and living.

Since the Holy Scriptures are the foundation of all Christian faith, doctrine and practice, they must also be the foundation of all Christian unity. Dr. Luther said, "I will have no peace and unity by which the Word of God is lost. With it eternal life and all would be lost. The Word and its doctrines must establish Christian unity and fellowship. Where these are in harmony and at

one, the other will follow.” This is the kind of Christian unity and fellowship that you and I desire also. So my purpose in addressing you this morning is to encourage you to continue in this God-pleasing desire and to urge you to share your faith and God’s Word with others so that, together, we all may give glory and praise to God through our “LIVING CHURCH FELLOWSHIP”.

- I. So let’s review what God’s Word teaches us about church fellowship,
- II. and how these principles apply to us in our calling as teaching servants in the church,
- III. and how these principles of church fellowship can be applied by your fellow church members and your students.

Do you remember the Lord Jesus’ High Priestly prayer which He prayed on the night of His betrayal when your Lord prayed for His apostles and all His believers? Let me quote you that portion of Jesus’ prayer in which He prayed for all His believers of all time recorded in John 17: 20-26, “My prayer is not for them alone (namely His apostles), 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. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that You sent Me and have loved them even as You have loved Me. Father, I want those You have given Me to be with Me where I am, and to see My glory, the glory You have given Me because You loved Me before the creation of the world. Righteous Father, though the world does not know You, I know You and they know that You have sent Me. I have made You known to them, and will continue to make You known in order that the love You have for Me may be in them and that I Myself may be in them.” Remember how Jesus prayed: “That all of them may be one!” Haven’t you longed for that too! Haven’t you also wished deep in your heart that all the believers, all who profess to be Christians would be one! Well, my dear brothers and sisters, your longing and wishes as well as your Savior’s prayer and desire have been fulfilled and answered. There is true unity and fellowship among all who believe and trust in Jesus Christ as their perfect Redeemer and Savior.

You and I must be aware of the fact that unity of faith exists among all members of the holy, invisible Christian Church, just as we confess with Dr. Martin Luther in the explanation of the Third Article of the Apostle’s Creed. We say that the Holy Ghost keeps the whole Christian Church on earth with Jesus Christ in the one true faith. No matter to which visible church or denomination a person may belong, or whether or not he or she is formally a member of any denomination, if that person trusts for the forgiveness of sins, eternal life and salvation solely in the merits of Jesus Christ, then that person is in unity of faith with all other Christians. He or she may possibly be ignorant of some other teachings of the Bible, or may misunderstand certain passages of Scripture, or may possibly err in certain doctrines; yet, if that person’s ignorance and misunderstanding do not pertain to the central doctrine, namely to justification by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, then that person is still in the unity of faith and a member of the holy, invisible Christian Church and will be saved eternally. This spiritual unity of faith is not bound by denominational lines but includes all, whoever and wherever they may be, who trust for grace and salvation in the God-man, Jesus Christ. The apostle Paul declares by inspiration of the Holy Ghost, “You are all the sons of God through faith in Jesus Christ, for all of you who were

baptized into Christ have been clothed with Christ” (Galatians 3:26). It is faith in Jesus Christ that unites us with our heavenly Father and joins us in spiritual unity with every other true believer in a most close spiritual fellowship. So you and I can say that we have fellowship with all other believers in Christ as members of the holy, invisible Christian Church.

But this is a unity that you and I cannot see. What we can see is the grouping of believers into what we call visible churches. Our Catechism reminds us, “that we call a group of people who come together to hear the Gospel a church.” As the holy, invisible Christian Church is one in faith, so the visible church should be one in its confession of faith and doctrine. This is God’s will made known to us by the apostle Paul when he writes: “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 maybe perfectly united in mind and thought (I Corinthians 1:10). It was for this same reason that Paul urged the Ephesian Christians: “Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit - just as you were called to one hope when you were called - one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (Ephesians 4:3-5). This then is what church fellowship is all about - namely, that we are united in faith and confession, in doctrine and practice with all other believers even in the visible church. Now the purpose of such church fellowship is the mutual strengthening of faith, the preservation and promotion of the unity of faith, and the extension of God’s kingdom of grace throughout the world. The end purpose is the glory of God and the eternal welfare of mankind. So we should strive diligently to preserve the true fellowship of faith that exists among us, avoid what hinders it and strive, with God’s help, to remove all errors so that we are united in faith and doctrine.

United in faith and doctrine! This is what God desires of us. We have just spoken of the spiritual unity of faith. But what is unity of doctrine? Unity of doctrine is this that the members of the visible church are fully united in all that they confess and teach. You and I are members of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. I hope that you are such not because you were born into this visible church but because you and I are united in our faith and doctrine - because we believe and teach the same. Our unity lies in the Word of God, which we believe and teach. Thus we have fellowship. You and I cannot look into each other’s hearts. We can only judge what another person confesses upon what they believe and teach. Now problems arise because not all visible churches believe and confess, declare and teach the same according to Holy Scripture. As with individuals, so with visible churches; we can only judge what another visible church believes and teaches on the basis of their confessions and confessional statements. God has forewarned us in His Word that so differences would come about. So you and I are to test people and churches’ beliefs and doctrines by what they say and declare as the apostle John instructs in his epistle: “Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world” (I John 4:1). Yet, you and I dare not consider as Christian only those who believe and teach exactly as we do. The Gospel is a means of grace, “it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes” (Romans 1:16). Wherever and whenever the Gospel is preached it will bring sinners to faith in Christ and all who believe and trust in Him are God’s children, members of God’s family, members of the holy, invisible Christian Church. But it can also happen that saving faith coexists with erroneous beliefs regarding certain other Bible doctrines. All erroneous, false doctrines are like cyanide in “Extra Strength Tylenol”. Any false doctrines or teachings can be fatal to saving faith. That’s why our Lord Himself warns us: “Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves” (Matthew 7:15). If you or I should fail to heed

Jesus' warning, it could lead to our being led astray from the truth of His Word, even worse, we could fall into spiritual death. So we should not want ever to become partners with any who harbor in their hearts, believe or teach false doctrines. Who would want to have any fellowship with such?

I have a Roman Catholic neighbor. I know from speaking with him that he doesn't believe or, hold to the same religious convictions that I do. There is no unity of doctrine between that Roman Catholic neighbor and myself or between me and many other denominations because we have a difference of doctrines. Oh, such divisions between us and others, such divisions of the visible church into various denominations is a grievous offense both to the world and to the church, even to weaker Christians but it is especially displeasing to our God. Why does this happen? Because there are those who do not hold to or abide faithfully to the Holy Scriptures. So divisions result. We cannot say of such that they are in fellowship with us or we with them. We are to be honest and truthful and admit that there are differences of doctrine that divide us. The cause and burden of such differences and divisions must NOT be placed upon those who strictly adhere to the Word of God and refuse fellowship to those who believe and teach otherwise, but on those "who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned" (Romans 16:17). We must also listen to the admonition that the apostle John offers us: "Many deceivers, who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh, have gone out into the world. Any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist. Watch out that you do not lose what you have worked for, but that you may be rewarded fully. Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God; whoever continues in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take him into your house or welcome him. Anyone who welcomes him shares in his wicked work" (II John 7-11).

The apostle Paul also warns us of fellowshiping with errorists. He warns us earnestly: "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" (Romans 16:17). That means that you and I should have no religious affiliations, worship, prayers, joint mission endeavors, religious activity of every sort with those who cause divisions and put obstacles in our way that are contrary to the teachings we have learned and received from the apostles. Yes, we should be ready always to confess our faith and give an answer to those who ask us of the hope we have in our hearts but not under the blanket of joint worship or ecumenical services, meetings, conferences or gatherings. The apostle Paul urged the Roman Christians to watch out for those who continually engaged in making, causing, or who created divisions and offenses. Such activity is only characteristic of those who are enemies. Paul had experience with such matters before. When the Judaizers infiltrated the congregations in Galatia, they brought a "different Gospel" which really was the old story of work righteousness, "and no Gospel at all". The Galatian congregations were divided by factions and doctrinal divisions and suffered greatly. Paul's words in Romans 16:17 were not only a warning but also an encouragement to strengthen them, build them up in their faith so they would be watchful and well equipped to resist and repulse any errors. Any errors, however minute or small, still have the power to cause splits and schisms in congregations and among Christians. Errors or false doctrines of any stripe or kind are to be guarded against and avoided. Those who espouse and teach errors cannot be regarded as brothers or sisters in the faith. So St. Paul gives good advice to us regarding not fellowshiping with those who have fallen into error, or who even insist upon perpetuating error, any teachings, doctrines or practices contrary to God's Word. Not having church fellowship with

such is absolutely necessary for the sake of the truth of the Gospel, for the welfare of the church and to warn those who persist in error that their course will endanger their eternal salvation.

How should you and I as teaching servants in the church apply the apostles' admonitions to ourselves? Let me give you an example: I received a letter recently from St. Josaphat's Basilica, a large Polish Roman Catholic parish on Lincoln Ave. on Milwaukee's south side. The gist of this letter was this: "We here at Saint Josaphat's parish are immersed in Renew ....a program dedicated to an increase of spirituality for our parishioners, but also given to an outreach, in friendship, to neighboring people. We would be most happy to have you join us in an evening of shared prayer and fellowship, at 6:30 p.m. on Sunday, November 7, 1982, at the Basilica ...and please allow your choir to join in the services. The theme of this segment of Renew is Discipleship. We would appreciate a contribution by you of a Scripture reading and/or homily in reference to this. Please acknowledge if you are able to join us." From what we have reviewed so far of the Holy Scriptures, should I or our Christ Church Choir participate in that service of Renew at St. Josaphat's Basilica? For reasons of conscience and being faithful to God's Word, we cannot join with them in such an ecumenical worship service.

If you and I desire to extend the hand of fellowship to other Christians, join them in worship and all other religious activity of the church, Scripture teaches us to do that only with those whom we recognize as brothers and sisters in the faith, people with whom we are in confessional agreement. We express this unity of faith by worshiping together and working together in the kingdom of God. This is the kind of fellowship we have, share and enjoy with the Evangelical Lutheran Synod (ELS). We acknowledge them as brothers and sisters in the faith, we exchange pulpits with them, we commune at each others' altars, we join them in prayers and special worship occasions, we ask them to join with us in maintaining Christian Day Schools or invite them to send their children to our schools, we ask them to join our high school associations, we ask them to cooperate with us in training pastors as in the Bethany Program, and we join with them in carrying out mission and charitable work. All this expresses our oneness of faith and is called church fellowship.

There are other churches and denominations with whom we find that we are not in doctrinal agreement. If we would desire to be united with them, we must labor towards a true unity of doctrine which doesn't consist in an external merger or union but rather unite in believing, confessing, and teaching the same truths of Scripture. Undoubtedly most of you have read in your newspapers during the first full week of September the news of an historic merger of three Lutheran Church bodies in the United States. A merger of the American Lutheran Church, The Lutheran Church in America, and the Association of Ev. Lutheran Churches which is to be completed and put into effect by 1988. This merger will form the third largest Protestant, and for that matter, Lutheran Church in the United States with more than five million members. This merger and union of these three Lutheran Church bodies was acclaimed by Pastor William Kohn, President of the Association of Ev. Lutheran Churches as being, "a dream come true". I say it is more like a nightmare! A nightmare because basically these three Lutheran Church bodies have reached agreement only in external matters and some areas of doctrine, while other areas of doctrine and practice where they had disagreed were swept under the rug. Their enthusiasm for merger and union runs high now but eventually they will find themselves only agreeing to disagree. All three of these Lutheran Church bodies admit openly that they have doctrinal differences but differences not serious enough to hamper their union. We call such mergers "unionism". Unionism is quite a different thing from unity of doctrine. Unionism is a gross violation of God's command and only perpetuates differences of doctrine because it

demands toleration of errors or false doctrines. Unionism denies the truth because it will compromise error with truth and so fosters indifference toward the truth of Scripture.

Insistence on purity of doctrine is not a pipe dream or narrow-minded bigotry on our part. A false doctrine can never produce a right faith, nor can false teaching direct us in the right way. Besides trembling at God's Word and not daring to depart from its teachings we know that we can accomplish the purpose of the Word only if we most conscientiously continue in its teachings; for the effect our teaching has on the hearts and lives of people is determined by the content of what we teach. Error and false doctrines create only a false faith in those who accept them and only the right doctrine can create the right concept in the mind and the right faith in the heart. To make people disciples of Jesus Christ, that is our work and calling. In order to do this, you and I must remain faithful to God's Word, we must teach ALL that Christ has commanded us and nothing but what He has commanded us. This is how we let our light shine as called teachers in the church and as servants of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul encouraged his young co-worker, Timothy, "Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers" (I Timothy 4:16). This is what you and I should desire also. We want those whom we teach, both young and old, to know how to love and serve their God in faith and to learn how to apply the Scripture's principles of church fellowship to their lives and relationships day after day. Our calling in doing this requires much work, patience and love! A number of our members in each of our congregations are babes in the Word. Many of them will remain that way all of their lives. That isn't the way it should be because our God desires us to grow in our sanctification. But unfortunately some do not progress to high levels of Christian faith where they can correctly apply God's Word to their fellowshiping with others of different beliefs. Some will assent when a close friend of a different faith claims: "We all believe the same anyway! We're all headed for the same place but on different roads!" When little Johnnie accepts an invitation to accompany his Roman Catholic friend and playmate to Mass and hears and recognizes the "Gloria Patri" or the "Gloria in Excelsis" being sung in that service, he can come away with the opinion that he and his friend have much in common regarding their forms of worship and can draw the conclusion that they both believe the same things. Although some of our older members have been indoctrinated and instructed for many years in the truths of Scripture, they can often arrive at the same conclusions and assent to the common, pious sounding drivel that really there are not many differences of beliefs between them and friends of a different faith.

Some of our members are very unsuspecting or naive and become innocent victims of the smooth methods and garbled talk of false teachers. They really can be most gullible. They intend no evil toward others, and so do not even suspect that others may intend evil toward them. They are trustful souls. They listen to the "700 Club" on TV and hear the words that we're saved by trusting in Jesus but miss the crass synergistic fodder that is also represented as "the Bread of Life" by that religious program. Some of our members just do not expect anyone who speaks so much about the Lord Jesus to take advantage of them or to mislead them. So there are those among our membership who send contributions to the "700 Club" and feel that they are really involved in doing mission work and that their gifts given to such religious organizations are pleasing to God. They are appalled to learn that such gifts support those who espouse errors and doctrines not in accord with God's Word.

It is our responsibility and calling to continue to instruct and warn our fellow believers not to let themselves be misled by smooth talk, slick religious programs, or sincere sounding fund raisers that are found on so many TV channels today. We have to show them how to use

God's Word to recognize those who make error sound helpful, good and pleasing to God and warn them that "our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Ephesians 6:12).

Do you remember that our Lord said, "Anyone who loves his father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me; and anyone who does not take his cross and follow Me is not worthy of Me" (Matthew 10:37)? There will be times when our faith in Christ and our faithfulness to God's will is tested. And faithfulness to God's Word will have an effect upon our family relationships. Many of our fellow members have family ties or relatives who are of a different faith. It must be taken into account and under consideration that these blood ties and human emotions will play a part, sometimes a big part, as our fellow members apply Scripture's fellowship principles to their lives. It is a danger and weakness that will always be present and each one must learn to strive against them. This is especially true when family members or relatives are members of other Lutheran churches. It's not too difficult for our fellow members to distinguish and recognize the differences between Christian and non-Christian or the differences between Lutheran and Roman Catholic, but they may have difficulty seeing the differences among Lutherans. It isn't unusual for the church secretary to receive a post card from an American Lutheran Church (ALC) congregation noting that one of our members who was visiting relatives in another city partook of Holy Communion with them at their ALC church. It takes patient instruction in God's Word to teach that member of ours that vital doctrinal differences do exist between the Lutheran Church bodies and that God's Word instructs and urges us not to give the impression by partaking of Holy Communion at an American Lutheran Church' congregation that we are in doctrinal unity with them. By not communing at an ALC church, that member is not questioning the validity of the Sacrament nor condemning his relatives as heretics, nor is he saying and confessing that we are the only true Church or that all of our members are absolutely true Christians and will unfailingly be saved; but that the doctrinal disunity between us prevents him from partaking of the Lord's Supper with them because partaking of the Lord's Supper together implies a unity of faith and doctrine. At whose altar we worship, his religion we confess! The apostle Paul in I Corinthians 10:16-17 reminds us that partaking of the Lord's Supper together is also an expression of our unity of faith.

There are also some who advocate that Scripture's fellowship principles, especially the admonitions of the apostle Paul in Romans 16:17, forbid us even to associate with those of a different faith. They go so far as to teach that you dare not date or marry a person of a different faith. They insist that you purchase your food, clothing, and all other necessities for life at businesses or stores owned by members of their faith. They even demand that employment should only be secured where management and co-workers are of the same faith. We must bear in mind always that when the apostle Paul and other passages of Scripture urge us to avoid false teachers and all who persist in false doctrines or errors, these passages are not speaking in absolute terms. We are shown and can learn from I Corinthians 5: 9-11 that St. Paul was not referring to non-religious associations or relationships, "I have written you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people 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. But now I am writing you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat." You and I must deal with our brothers and sisters in the faith

in an evangelical manner and be careful how we present and teach them Scriptural admonitions. You may have a child in your classroom who holds sincerely to God's Word with a truly child-like faith. It can be a traumatic shock for that child when he realizes that Uncle Charlie, who brings gifts or plays baseball or football with him, doesn't believe in the Lord Jesus and that our Lord says: "whoever does not believe will be condemned" (Mark 16:16b). Here you have the opportunity to deal with that child and his problem but not to dwell upon Uncle Charlie's unbelief and condemn him deeper to hell. Rather encourage that little one to be the Savior's messenger and show him how to talk to Uncle Charlie about his sin and his Savior from sin.

Another danger that confronts us and our fellow members is that we can become very legalistic in applying these Scriptural principles of fellowship to our own and our fellow members' daily lives and relationships. There is something that upsets me very much. What upsets me is when fellow church members say: "I can't do this or that because my church doesn't allow it!" Such people remind me of the Galatian Christians who were being led by the Judaizers to place themselves again under the burdens of the ceremonial laws. The apostle Paul called them "foolish Galatians" and he encouraged them, "stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery". There are weak Christians who desire rules and regulations to be laid down for them regarding the application of these fellowship principles. They want to be told: "This is what you can do - this is what you cannot do!" They want the rules to be categorized so that they can follow them to the letter and carry out what our church or our Synod requires. They cannot cope with questions or reach decisions on their own when confronted with situations in their lives where they will need to make decisions regarding their fellowship practice. If a relative who is of another faith dies, they want a definite rule as to whether or not they can attend the church funeral service, or if they can attend the service, definite rules as to what kind of memorials may be given or how far they can go in participating in the funeral service of another person of a different faith.

You and I must teach them that there will be many situations in our lives when we will have to exercise our Christian judgment. We must make them realize that sometimes their Christian brothers and sisters may differ in their judgements and we dare not pounce upon others with a righteous wrath and demand in a most legalistic manner that their judgements regarding fellowship practices must be exactly as ours in every single situation. God hasn't chosen to provide us with rules to cover every possible situation in our fellowshiping with others. He has given us in His Word the principles of His holy will that are to govern our fellowship practices and He expects us as His redeemed, sanctified and mature sons and daughters to apply those principles in the spirit of the Gospel.

Now I have endeavored to set before you this morning the primary Scriptural principles which should guide you and me in our living church fellowship. I did not include an exegesis of the original Greek text of the Bible passages pertaining to Christian fellowship because the time allotted to this doctrinal paper would not permit such inclusion into my presentation and still allow some time for discussion from the floor. I do pray that this doctrinal paper has helped you to realize what a gracious gift from God true church fellowship is and what a joyful possession it can be. May you prize it highly, desire your brothers and sisters in the faith to also realize its great value, seek such fellowship, be ever alert to preserve it and bring its blessings to as many people as you can reach. I did not intend this doctrinal paper to provide you with rules and regulations to take home and apply to yourself or to those who are under your spiritual care. I do pray fervently that you are filled with the love of Christ and that the love of Christ will motivate you to be faithful to your Savior and His Word. The love of Christ will also move you to be



filled with a love for souls, souls with whom you may share the Gospel. The love of Christ will also motivate you to be filled with a concern and love for souls enmeshed in error. Let this love of Christ guide and enable you to keep and apply the Scripture's fellowship principles in ways and manners that glorify God and please Him.