

"Levels Of Fellowship"—Scriptural Principles Or Rules Of Men?

Wilbert R. Gawrisch

The 20th century has been called the age of ecumenism. Others have called it the age of pluralism.¹ Ever since the World Conference of Missions held in Edinburgh in 1910 the doctrines of Scripture and of confessional fellowship have been under attack. "United we stand, divided we fall" has been the persuasive philosophy energizing the powerful movement to bring all Christian churches under one huge umbrella.

As the century draws to a close, the destructive winds of ecumenism and its companions, pluralism and minimalism, are blowing through the world with hurricane force and threatening to capsize the little ship that is Christ's church. Ecumenism is the drive to unite all churches into one large organization. Pluralism is the toleration and side-by-side existence of various and conflicting doctrinal positions within a single church body. In a broader sense, it refers to the belief that there is value in all religions and all should enjoy equal toleration. Minimalism is the view that churches can and should unite, or at least have fellowship with one another, on the basis of a minimum of doctrinal agreement. An example of such a lowest-common-denominator consensus is the World Council of Churches' agreement on the proposition that Jesus Christ is "Lord."

In this pluralistic age religious diversity is viewed as wholesome and beneficial. Every kind of religious persuasion is tolerated—with the single exception of confessionalism, which is seen as inimical to the goal. Doctrinal integrity is sacrificed in the interest of a united front. Doctrinal indifference and unionism are in the air. Roman Catholics, Evangelicals and even Lutherans who describe themselves as conservative are caught up in the spirit of the age and are being swept along by the tide.

Scripture calls for doctrinal unity in Christ's church on earth

Sailing against these fierce winds, the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod and its partner churches continue to insist on the basis of Scripture that complete doctrinal agreement is necessary for the practice of church or confessional fellowship. Praying for the Christians at Rome, Paul says, "May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Ro 15:5,6). To the Corinthians 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 may be perfectly united in mind and thought" (1 Cor 1:10). The same apostle urges the church at Ephesus, "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace" (Eph 4:3). The Formula of Concord therefore emphasizes the need for agreement "in the doctrine and all its articles," as well as "in the right use of the holy Sacraments."²

For churches that take the Scriptures seriously, fellowship with errorists is ruled out by such basic passages as Matthew 7:15, "Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves"; Romans 16:17,18, "I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them. For such people are not serving our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people"; and 2 John 10,11, "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."

"Watch out for," "keep away from" and "do not welcome" are clear, unqualified imperatives. These are the Lord's directives flowing from his loving concern for the spiritual safety and welfare of his people. These injunctions are speaking, of course, not about family, business, social or political relationships, but about religious, spiritual relationships. They do not allow for religious fellowship of any kind with those who do not hold strictly and faithfully to the teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ (Mt 28:20). The motto of the Quarterly

¹ John G. Strelan, "The Age of Pluralism," *Concordia Journal*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (July 1990), pp 202-216.

² FC, SD, X,31 (Concordia Triglotta, 1063; Tappert, 616).

printed on the back cover of each issue reminds us that our Savior says, "If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed" (Jn 8:31).

The perfect unity in the *Una Sancta*

On the basis of Scripture, we believe and confess, of course, that there is a church composed of people of diverse races and nationalities in which perfect, unimpaired unity exists. This church is the *Una Sancta*, the holy Christian church, the communion of saints, as we call it in the Third Article of the Apostles' Creed. It is the Body of Christ. It consists of the entire group of all believers in Jesus Christ of all times. Many of its members are now in heaven; others are here on earth. In the Smalcald Articles Luther describes the church as "the holy believers and lambs who hear the voice of their Shepherd."³

Luther's heart fairly leaps with joy as he writes in his Large Catechism, "I believe that there is upon earth a little holy group and congregation of pure saints, under one head, even Christ, called together by the Holy Ghost in one faith, one mind, and understanding, with manifold gifts, yet agreeing in love, without sects or schisms. I am also a part and member of the same, a sharer and joint owner of all the goods it possesses, brought to it and incorporated into it by the Holy Ghost by having heard and continuing to hear the Word of God, which is the beginning of entering it."⁴

Scripture describes this perfect unity in the *Una Sancta* when Paul writes, "You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus....There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Ga 3:26-28). Again he says, "In Christ we who are many form one body" (Ro 15:5). To the Ephesians he writes, "There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all" (Eph 4:4-6).

This unity crosses denominational lines. It binds together all true Christians, all who believe in Jesus as their Savior from sin. Regardless of what their denominational affiliation may be—whether they are confessional Lutherans, liberal Lutherans, Baptists, Methodists, Roman Catholics, Greek Orthodox, or members of any other of the 20,780 distinct Christian denominations David B. Barrett lists in his *World Christian Encyclopedias*⁵—or even if they are not formally affiliated with any organized Christian church—faith in Jesus Christ makes them members of his spiritual Body, the holy Christian church. Faith unites them with Christ, their Head, and with one another (1 Jn 1:3). This union and fellowship is God the Father's answer to Jesus' high priestly prayer, "That all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you" (Jn 17:21). This spiritual unity exists among all of Jesus' disciples in spite of the outward divisions that separate the world's approximately one billion professing Christians.

Faith in Jesus Christ as one's Savior from sin is invisible to human eyes. No one can look into another person's heart. Only God can do that (1 Sm 16:7). Only he therefore knows who the members of Christ's church actually are. Some who claim to have faith and trust in Jesus may in fact be hypocrites. Only "the Lord knows those who are his" (2 Tm 2:19).

Because of God's promise, however, we believe that wherever the gospel of Jesus Christ is being proclaimed, believers will be present, even though we cannot identify them individually. We have the Lord's assurance that his Word will not return to him empty. It will accomplish what he desires and achieve the purpose for which he sends it (Is 55:10). We call the gospel and its visible forms, the holy sacraments, the means of grace. Through them the Holy Spirit creates, nourishes and strengthens saving faith. We also call these means the marks of the church. Where they are in use, we can be certain that Christ's church is present.

It is only the gospel, however, not any error which may have become attached to the gospel, that has the promise of working faith (Ro 10:17) and that serves as a mark of the church. Error does not work faith; it undermines and destroys faith. It is like poison (Dt 32:33). A pinch of cyanide in a goblet of wine can kill. Peter

³ SA, Part III, Art. XII,2 (*Trig.*, 499; Tappert, 315).

⁴ LC, The Creed, Art. III,51,52 (*Trig.*, 691; Tappert, 417).

⁵ David B. Barrett, *World Christian Encyclopedia*, Nairobi, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1982.

calls heresies "destructive" (2 Pe 2:1). Errors that adulterate the gospel may completely vitiate and nullify its saving, faith-creating power. For that reason God through Jeremiah declares, "I am against the prophets who wag their own tongues and yet declare, 'The LORD declares'" (Jr 23:31). In a false-teaching church we do not know what effect the error has had on the members' faith. We speak of such a church as a part of the visible Christian church on earth because of God's promise concerning the gospel which is taught there, even though that gospel may be mingled with many errors.

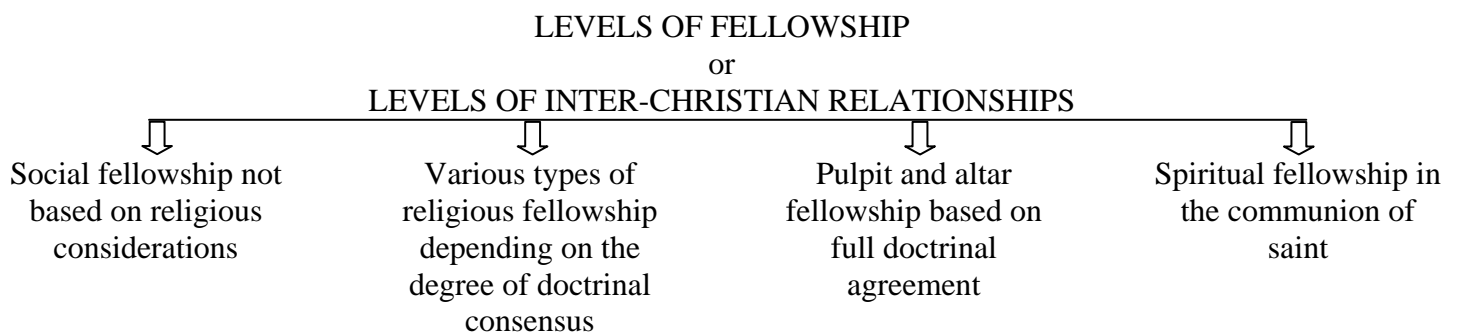
Since the *Una Sancta* is invisible to human eyes, its perfect unity is also invisible to our eyes. This unity, like the existence of the *Una Sancta* itself, is a matter of faith. In the Creed we confess, "I believe...in the holy Christian church, the communion of saints." We also believe in its oneness, its perfect spiritual unity.

Because faith in Christ is invisible, we cannot practice the spiritual fellowship we have within the *Una Sancta*. We do not know what the personal relationship is that people have to Jesus Christ. The attitude of people hidden in their hearts does not enable us to recognize them as fellow members of the Body of Christ. We can judge them only on the basis of the outward evidence of what they say and do. Paul writes to the Roman Christians, "It is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved" (Ro 10:10). We can recognize those who are one with us only on the basis of their confession. While it is true that we may be deceived when their confession and conduct are hypocritical, the Lord does not expect us to recognize sham Christians. "He who searches the hearts" (Ro 8:27) will himself judge them and deal with them in his own time and in his own way as he did when he exposed Ananias and Sapphira in the apostolic church.

"Levels of fellowship"

Within the past few years a new term is being heard more often in theological discussions of fellowship. It is the expression "levels of fellowship," also spoken of as "levels of inter-Christian relationships."⁶ The relationship of Christians toward one another is thought of as a "continuum," "ranging all the way from a relatively minimal agreement in this faith [in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior], all the way over to the other end of the continuum, where we have full agreement in the whole doctrine of the Gospel as taught in the Scripture."⁷ Levels of fellowship depend on levels of doctrinal unity. Sometimes even purely social fellowships are brought into the picture.

One might therefore diagram this levels-of-fellowship concept something like this:



⁶ Samuel H. Nafzger, "Levels of Fellowship: A Missouri Synod Perspective," an essay presented at an ecumenical conference in Puerto Rico, January 30, 1987; also, "Confessional Lutheranism in a Pluralistic World," an essay presented to pastors in the LCMS Minnesota North District, September 29, 1988; "Conversations: Inter-Christian Relationships," hereafter cited as "Conversations," a video-taped presentation by Dr. Ralph A. Bohlmann, president of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, and Dr. Samuel H. Nafzger, executive director of the LCMS Commission on Theology and Church Relations.

⁷ Ralph A. Bohlmann, "Conversations"; cited also in Kurt E. Marquart, "'Levels of Fellowship': A Response," *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, Vol. 32, No. 4 (October 1988), p 243.

The levels-of-fellowship approach is advocated as an alternative to the so-called all-or-nothing, either/or practice of fellowship. It is argued that different levels of cooperation and fellowship can be practiced that are proportionate to the degree of consensus that exists. An LCMS spokesman puts it this way: "How can we relate to those whom we recognize on the basis of their confession, Billy Graham for example, as a brother in Christ, but with whom we disagree in the confession of our faith in Jesus Christ?"⁸

Cooperatio in externis—Communio in sacris

The church has long recognized that Scripture does not prohibit cooperation in externals (*cooperatio in externis*), that is, in such matters that do not involve a joint confession of faith, as opposed to *communio in sacris*, a sharing of sacred things, which is contingent on agreement "in the doctrine and all its articles." Christians of all kinds—and even non-Christians—can cooperate, for example, in helping victims of an earthquake, tornado or drought. Opposing legislation or court decisions that threaten our freedom of religion or the right to educate our children in private schools are political, not religious, issues. Engaging in such activities together with people not of our faith does not compel us to compromise our religious convictions.

Church or confessional fellowship, on the other hand, is joint worship or work involving the gospel (*communio in sacris*). According to Scripture, it requires, as has been said, agreement "in the doctrine and all its articles." When churches find themselves to be in such agreement, they may declare fellowship with one another. Such a declaration is mutual recognition that doctrinal agreement exists. We say, they are in fellowship. They practice fellowship when they engage in joint religious activities such as worship or mission work.

The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) continues to hold that "'agreement in doctrine and practice' is the necessary basis for altar and pulpit fellowship."⁹ Its Commission on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR) in its report entitled "The Nature and Implications of the Concept of Fellowship" lists among the scriptural principles of fellowship the following:

7. Church fellowship (in the sense of external unity in the church) is constituted by agreement in the faith which is confessed (*fides quae*) and not by faith in the heart (*fides qua*)....

8. The refusal to affirm church fellowship (in the sense of external unity in the church) with those who do not confess the faith (*fides quae*) as it is taught in the Scriptures is not an optional matter but a Scriptural mandate...¹⁰

Those are fine statements. Several comments are called for, however. While the CTCR Report is only a study document and as such has no standing as an officially adopted LCMS position, there is no reason to question that it represents the *publica doctrina* of the LCMS. Furthermore, it is not our purpose at this time to investigate whether the LCMS actually adheres to this position or whether it has in fact become a pluralistic church which tolerates contrary doctrines both internally and among its partner churches.

The unit concept of fellowship

Our immediate point of interest is the limitation the LCMS puts on the concept of fellowship, restricting it to pulpit and altar fellowship. It vigorously rejects the definition in the Statement on Church Fellowship adopted by the WELS in 1959:

⁸ Samuel H. Nafzger, "Conversations"; cited also in Marquart, *op. cit.*, p 242.

⁹ *Convention Workbook, 52nd Regular Convention of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 1977*, p 70, cited in Samuel H. Nafzger, "Levels of Fellowship: A Missouri Perspective," p 10.

¹⁰ *The Nature and Implications of the Concept of Fellowship, A Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, April 1981*, pp 14,15.

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.¹¹

The Statement goes on to explain:

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.¹²

It is this "unit concept" that in particular is at variance with the levels-of-fellowship approach. President Ralph Bohlmann of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod calls it the "rather simplistic, and I think wrong, unit concept approach."¹³ It was, however, the historic Synodical Conference concept of fellowship. As late as 1946, Dr. John Behnken, at that time president of the LCMS, in an address at the American Lutheran Conference contrasted cooperation in externals with other kinds of cooperation:

If such cooperation involves joint work in missions, in Christian education, in student welfare work, in joint services celebrating great events, then cooperation is just another name for pulpit, altar and prayer fellowship. Without doctrinal agreement this spells compromise. It means yielding in doctrinal positions. Such fellowship will not stand in the light of Scripture.¹⁴

One of the objections raised against the unit concept of fellowship, particularly by the so-called Overseas Brethren, theologians from overseas churches in fellowship with the now defunct Synodical Conference, was that it failed to take into account the distinction between the marks of the church, which are means of grace (the gospel in Word and sacrament), and other activities, like prayer, that do not work saving faith. This distinction, it was said, makes necessary a distinction also between pulpit and altar fellowship, on the one hand, and prayer fellowship and other joint religious activities, on the other. The Statement addresses this objection, however, and points out the fallacy of it:

It is indeed only in their function as joint expressions of faith that the use of the Means of Grace and such other things mentioned as Christian prayer, Christian education, and Christian charity all lie on the same plane. In other respects the Means of Grace and their use are indeed unique. Only through the Means of Grace, the Gospel in Word and Sacrament, does the Holy Spirit awaken, nourish, and sustain faith. Again, only the right use of Word and Sacrament are the true marks of the Church, the marks by which the Lord points us to those with whom He would have us express our faith jointly.¹⁵

¹¹ *Doctrinal Statements of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod*, Reprinting authorized by the Commission on Doctrinal Matters, 1970, (hereafter cited as *Doctrinal Statements*), p 50.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp 51,52.

¹³ "Conversations."

¹⁴ "Dr. Behaken at the American Lutheran Conference," *Quartalschrift, Theological Quarterly*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (January 1947), p 68. Further evidence that the historic Synodical Conference position on fellowship was the unit concept, although it was not called by that name, is presented in the booklet, *Fellowship Then and Now*, pages 16-21, which was authored in 1961 by a subcommittee of the WELS Commission on Doctrinal Matters consisting of Professors Gerald Hoenecke, Joh. P. Meyer and Armin W. Schuetze.

¹⁵ *Doctrinal Statements*, p 51.

According to Scripture, not only the joint use of the means of grace is an expression of Christian fellowship but also such activities as giving a handshake (Ga 2:9) or a fraternal kiss (Ro 16:16). James, Peter and John gave Paul and Barnabas "the right hand of fellowship" after Paul had "set before them the gospel" that he preached among the Gentiles (Ga 2:2). Paul urged the Christians at Rome to "greet one another with a holy kiss" but to keep away from those who taught contrary to the teaching they had learned (Ro 16:16,17).

The Statement also points out, however, that there is a distinction between various kinds of fellowship activities:

Certain things like the celebration of the Lord's Supper, the proclamation of the Gospel, and also prayer are by their very nature expressions of faith and are an abomination in God's sight when not intended to be that. Other things like giving a greeting, a kiss, a handshake, extending hospitality, or physical help to others are in themselves not of necessity expressions of Christian faith. Hence doing these things together with others does not necessarily make them joint expressions of faith, even though a Christian will for his own person also thereby be expressing his faith (cf. 1 Cor. 10:31). These things done together with others become joint expressions of faith only when those involved intend them to be that, understand them in this way, and want them to be understood thus, as in the case of the apostolic collection for the poor Christians at Jerusalem, the fraternal kiss of the apostolic church, our handshake at ordination and confirmation.¹⁶

Rationalistic arguments for levels of fellowship

Conspicuous by its absence in the materials advocating the levels-of-fellowship concept is any scriptural support for this innovation. The assertion is simply made:

We have long recognized that there can be various levels of interaction with other Christians, and that the amount or degree of doctrinal agreement is a key factor in determining what we can do together, if indeed we can do anything at all.¹⁷

Cited as evidence of such "various levels of interaction" is the membership Missouri held in the now no longer existing Lutheran Council in the USA (LCUSA) while not joining the World Council of Churches. At the time Missouri joined LCUSA, however, it insisted (mistakenly, to be sure) that it was only cooperating in externals.

Again, it is said,

We and our people live and work and play in a world where there are more than 20,000 Christian denominations....Membership in a denomination is often rather ambiguous in terms of what that means doctrinally....Like it or not, we have to come to terms with the real world. We have to help one another relate to that world with confessional strength and evangelical flexibility.¹⁸

Such an approach is described as being "pastoral," as one that properly distinguishes between law and gospel. It is argued that one of the reasons for becoming involved with other Christians is because "we're already part of God's family in Jesus Christ. They're our brothers; they're our sisters, like it or not."¹⁹ That is obviously a sentimental, human argument—and a very appealing one—but not one based on Scripture.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, pp 51,52.

¹⁷ Bohlmann, "Conversations"; also cited in Marquart, *op. cit.*, p 255.

¹⁸ *Ibid*.

¹⁹ *Ibid*.

Those who are true disciples of the Good Shepherd will, of course, show Christian love and concern toward all their fellow human beings, including those who profess to be Christians but are enmeshed in error. This love will include the testimony called for by Peter, "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope you have" (1 Pe 3:15). It will also include admonition, when necessary, as well as the withdrawing or withholding of fellowship, when appropriate according to scriptural principles.

The claim is made that "such a context as we find ourselves in today [i.e., the pressure to participate in ecumenical activities of various kinds]...demands a consideration of a 'levels of fellowship' approach to 'the basic challenge of fundamental consensus and fundamental differences.'"²⁰ Such an approach is advocated on the basis that it "can help us avoid an 'all or nothing' posture to the quest for unity in the church."²¹

Such argumentation needs to be recognized for what it really is—pure rationalism. The passages calling for avoiding and separating from those who teach contrary to God's Word are not addressed. They are ignored. Proponents of unscriptural doctrine are not regarded as false teachers and errorists, but as Christians "with whom we don't confess the truth of God's Word in the same way."²²

The all-or-nothing approach may not be popular, but it is scriptural. The Scriptures require us to recognize the distinction between truth and error and to act accordingly—giving the right hand of fellowship to those who confess the truth with us and avoiding those who teach or tolerate error.

In the 1950s German theologians debated the possibility of a closer or looser fellowship *in internis*, depending on the measure of consensus or dissensus that exists between churches.²³ Later, in 1960, Dr. Martin Franzmann, one of Missouri's representatives at discussions that eventually led to the formation of LCUSA, properly argued against degrees or stages of fellowship proportionate to the degree of consensus which has been attained. He pointed out that it "raises the question of the *damnamus* as indispensable to the proclamation of the Gospel as both a savor of life and a savor of death."²⁴

Practicing fellowship with a false teacher is outright disobedience to God's Word. Inevitably also it undercuts any testimony that the false teacher is perpetrating a "wicked work" (2 Jn 11) and takes the edge off any admonition that may be given.

Our WELS Statement on Fellowship many years ago declared it to be an untenable, that is, unscriptural, position "to envision fellowship relations (in a congregation, in a church body, in a church federation, in a church agency, in a cooperative church activity) like so many steps of a ladder, each requiring gradually increasing or decreasing measure of unity in doctrine and practice."²⁵ The term *levels of fellowship* is not used, but the concept could hardly be described more clearly or rejected more decisively.

President Frédéric Bohy of the Evangelical Lutheran Church—Synod of France and Belgium (EEL-SFB) in his presidential address at the general assembly of the synod, April 28 to May 1, 1990, took note of the current levels-of-fellowship debate. Levels of fellowship, he said, means that "according to circumstances, or according to the greater or lesser degree of faithfulness to Scripture of a Church, I can have with it a certain type or certain degree of church relationship." He then made the perceptive comment, "It's tempting, but is it scriptural?"²⁶

Call it levels of fellowship or levels of inter-Christian relationships, as you will, the fact remains that this concept is another gust of the ill winds of ecumenism that are sweeping through the Christian church as the 20th century draws to a close. What a grave mistake it would be for us of the WELS to be lulled into

²⁰ Nafzger, "Levels of Fellowship: A Missouri Perspective," p 18.

²¹ *Ibid*, p 20.

²² Bohlmann, "Conversations."

²³ See Hans-Lutz Poetsch, "Lutherische Kirche and Lutherischer Weltbund," *Lutherischer Rundblick*, II,8-9 (August-September 1954), pp 125-145; also Marquart, *op. cit.*, p 250.

²⁴ *Essays on the Lutheran Confessions Basic to Lutheran Cooperation* (LCMS and NLC, 1961), p 6; also cited in Marquart, *op. cit.*, p 251.

²⁵ *Doctrinal Statements*, p 55.

²⁶ Frédéric Bohy, "Rapport du Président," Assemblée Generale Synodale 1990, Église Evangélique Luthérienne-Synode de France et de Belgique, translated by Madeleine Velguth.

complacency! Let us not think that we are in no danger. It is not easy to sail through a hurricane. We are not immune to the devil's schemes. We need to be on constant alert if we are not to be deceived by him. The fate of many once strong churches serves as a warning example.

Quoting the prophet Isaiah, Jesus denounced teachings that "are but rules taught by men" (Mt 15:9; Is 29:13). Carefully examined, the levels-of-fellowship concept, far from embodying principles drawn from Scripture, calls for practicing fellowship according to rules devised by men.