

A Review of the Doctrine of Church Fellowship and its Scriptural Basis

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As I was working on the research for this paper I realized that most of the material that was supplied me from the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, Wisconsin, was written either just before the '50s or during the '50s. I know that we are in an age that is reliving that period of time in style and fashion, but I assure you that the contents of this paper will not simply be a nostalgic look at the past. If it were, then truly there would be something very wrong with our present day theology. The Scriptural principles of the Doctrine of Church Fellowship must be maintained among us, as all the council of God's Word. The devil has not let up on his attacks on faithful Christians who, by God's grace, are endeavoring to remain in the Word of God. We are faced with decisions each day in regard to fellowship, prayers, and invocations at sporting events, political rallies, secular meetings; high school choirs participating in the worship services of congregations as a requirement for their credit, the questions of scouting and lodges, the new "club" that is forming in town but is really a lodge, to name just a few. There is always the question that is asked of us, "Why don't you get along with all the other churches? They are trying so hard to get everyone together, and your kind of people always break that effort." Unionism is not a dead issue in our nation. There is, and there will be, a continuing effort to dissuade us from our Scripture-based stance. This paper then, endeavors to review that Scriptural basis for the doctrine of fellowship and also make some practical applications of that principle.

In carrying out the assigned topic, I have used as the basic outline the presentation of our Wisconsin Synod Commission on Doctrinal Matters, on Church Fellowship, which was discussed by the Joint Doctrinal Committees of the Synodical Conference. The statement defines church fellowship: "Church fellowship is every joint expression, manifestation, and demonstration of the common faith in which Christians on the basis of their confession find themselves to be united with one another." It precedes with two basic points: A. How Scripture leads to this concept of church fellowship, B. What principles Scripture teaches for the exercise of such church fellowship.

One of the endeavors of those who participated on the committee was not to dwell on the limitations, or what could be termed as the negative side, of church fellowship, but rather the positive side. Prof. Carl Lawrenz, in an essay that was read before the Nebraska District Convention, at Stanton, Nebraska, June 15-18, 1954, states:

The practical issues facing us in our synod all tend to focus our attention on one phase of the subject of Christian fellowship, namely the limitations and restrictions which God in His Word has placed upon the outward exercise of Christian fellowship. But it would not be wholesome to think of Christian fellowship too exclusively in terms of what we might call its negative side. In carrying out our assignment we have, therefore, treated it in its wide scope, that we may again be reminded what a glorious blessing is involved in Christian fellowship that we may be deeply constrained by the abundant encouragements of Holy Writ to manifest it in all of its God-pleasing manifestations, to exercise it as long as we can possibly do this with the Lord's approval, that we may pay richly 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 imitations which our Lord has placed upon the exercise of Christian fellowship in a faithful yet evangelical manner. (C. Lawrenz, "The Scriptural Principles Concerning Church Fellowship," *Quartalschrift Theological Quarterly*, Volume 51, October 1954, Number 4, page 260)

This I hope is also the thrust of this paper. For the Lord has given us a wonderful gift in church fellowship.

Church Fellowship: A Fellowship Which Unites Believers with the Lord

In the doctrinal or dogmatic books this section would first of all be under the heading “the *Una Sancta*—the *One, Holy, Christian Church*.” Really for any discussion of church fellowship this would first have to be discussed. From the fall of mankind into sin, man has not been in union with God. He was created in God’s image (Gen. 1:27) but lost that image by disobeying the command of God. As a result, we are all by nature lost and condemned creatures. We all deserve God’s eternal wrath. But God in His mercy did not deal with us according to our sins; instead we read the first Gospel promise of the Seed in Gen. 3:15. St. Paul then writes in Galatians 3:26, “For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus.” Through the God-given, Spirit-worked faith in Christ our Savior God has become our dear Father and we who were once lost and condemned sinners, are now His children. This truth is more completely explained by St. Paul in Galatians 4:4-6, “But when the fulness of time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons. And because ye are sons, God hath sent forth the spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying, Abba, Father.” The Holy Ghost has called us by the Gospel message of Christ’s finished redemption. The Holy Ghost continually gives us the assurance of faith that our sins are forgiven and that God no longer sees our sins, but Christ’s righteousness. We, on the other hand, no longer see God’s wrath threatening down on us because of our sin but see God as our Father through the cross of Christ. So the Spirit works that confidence in our hearts that we can pray to God, trust in Him and hope in His promises. This blessing should thrill us as it did the Apostle John as he wrote: “Beloved, what manner of love that Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God: therefore the world knoweth us not, because it knew him not. Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him for we shall see him as he is” I John 3:1-2.

Church Fellowship: An Invisible Fellowship with all Believers

This faith that has been worked in our hearts at the same time unites us with an intimate bond with all other believers. From the very moment that we sinners were received into fellowship with our God through faith in Christ our Savior, we also entered upon another fellowship with every other believer in Christ. The first general epistle of St. John is full of that teaching by the constant references to “we” and “us.” This is also the theme of the letter, the fellowship that is ours. So in the first chapter verse three we read, “That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ.” He then sounds a warning that this blessed fellowship with the Father and Son is broken by those who choose to walk in darkness of sin, “but if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another and the blood of Jesus Christ cleanseth us from all sin” (1:7). This faith in Christ unites us with all believers the world, over, making us brothers and sisters in the faith.

Ephesians 4:4-6 is also a very striking description of our fellowship. Here St. Paul states: “There is one body, and one Spirit even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is above all, and through all, and in you all.” Notice the intimate union between the Trinity and all believers. So it matters not what race, nationality, age, sex, station in life, its members are. Those true believers, living on this earth or those who are already departed out of this life, are the invisible Church of Christ which makes up His body. One and the same Spirit dwells in the hearts of all its members.

The Lord and Savior is the same, not only in His wonderful person as true God and true man, but also in His work. He did not prepare a complete salvation for some and a salvation that must be supplemented by works for others. The faith by which Christ’s merits are appropriated is the

same in every case. It is not that some trust in Christ completely while others rely to some extent on their own honor and merits. This faith is produced by the Holy Ghost. All share in one baptism of regeneration. 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 through all using them to carry out His plans who is living and dwelling in them through His Spirit. (John P. Meyer, "Prayer Fellowship," *Quartalschrift*, Volume 46, October 1949, Number 4, page 253)

On the night before Jesus Christ gave Himself as the perfect Sacrifice on the cross, He prayed "That they all may be one: as thou, Father, art in me, and I in Thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me" (John 17:21). This glorious and invisible fellowship of believers, like the fellowship with God, comes not by man's working but by the Holy Spirit. Jesus told His disciples in John 16:13, "Howbeit, when he, the Spirit of Truth, is come, He will guide you into all truth." The Holy Spirit of God is responsible for this unity, He creates it, He preserves it. It is worked by the Spirit through the Word, as Jesus prayed for the twelve disciples in John 17:17, "Sanctify them through thy truth, Thy Word is truth." In verse 20 He points out that He did not just pray for the twelve, "neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word." To this Scripture has added all the many striking metaphors emphasizing the unity of the Church, with pictures like the body of Christ,

the temple of God in which the individual Christians are living stones fitly framed together, a city of the living God, a commonwealth, in which the believers are fellow citizens, a family, in which we are sons and daughters of our Father in heaven; a royal priesthood, in which all those who are washed from their sins are kings and priests together; branches of the one Vine, from whom they all draw strength and substance; one fold in which all believers are sheep of the one Good Shepherd. (C. Lawrenz, "The Scriptural Principles Concerning Church Fellowship," *Quartalschrift*, Volume 51, October 1954, Number 4, page 263)

Please note here one very important aspect. The unity that Scripture speaks of here is always a *Spirit-worked* unity. So often we hear these passages quoted so incorrectly as supporting the man-made unionism that is so popular in our age. Many times men strive for union on social problems as an effective means for church unity. It is God's Word and Spirit that unite the Christians, not an outward organization which claims to be unified. We must maintain this Scriptural truth as we do in *This We Believe*, page 20,

We reject any attempt to identify the holy Christian Church with an outward organization, and likewise any claim that the Church must function in the world through specific organizational forms. We reject any views that see in the Church, as the Body of Christ, an extension of Christ's incarnation. We reject as false ecumenicity and views that look for the true unity of the Church in some form of external or organizational union, and we oppose all movements toward such union made at the expense of confessional integrity.

Church Fellowship: Its Expression

On the outline that we have been following, we will now take the next three sections together. They all deal with the related matter of the outward expression of Church Fellowship. The first point states:

Faith as spiritual life invariably expresses itself in activity which is spiritual in nature, yet outwardly manifest, e.g., in the use of the means of grace (John 8:47), in prayer (Gal. 4:6), in praise and worship, in appreciative use of the "gifts" of the Lord of the Church (Eph. 4:11-14), in

Christian testimony (Acts 4:20, II Cor. 4:13), in furthering the cause of the Gospel (I Pet. 2:9, Gal. 2:9), in deeds of Christian love (Gal. 5:6).

Faith is that which unites believers with their God and Savior and with one another. Faith is spiritual life, created, nourished, and sustained by the Holy Spirit.

Because faith is spiritual life it will like all life manifest itself in activity. We know that to be true of physical life. Also physical life itself we cannot see. But the life which throbs in a human body and which pervades all its members manifests itself through heart and pulse beat, through growth and change, through movement and activity. It is also thus with faith, spiritual life. It manifests itself through activity.

Since we are speaking specifically of Christian fellowship we can carry the comparison a step further. In our physical bodies heart, lungs, hands, feet, eyes, ears do not merely show themselves as living members by their individual activity. Since all these individual members are closely fused together in one body, with one life throbbing through all of them, these members in their activity function jointly and harmoniously, each integrating its activity with that of all the other members, each with its own activity serving all the other members. That, too, is true of the Church of believers as the mystical body of Christ. The spiritual life of faith which dwells in each believer does not merely manifest itself by individual activity. Since one and the same God-wrought faith in the Savior dwells in the hearts of all believers, uniting them most intimately as the body of Christ, the common spiritual life will also manifest itself in joint activity. Together believers will express their faith, each integrating the activity of his faith with that of other believers, each serving the other in faith with his particular gifts. It is such joint expression of faith which we mean when we speak of Christian fellowship or Church Fellowship.

This is not a comparison of our own devising. It is one which God Himself makes in His word, one which the Holy Spirit employs in great detail through the Apostle Paul in the 12th chapter both of Romans and I Corinthians. It will not do, of course, to press the comparison beyond the points which it is to clarify in a vivid manner. In all comparisons the analogy is never complete in every point. The fact that the spiritual life of faith manifests itself in activity and that as spiritual life common to all believers it manifests itself in joint activity does not mean that through such activity the invisible Church of believers now actually becomes visible. In the sphere of physical life a doctor, by taking note of pulse and heart beat, may detect and determine quite conclusively whether there is still life present or not in a body, even though life may be at a very low ebb. It is not so with spiritual life. The activity by which faith indeed expresses itself can as far as its outward manifestations are concerned—and that is all we mortals can observe—still be feigned and imitated by those in whose heart no faith is throbbing. Thus the presence of these outward manifestations of Christian life is not yet an absolute indication that those from whom they originate are truly believers. We may actually be dealing with an activity of hypocrites like the worship and the charity of Ananias and Sapphira, which, until exposed by God, however, passed for expressions of Christian faith. (C. Lawrenz, "The Scriptural Principles Concerning Church Fellowship," *Quartalschrift*, Volume 51, October 1954, Number 4, pages 264-266)

Since it is through the Word of God that faith is created in our hearts, and it is through the Word of God and only through that Word that the Holy Spirit nourishes and keeps this spiritual life of faith in our hearts, it is also then to the Word of God that we should turn in regard to its outward expressions. You will find a listing of the passages that we will discuss in the outline that this paper follows.

As we had stated earlier, our Savior prayed for His disciples, "Sanctify them through thy truth, thy word is truth" (John 17:17). In John 8:47, we read, "He that is of God heareth God's word." Here our Savior is giving

us one of the expressions of faith in a believers heart, the use of the means of grace. Here the Lord has given to us a wonderful opportunity. The Holy Spirit working through the Word strengthens that faith. And wherever faith exists there is a yearning for the means of grace. The Old Adam will always be fighting this desire of the new man and this longing may not always win out and be able to assert itself fully, but it is there as long as there is faith in the heart. Scripture abounds with exhortations to encourage and build up our faith. It is the Holy Spirit that leads the individual Christian in this longing for the spiritual food. It is also the Holy Spirit that leads the Christian to gather with fellow-believers who are also led by that same Spirit in joint expressions of their faith. Look at the first Christian congregation on the Pentecost, Acts 2:41-47. Of this entire company we are told, "They continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine..." They gladly received the Word of the Apostles; they saw their supreme treasure in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. They diligently made use of that supreme treasure. They were moved by that Gospel to diligently look out for the need of their fellow believers. They, "continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house of house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart, praising God, and having favor with all the people." It was a true expression of Christian Fellowship. God had given His saving Word to His Church and to each individual member that His believers may gain strength for their souls with it. With the Word the Church is exhorted to administer to one another for the mutual building up of the-Church. When the Church does this it is an expression of church fellowship.

The Lord has also given to His Church two visible means of grace, the Sacraments, Holy Baptism and Lord's Supper. It is the same Gospel message connected with visible elements, or tokens. When Christ commanded His disciples to make disciples of all nations, He instituted one of these Sacraments in giving the command to "baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost." When this washing of regeneration is carried out by Christians, it is an expression of fellowship. "On the night that He was betrayed," Jesus, took bread and wine and ordained His Holy Supper for all the present disciples and for future disciples with the precious promise that in, with and under the bread and wine they would receive at every celebration His true body and blood. At this eating and drinking each would be individually assured in his faith. For the Savior is first of all assuring the individual that He has given his body into death for his salvation, He has shed His blood for the forgiveness of his sins. But though this precious means of grace was meant for the believer's individual assurance of salvation, it was at the same time also to be an expression of the fellowship of faith.

It was that when Jesus celebrated it with His disciples at its institution. He intended that it should continue to be that when it would be celebrated in the future, saying, "This do ye, as oft as ye drink it, in remembrance of me." When we are told of the Pentecost congregation that they continued steadfastly in the breaking of bread and that they broke bread from house to house, this has been commonly interpreted as referring to joint celebration of the Lord's Supper. Though this cannot be established with full certainty, we do know from I Corinthians 11 how the first Christians at Corinth jointly communed at the Lord's table in connection with their Agape feasts, which were in themselves an expression of Christian fellowship. The Apostle reminds the Corinthians, I Cor. 10:17: "We, being many, are one bread, one body: for we are all partakers of that one bread." Most appropriately, therefore, do we call this sacred meal "Communion" and the guests at the Lord's table "communicants." When we approach the Lord's table, we bear testimony that we are of one faith with those who commune with us. We commonly refer to it as altar fellowship. (C. Lawrenz, "The Scriptural Principles Concerning Church Fellowship," *Quartalschrift*, Volume 51, October 1954, Number 4, pages 267-268)

The next passages in the thesis concern themselves with another phase of church fellowship and that is the proclamation of the Word of God. For God has also given us the command to "Go and preach the Gospel to every creature." In John 15:26,27 our Savior promised: "But, when the Comforter is come, whom I will send unto you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, which proceedeth from the Father, he shall testify of me: and ye also shall bear witness, because ye have been with me from the beginning." The Holy Spirit, came to the

disciples as Jesus had promised. He brought to their remembrance all that the Savior had done before their eyes and ears. He would guide them to see it all in its true saving meaning. The disciples would testify of the strength and power of the Holy Spirit and as His instruments. It is the Holy Spirit that still constrains believers to bear witness of their faith in the Lord. We, of course, have not been with Jesus from the beginning, the disciples were with Him for us. Through their inspired Word we hear Jesus' mighty words, we see His powerful miracles, we are moved by the gracious message of that crucified and risen Savior. Through the Word of the Apostles the Holy Spirit has guided us into all saving truth and led us to embrace it with believing hearts. The Holy Spirit has testified of Jesus as the Redeemer before our souls. Through this saving work the Holy Ghost now constrains us to bear witness of Jesus in word and deed. Like Peter and John, "we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:20). When we bear testimony together with our lips and lives, this is an expression of church fellowship called church work.

God has also established the public ministry for the furthering of His Church. Paul states in Eph. 4:11-14: "And He gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ; till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ: that we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the slight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive." The Christian realizes in his God-given faith, that the servants of the Lord are a blessing to him from God. Wherever believers are found, they will gather together in smaller or larger groups. They need not be commanded to form a congregation. The Holy Spirit leads them together on the basis of their common faith and they are moved by the same Spirit to establish the public ministry in their midst and call public servants to serve them with the means of grace. This is abundantly shown in the book of Acts where the founding of the first Christian congregations is recorded. When these public servants of the Word minister to believers, and the believers on their part receive these ministrations, this is an expression of Christian fellowship, commonly called pulpit fellowship.

The bond of faith will express itself in another way. For these congregations drawn together by the Holy Spirit will not stay aloof and apart from each other but will seek contact with each other and share with each other the gifts that the Lord may have given to one or the other congregation. The New Testament gives us a number of examples of this type of intercongregational action.

Timothy of Derbe had a good report from the Churches at Lystra and Iconium, having worked and done creditable work in all of them. St. Paul had founded three congregations in Macedonia, some distance from one another. In his First Epistle to the Thessalonians, Paul commends them for having practiced brotherly love "toward all the brethren which are in all Macedonia." There was at least one man who served all the congregations of Macedonia. They had enough of an organization to carry out a joint election, in which this particular man was chosen as a traveling companion of Paul, to represent these Churches in delivering the collection which they had gathered for the needy in Jerusalem. In connection with this collection, Paul also says in II Cor. 9:2: "Achaia was ready a year ago." Thus we see that he thought of the three congregations of Athens, Corinth, and Cenchraea as a closely knit fellowship in a common area. When Paul organized this great collection among the Greek churches for the church in Jerusalem, the chief purpose was thereby to cement two parts of the church together which stood in danger of drifting apart. All these joint expressions of faith on the intercongregational level were an exercise of Christian fellowship. St. Paul stressed the divinely created bonds which united the Corinthians with the rest of the church. When they were inclined to hide behind congregational independence, he rebuked them saying, "What? came the Word of God out from you? or came it unto you only?" When Christian congregations outwardly accept one another as fellow believers, when they join hands in doing the work of the Lord, when they share servants of the

Word, this is an expression of Christian fellowship. (“Essay on Church Fellowship,” *Doctrinal Statements of the WELS*, 1970, page 25).

We have an expression of this common faith worked by the Spirit in the association of congregations to which we belong. The synod, district, conferences, their joint supervision of Christian education—all are expressions of Christian fellowship. While the specific forms have not been given us in the New Testament the Holy Spirit guides His children to create adequate and wholesome forms which fit every circumstance, situation and need.

One set of passages need yet to be discussed, and that is in connection with prayer. Only a Christian can pray. Every man by nature attempts to pray. So it doesn’t surprise us when we find almost all people speaking about praying and engaging in what they consider prayer. Man has a natural knowledge of God, and of his accountability to God. But in his sin-laden conscience man cannot approach God in true prayer. He, natural man, views his prayer as a meritorious work, or as a charm whereby he can gain something for himself. He is not concerned about worshipping God or knowing Him but is looking for some benefit for himself. These truly are vain repetitions, for they are an abomination to God.

St. Paul in Galatians 4:6 says: “Because ye are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son in your hearts, crying, Abba, Father.” Only where the Holy Spirit has worked faith can there be true prayer. Our prayers are in response to the precious promises of His Word. God acted in our life first. He brought us to salvation through Jesus Christ. Our sins are forgiven, and the barrier of sin has been removed. We, as children of God, can commune with Him in prayer. This talking to God is done in Jesus’ name, and in faith, through Jesus alone, we can come to Him as dear children. True prayer is an expression of Christian faith. When Christians therefore join together in prayer, when they pray together, they express their common faith. Jesus indicated that this is His will when he bid us to pray, “*Our* Father who art in heaven.” He wants us to remember that we are addressing the Father of a large family. In our prayers, God wants us to remember that we stand before him together with all our brothers and sisters in the faith.

In this sense all our prayers are really joint prayers. In II Tim. 2:19, we read, “Nevertheless the foundation of God standeth sure, having this seal, The Lord knoweth them that are his. And, let everyone that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity.” It is a blessed article of our faith that all the children of God who are known only by God alone are praying for us. So we are engaged in joint prayer with every other individual in the communion of saints. But it is not this activity that we are speaking about when we talk about joint prayer in connection with church fellowship.

The Savior urged joint prayer in which we select specific individuals for the purpose of addressing a common plea to the heavenly Father. This is prayer fellowship in the sense of church fellowship. In Matt. 18:19-21, Jesus says: “If two of you shall agree on earth as touching anything that ye shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.” We heard before that this was true of the Church of Jerusalem, for they continued “steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship and in the breaking of bread and in *prayers*.” Note that the prayers are an expression of the common faith.

As mortals whose human vision is limited, we cannot see another’s faith to judge whether or not it is the same as our own. We can and must accept what he confesses and practices in his life as, a sincere expression of his faith. If his confession of faith is in full harmony with God’s Word, and if his practice does not contradict this confession, then we conclude that such a person believes as we do. In all of these outward expressions of Christian faith, they are conscious, deliberate joint expressions of fellowship in this common faith.

We may classify these expressions of Christian fellowship according to the realm of activity in which they occur. Yet thereby they do not become so many different kinds of fellowship each quite different from the other. It is not that pulpit fellowship involves something quite different from altar fellowship, and these again quite different from prayer fellowship. It is not that individuals may undertake to exercise fellowship in joint church work but that they are not yet sufficiently united to practice fellowship in worship. It is not that pulpit and altar fellowship

require a certain high measure of unity, while prayer fellowship is quite possible among those who are less united. If these consciously undertaken joint manifestations of Christian faith are not a mere outward sham, then they are all expressions of one and the same fellowship of faith. This, however, is not a fellowship of man's own making, but a gift and creation of the Holy Spirit.

All this is expressed in the outline in Point A, 6 of the presentation of church fellowship. It states: "We may classify these joint expressions of faith in various ways according to the particular realm of activity in which they occur, e.g., pulpit fellowship, altar fellowship, prayer fellowship, fellowship in worship, fellowship in church work, in missions, in Christian education, in Christian charity. Yet insofar as they are joint expressions of faith they are all essentially one and the same thing, and are all properly covered by a common designation, namely, church fellowship. Church fellowship should therefore be treated as a unit concept, covering every joint expression, manifestation, and demonstration of a common faith. Hence Scripture can give the general admonition "avoid them" when church fellowship is to cease, Rom. 16:17. Hence Scripture sees an expression of church fellowship also in giving the right hand of fellowship, Gal. 2:9, and in greeting one another with the fraternal kiss, Rom. 16:16; on the other hand, it points out that a withholding of church fellowship may also be indicated by not extending a fraternal welcome to errorists and by not bidding them Godspeed, II John 10, 11. Cf. III John 5-8." ("Essay on Church Fellowship," *Doctrinal Statements of the WELS*, 1970, pages 28-29)

Church Fellowship: Its Basis or Prerequisite

What principles does Scripture teach for the exercise of such church fellowship? Who are those with whom God would have us jointly express our faith? With whom would He have us engage in a joint prayer? With whom are we to join in worship? With whom will we commune at the Lord's Table? With whom will we join hands to spread the Gospel among men? The obvious answer is "With Christians!" All those activities mentioned are expressions of Christian faith and only with Christians are we united in a common faith. This by itself doesn't answer our questions but raises another. The thesis states:

In selecting specific individuals or groups for a joint expression of faith we can do this only on the basis of their confession. It would be presumptuous on our part to attempt to recognize Christians on the basis of the personal faith in their hearts.

II Tim. 2:19: "The Lord knoweth them that are His." Faith is a matter of the heart and as such is visible only to God. "Man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart" (I Sam. 16:7). Since we cannot probe the heart, God would have us deal with men on the basis of the confession that they make concerning the attitude of their heart. Romans 10:10: "For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation." Prof. Meyer states:

We accept every confession of faith as a sincere expression of the real attitude of the heart. In case a clash appears between the confession by mouth and the confession by deed, we accept the confession by deed in preference to the confession by mouth, since deeds speak louder than words. (J.P. Meyer, "Prayer Fellowship," *Quartalschrift*, Volume 47, October 1950, Number 4, page 288)

The other passage listed is I John 4:1-3: "Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God; because many false prophets are gone out into the world. Hereby know ye the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God." The Apostle is telling us to

know and search out the spirit that is in a man on the basis of his confession. Of course, we know from Scripture that there will be hypocrites, whose confession will not correspond with the true attitude of the heart. That is beyond our responsibility. God will deal with hypocrites at His own time.

On first glance, it would appear that the apostle John is giving us a very narrow requirement, namely the confession that Jesus Christ is come into the flesh.

But very obviously St. John is not satisfied with a mere confession of Christ's incarnation, for that alone does not set forth the heart of Christian faith as St. John teaches it. Out of a very practical interest the Apostle mentions only the particular point of doctrine which was being perverted by Cerinthus, who with his false teaching was troubling the Christians to whom John is writing. Yet the denial of Christ's incarnation involves also the gracious purpose, the blessed fruit, the glorious outcome of Christ's entrance into the flesh. As soon as you bear this in mind, you will not be able to stop short of including the entire Word of God, for it is all a revelation of Christ and His salvation. (C. Lawrenz, "The Scriptural Principles Concerning Church Fellowship," *Quartalschrift*, Volume 51, October 1954, Number 4, pages 276-277)

John 8:31, records our Savior's attitude on the requirement for confession, "If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed; and ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." In the great commission, our Savior bids us that in making disciples of all nations, we are to teach them to observe all things whatsoever He commands us. So it is our Savior that we follow when we state, "A Christian confession of faith is in principle always a confession to the entire Word of God. The denial, adulteration, or suppression of any word of God does not stem from faith but from unbelief" ("Essay on Church Fellowship," *Doctrinal Statements of the WELS*, 1970, page 31). We do well to consider all the other passages listed there. Our Savior earnestly forbids His disciples to add to or subtract from His Word, Matt. 5:19: "Whosoever therefore shall break one of the least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in kingdom of heaven. And whosoever shall do and teach them the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven." The Apostle Peter tells Christians, "If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God" (I Pet. 4:11). The Lord speaking to the Prophet Jeremiah says, "The prophet that hath a dream, let him tell a dream; and he that hath my word, let him speak my word faithfully" (Jer. 23:28). In verse 31 we read, "Behold, I am against the prophets, saith the Lord, that use their tongues, and say, He saith." The Lord clearly is declaring His attitude toward His word in Deut. 4:2: "Ye shall not add unto the word which I commanded you, neither shall ye diminish ought from it, that ye may keep the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you." The New Testament has a similar statement in Rev. 22:18,19: "For I testify unto every man that heareth the words of the prophecy of this book, if any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book; and if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book."

So we state: "we recognize and acknowledge as Christian brethren those who profess faith in Christ as their Savior and with this profession embrace and accept His entire Word" ("Essay on Church Fellowship," *Doctrinal Statements of the WELS*, 1970, page 31).

Church Fellowship: The Weak Brother

In order to understand properly the conclusion we just made about the basis and prerequisite for Christian fellowship we need to distinguish with Scripture between an adherent of false doctrine or practice and a weak brother. So the next two points of the outline deal with the weak.

"Actually, however, the faith of Christians and its manifestations are marked by many imperfections either in the grasp and understanding of Scriptural truths, or in the matter of turning these truths to full account in their lives. We are all weak in one way or another" ("Essay on Church Fellowship," *Doctrinal Statements of the WELS*, 1970, page 32). This is nothing unusual among Christians on this earth. St. Paul said of himself:

“Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect: but I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus” (Phil. 3:12). In Eph. 3:16-28, St. Paul prays that they may grow in Christian wisdom and understanding. “That he would grant you, according to the riches of his glory, to be strengthened, with might by his Spirit in the inner man; That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith, that ye, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height.” In II Thess. 5:14, St. Paul warns: “Warn them that are unruly, comfort the feeble-minded, support the weak, be patient toward all men.” A presupposition of weakness among Christians underlies both of those passages. In Eph. 4 the Apostle speaks of the unity of the church. He speaks of God’s gift of the public ministry for the education of his Church on earth, that the many weaknesses be overcome which seek to undermine the blessed unity of the Church. Through the Word, the Church is to be edified “that we henceforth be no more children tossed to and fro, and, carried about with every wind of doctrine by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive” (v. 14). The writers to the Hebrews states: “For when for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you again which be the first principle of the oracles of God: and are become such as have need of milk, and not of strong meat” (5:12). This certainly assumes much weakness of faith and Christian understanding in the Church.

Through the imputed righteousness of Christ His believers are indeed all perfect in God’s sight. Yet in its life Christ’s Church here on earth is a congregation of spiritual convalescents, under the constant care of their heavenly physician.” (C. Lawrenz, “The Scriptural Principles Concerning Church Fellowship,” *Quartalschrift*, Volume 51, October 1954, Number 4, pages 277-278)

The outline quotes Walther’s Thesis 5 but also refers to number 10 to correct any false conclusion. Thesis 10 states:

From the fact that the Church militant cannot again a higher degree of unity than a fundamental one, it does not follow that any error against the Word of God may be granted equal rights in the Church with the truth, nor that it may be tolerated.

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. In precept and example, Scripture abounds with exhortations to pay our full debt of love toward the weak.

The first general exhortation given in Gal. 6:1,3: “Brethren, if a man be overtaken in fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness: considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted. Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. For if a man think himself to be something, when he is nothing, he deceiveth himself.” The other general exhortation we have discussed (Eph. 4:1-6) or will discuss (Matt. 18:15-17).

The next part refers to the weakness in laying hold of God’s promises in a firm trust. Matt. 6:25-34: in this portion of the Sermon on the Mount, in which Jesus speaks about the cares of this life and our trust in God. Prof. C. Lawrenz, in his paper, discusses very well the types of weaknesses in this area.

In the Gospels we frequently hear Jesus warning, rebuking, chiding His disciples for being of “little faith.” They gave way to anxious worries and cares about their earthly needs. In the midst of a storm at sea they were on the verge of giving way to despair. Their weakness of faith consisted in this that they showed a lack of trust in God’s gracious and provident care. It was not, however, that in principle they denied God’s fatherly care. It was not that they rejected the Savior’s testimony that through Him they had full access to God’s fatherly love. Their weakness rather consisted in this that they were not yet quite able to live up to these truths. The hand of

faith with which they embraced and held them was still feeble. We all understand this weakness, for if we were wholly free from it we would not be troubled with any worries and cares. Such weakness of faith does not prevent expressions of Christian fellowship. It rather calls for them. Consider how Jesus dealt with His disciples when symptoms of little faith showed themselves. He rebuked them sharply, blamed them for having a Gentile mind. But He also instructed them with all patience and tenderness. In their worries and cares He lifted up their hearts by calling their attention to God's providence in nature and then reminding them that they were more than the birds of the air and the lilies of the field in God's eyes. In their fearfulness during the storm at sea, He with a searching question called to their remembrance the rich experience of His Savior's love and power which they had been enjoying, which left no room for fear. Then He granted them a new manifestation of His grace and power in rebuking wind and sea before their eyes. The Lord is not pleased to see our faith weak. For a weak faith is in constant danger of dying out altogether and thus of losing the rich blessing which it still enjoys. Yet the Lord recognized also those of weak faith as His believers; and we will want to do likewise. With Him we are not to break the bruised reed or quench the smoking flax but lovingly to make every effort to restore them to healthy vigor. Weak brethren distinguish themselves from scoffers and unbelievers in their willingness to receive spiritual help and instruction. Their attitude will be that of the father of the lunatic in the Gospel who prayed, Mark 9:24: "Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief." (C. Lawrenz, "The Scriptural Principles Concerning Church Fellowship," *Quartalschrift*, Volume 51, October 1954, Number 4, pages 278-279)

Another type of weakness in Christians which need not be a reason for terminating fellowship is: "weakness with reference to adiaphora in enjoying fully the liberty wherewith Christ has made us free." Romans 14 and I Cor. 8 and 9 treat this type of weakness which pertained to the use of adiaphora, things neither commanded nor forbidden in God's Word. Also here as in all points of Christian life, doctrine was involved, but not in the sense that the weak brother did not know or understand the pertinent truths. The problem rather lay in this that the conscience of the weak brother had not yet risen to the level of his understanding. This prevented him from enjoying to the fullest extent the liberty wherewith Christ has made us free.

At Rome the problem was particularly the matter of eating meat. Both sides were sincerely devoted in faith to their Savior. They realized that as far as their relation to Christ and the enjoyment of His salvation was concerned all foods were alike. But there were Christians who were disturbed by partaking of the same foods that their fellow Christians did. Others observed certain days, while others did not. So Paul states: "Him that is weak in the faith receive ye, but not to doubtful disputations" (v. 1). Any unwillingness to treat him as a brother would be tantamount to despising him; it would mean refusing to receive him and help him in love. In true brotherly love toward the weak brother they were to realize that they could not serve him with doubtful disputations, with overbearing argument, with condescending instruction. He needs to be instructed anew with the glorious liberty wherewith Christ has made us free. But in the meantime they were to be very careful in their use of their own liberty, so as not to cause the weak brother to be shaken in his faith or tempted to do something that his conscience still considered a sin.

In Corinth the problem was much the same and Paul gives the same advice. In chapter 9 Paul states: "To the weak became I as weak, that I might gain the weak: I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some" (I Cor. 9:22). These words have been grossly misunderstood and abused.

Becoming all things to all does not mean taking liberties with the Word of God, adapting it to what men may be willing and ready to hear, taking off some of the sharp edges of the Law, making the Gospel less of an offense to them, or in general making some compromises and concessions on individual points of God's message. It is not for us to streamline God's Word into an effective message for our day. Paul does not mean that he pretended to be weak or acted as one who was weak, but that he placed himself into the position of the weak; he actually made

their problems his own and fought their battles in his own heart. In this way he cultivated the ability to deal with the weak on their own level and thus to win them. In Gal. 1:6 he uses the figure of placing one's self under the other man's burden, exhorting: "Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ." It is in this way that we are to become all things to all men in order that by all means some might be saved. It is in this way that the Lord would have all of us pay our debt of love to the weak. (C. Lawrenz, "The Scriptural Principles Concerning Church Fellowship," *Quartalschrift*, Volume 51, October 1954, Number 4, pages 281-282)

The next point mentions Acts 1:6. Even as late a Jesus ascension into heaven the Apostles still showed a woeful ignorance as to the nature of Christ's kingdom, when they asked: "Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom of Israel?" In patient love Jesus corrected, instructed, and strengthened these weak disciples. In His name we are to deal in a similar way with all those who will receive correction and instruction. St. Paul is also an excellent example in treating weak brothers. The epistles to the Galatians and the Colossians were written to brothers who were being misled by false teachers. A complete study of these epistles is not possible in the time we have here, but in a very loving way St. Paul showed these Christians how their errors were cutting them away from Christ and salvation. The great resurrection chapter, (15) of I Corinthians was written to correct the mistaken ideas concerning the resurrection of the body and to help in strengthening the Corinthians to proclaim the pure Gospel.

When those who have been our brethren show a lack of Christian understanding or become enmeshed in error, we, too, are to treat them as weak brethren as long as we still have reason to assume that they are ready to receive correction and instruction. We shall make every effort to build them up in their faith that they may overcome their error. In much the same way the Lord would also have us deal with brethren who have deviated from the Christian life. We are first of all to deal with them as weak brethren. Jesus says: "Moreover, if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone; if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother" (Matthew 18:15).

Church Fellowship: Its Limitations and Restrictions

Persistent adherence to false doctrine and practice calls for termination of church fellowship. . . We cannot continue to recognize and treat anyone as a Christian brother who in spite of all brotherly admonition impenitently clings to a sin. His and our own spiritual welfare calls for termination of church fellowship. ("Essay on Church Fellowship," *Doctrinal Statements of the WELS*, 1970, pages 40-41)

The passages Matthew 18:17 and I Corinthians 5:1-6 are listed. Both are very well known passages. Jesus teaches us clearly that we cannot continue to treat anyone as a brother who in spite of earnest brotherly admonition clings to sin. We do this action out of love to the brother that he may realize his sin and what that impenitence really involves. The Corinthian passage is Paul's urging the Corinthians to put out the man committing the fornication, in order that this man's old Adam might be crucified and his spirit saved. But also their own spiritual welfare was at stake. Paul warned, "Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump?" We also are given the happy results, for the sinner repented and Paul could now in II Corinthians urge them to receive him anew as their brother.

Scripture repeatedly admonishes us and warns us that "we can no longer recognize and treat as Christian brethren those who in spite of patient admonition persistently adhere to an error in doctrine or practice, demand recognition for their error, and make propaganda for it" ("Essay on Church Fellowship," *Doctrinal Statements of the WELS*, 1970, page 42).

Let us briefly look at the passages listed. The Galatian congregations were attacked by the Judaizers who taught that in order to enjoy the salvation won by Christ believers still needed to be circumcised and observe the Mosaic festivals. In Acts 15 we hear how Paul already had to face this error and oppose it when

certain men of Judea came to Antioch in Syria and troubled the church with it there. As a result the Antioch congregation sent Paul and Barnabas to discuss this error with the apostles and elders at Jerusalem. We are told that then this council was held in the midst of the congregation at Jerusalem, certain of the sect of Pharisees which believed openly voiced the opinion concerning Gentile Christians “that it was needful to circumcise them and to command them to keep the Law of Moses.” Note that St. Luke speaks of these people as standing in the faith. The Apostles and elders came together to consider the matter. The result was that after a frank discussion on the basis of God’s Word this erroneous idea was unanimously rejected by all present, including those who had previously held to it because they had not thrown off all of their former Pharisaic notions. Yet they did not persist in their error when corrected by God’s Word, and thus the fellowship was not broken. But with the errorists who came to Galatia the situation was different. The Apostle still treated the Galatians as weak brothers and tried to build up their faith that they might overcome the error which affected them. But to the Judaizers who deliberately opposed the Gospel, Paul gave quite a different treatment. Gal. 1:8,9 “If any man preach any other Gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed.” And again in Gal. 5:9 “I would they were even cut off which trouble you.” The thought of practicing Christian fellowship with them was out of the question.

Take a brief look at how the Savior treats the Pharisees and Sadducees, in warning against their false teachings. He warns in Matthew 7:15-19 of the false prophets who in their teaching deviate from God’s Word, demand recognition for errors, seek to spread them and win followers for them. Often they themselves are deceived by their own sheep’s clothing, yet they are in reality: “ravening wolves.” They are that whether they are conscious of their false teaching or not. They threaten Christ’s flock, His believers, with harm and destruction. Our Lord would have us know that it is not a light and harmless matter to deviate from His Word. That the Lord in His grace often prevents it from becoming fatal, even in the false prophets themselves, is quite beside the point. For the Lord in His love is seeking to preserve His precious Word for us and others, His Word which He has given to us as the bread of life, whereby alone faith is created, nourished, and preserved unto eternal life.

We are all very familiar with a similar general exhortation which the Apostle Paul voices in the final chapter of Romans: “Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them.” Note the solemn preface “Now I beseech you, brethren,” with which Paul introduces the plea that the Roman Christians should take note of those who are causing divisions and offenses in opposition to the doctrine which had been taught to them. They had been properly instructed in Christian truth. They had again been taught by Paul in this very epistle addressed to them, in which he had veritably presented a thorough and connected discussion of the entire Christian doctrine. Thus they were well able to keep a watchful eye on anyone who deviated from the doctrine which they had learned. Paul earnestly urged them to do so. Also here Paul is not thinking of anyone who might casually make an erroneous doctrinal statement. No, he had such in mind as cling to their error and with it create divisions. He uses a present participle to bring out the fact that it is something which those against whom he is warning practice habitually. These they are to avoid, and that means cease all Christian fellowship with them. That he does not mean social contact or any of the other ordinary contacts of life, should be evident from what he told the Corinthians when they misunderstood his exhortation that they should have no company with fornicators. Paul wrote: “Yet not altogether with fornicators of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or with idolaters; for then must ye needs go out of this world.” No, Paul, when speaking of avoiding errorists, means any contact which would be an acknowledgment and expression of fellowship.

Those who question our application of this inspired exhortation to all who persistently deviate from any teaching of God’s Word are apt to complain that we stress this seventeenth verse of Romans 16 but fail to do justice to the following verse, which goes on to say: “For they that are

such serve not our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly; and by good words and fair speeches deceive the hearts of the simple.” In applying verse 17 to all persistent errorists we have no thought of slighting this following verse. We will say, however, that it does not give a description by which Paul’s bidding to mark and to avoid is restricted only to a certain class of those who cause divisions and offense contrary to true doctrine. It doesn’t serve the purpose of telling us whom we are to mark and avoid. It sets before us God’s own appraisal and judgment upon all those whom He would have us avoid, namely upon all persistent errorists. God would have us know that in the matter of clinging to error and disseminating it they are taking orders from their own heart, from their own desires—that is what belly means here—instead of serving the Lord Jesus, whether they are fully conscious of it or not. We cannot fellowship with them as though ours and theirs were a common cause. All who follow such an errorist and make his confession their own help to spread it. They, too, make it impossible for us to recognize them as Christian brethren. (C. Lawrenz, “The Scriptural Principles Concerning Church Fellowship,” *Quartalschrift*, Volume 51, October 1954, Number 4, pages 287-289)

The same Scriptural principles are still binding today even though there are many around us who would have us believe otherwise. Man’s strongest arguments can never change God’s Word. That Word gives us the answer. The joint prayers that are advocated today in public functions, they lodge who prays a false prayer not in the name of Christ, the boy scout who is making his own character, are all then practical applications of this doctrine. For, Scripture tells us, “Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers; for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness, and what communion hath light with darkness?” (2 Cor. 6:14). We must remember that those who practice church fellowship with persistent errorists are partakers of their evil deeds (2 John 11).

From all of this we see that in the matter of outward expressions of Christian fellowship, the exercise of church fellowship, particularly 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 seeds. Conscientious recognition of both principles will lead to an evangelical practice also in facing many difficult situations that confront us, situations which properly lie in the field of casuistry. (“Essay on Church Fellowship,” *Doctrinal Statements of the WELS*, 1970, page 47)

Included are some situations for our consideration. Can we attend funerals of relatives of another faith without offending God? This question was answered in the *Northwestern Lutheran*, December 18, 1960, by Prof. Armin Schuetze in this way:

This situation would be similar to the one that faced Naaman. He had come to believe in the true God and henceforth wished to worship Him alone. However, his duties as captain of the host of the king of Syria required him to accompany his master into the house of the idol of Syria, Rimmon. He said to the Prophet Elisha: “In this thing the Lord pardon thy servant, that when my master goeth into the house of Rimmon to worship there, and he leaneth on my hand, and I bow myself in the house of Rimmon: when I bow down myself in the house of Rimmon, the Lord pardon thy servant in this thing” (II Kings 5:18). Although his duties to his king required his presence in the house of Rimmon, he would not participate in the worship of the idol (the bowing spoken of cannot refer to bowing in worship toward the idol, for immediately before this Naaman had said to Elisha: “Thy servant will henceforth offer neither burnt offering nor sacrifice unto other gods, but unto the Lord”). Elisha did not condemn him for this but dismissed him with the words: “Go in peace.” Circumstances may require our presence at a funeral that will bring us

into a church in which we cannot join in worship. We may even be called to serve as pallbearers. However, when we attend such a service, it should not be as actual participants in the religious worship. We are not to join in worship with errorists, as Romans 16:17 tells us.

What of prayer with family or friends of a different denomination or different synod? In the tract “Prayer Fellowship” (tract #10 in the *Continuing in His Word* series), these same principles of fellowship were set forth.

We know this to be the will of God for His believers (a) to manifest in worship and in prayer the fellowship of faith that unites them (Acts 2:24; Eph. 5:18ff.), until and unless (b) confession of the truth and rejection of error require them to separate (2 John 10). These are not legalistic rules, but evangelical principles. They are to be applied in the spirit of our Savior, who would not break a bruised reed, nor quench a smoking flax. In both these principles, that of fellowship and that of separation, there is inherent the spirit of love and true concern for the spiritual welfare of others. In any given instance we must do whatever the glory of our Savior and the true edification of the other person may require. This may direct us to join in prayer with others, or to refuse to pray with them.

Now we know that there are devout children of God in all synods who unfortunately are not yet informed regarding the matters in controversy and are not aware of their involvement in error through membership in a heterodox synod. I may have an A.L.C. grandmother who has always manifested a simple, childlike faith in her Lord and Savior, but who nevertheless is unaware of the intersynodical differences and their implications. When I visit her in the privacy of her home, it might be a grave mistake were I to assert the principle of separation by refusing to pray with her under the circumstances. What would the Lord have me do? Should I trouble her simple faith with these matters which are apparently beyond her grasp? Or is it my plain duty to support and build up her faith by praying with her or otherwise expressing my own faith?

If, however, my cousin is not only aware of the synodical differences, but defends his church’s errors, I cannot pray with him even in the privacy of his home. In order to make clear to him that the error he defends destroys the unity of our faith, I must refuse to join him in prayer. In cases of this kind it matters not how close the other person may be to me as a relative or friend; here the word of Jesus applies: “He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me” (Matt. 10:37).

There may be more occasion where prayer together with other Lutherans, even other Christians of other denominations is indicated—in the hospital, for example at the scene of an accident, or on the battlefield. When peril and imminent death reduce a Christian’s confession to no more than a grasping “Lord Jesus, help me,” we pray with that soul in his desperate need, even if he is not a member of our church body. When we stand in the presence of God, in the awareness of our guilt and one in our complete trust is His saving love, we can unite in prayer as we could have united with the thief on the cross in his simple pleas, “Lord, remember me.” Let us only be careful that we do not even the compromise the truth nor sanction error.

Though Scripture compels us not to join in the popular movements of unity today, we still are deeply concerned about Christian unity. In our concern for unity, we pray for others and ourselves. We pray that God may pour on all Christian people the grace of unity, that all schisms may be healed so that His people gathered from all nations, may serve Him in the unity of faith. But we leave it to God, who orders the course of this earth and His Church on earth to effect this unity of faith through his holy Spirit. As instruments in His hands let us faithfully use the means Christ has committed to us, His Word and Sacrament, holding them sacred, and avoiding all that might hinder their effectiveness. We have the precious Gospel in its truth and purity. It is the power of God unto salvation! Let us promote the best interests of His kingdom and the cause of Christian unity by soundly proclaiming that Word entrusted to us; For by using the truth of God’s Word we are promoting the

best interests of His kingdom and the cause for Christian unity; for sound doctrine has its roots in laid in Christ, and Christ will draw all men unto Himself.