

The Doctrine of Fellowship and the Cost of Discipleship

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Fellowship in the *Una Sancta*

What a blessed privilege it is to be a member of God's family, a brother or sister of Jesus Christ, the Son of God! Through faith in Jesus, our Savior, we are God's dear children, and he is our dear Father. On the night in which he was betrayed Jesus prayed for his chosen disciples, but he prayed also for you and me, for he said, "My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you" (Jn 17:20,21).

Despite the fact that Jesus and his Father are separate Persons in the one Godhead, there is between them a perfect oneness, a perfect harmony in thought and purpose. That harmony and oneness exist also between us and all our fellow believers. As the Greek verb ὄσιν (present subjunctive) shows, Jesus did not pray that his followers might get to be one but that they might continue to be one. Their oneness is a present reality. It is like the perfect unity between the Father and the Son. Furthermore, the Father and the Son live in the hearts of believers and they in God.

True, this harmony and oneness of the church are not presently visible or perceptible. Nevertheless, this oneness is a fact! Jesus' prayer for his church has been answered. The vast number of believers "from every nation, tribe, people and language" (Re 7:9), diverse as they are in race, gender, social standing, personality, and other individual characteristics, are completely one in heart and mind and will. They may be separated from one another in various denominations of the visible Christian church, but theirs is a true and real spiritual unity. In his First Epistle John writes, "We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ" (1:3).

The Greek word for "fellowship" is κοινωνία, which means a sharing of something with someone, a participation or partnership in things, having things in common. In Philemon 6 Paul uses κοινωνία to describe the sharing of faith between Philemon and other believers. Faith in Christ Jesus is something they have in common. In 1 Corinthians 1:9 God tells us that he has called us "into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord." We have entered into a spiritual communion with our risen Lord. We are his brothers and sisters. In 1 Corinthians 10:16 Paul uses κοινωνία to express the close relationship between the contents of the cup of blessing which we bless and the blood of Christ and between the bread which we break and the body of Christ. Furthermore, in the Sacrament of the Altar believers are closely united with their Savior, Jesus Christ. This union includes the blessing of the forgiveness of sins, which he won by his sacrificial death. But in the Sacrament of the Altar there is also a κοινωνία, a commonality, between the believing recipients with one another: "Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf" (1 Cor 10:17).

Only when we are standing before the throne and before the Lamb on the great Day of Judgment will we see and experience the perfect unity, harmony, and oneness of the *Una Sancta*, the one holy Christian Church, the communion of saints, the Body of Christ. It will be a great multitude, which no one can count (Re 7:9). We can only dream of the joy, the exhilaration, and the exultation that will be ours on that day. There is no experience in this present world that can compare with it.

The tie that binds us together with our fellow believers is faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God and Savior of the world. Faith is an invisible attitude in the heart. It is the hand with which we embrace and

make our own the forgiveness of sins won for us by Christ on the cross. No human being can look into another's heart. No one can see whether faith actually exists in another person. "Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart" (1 Sm 16:7). He alone knows who the true believers are.

While it is true that faith expresses itself in love and the true believer lives a life of deeds that please God, it is also true that there are hypocrites who mask their unbelief with counterfeit works. Sometimes God unmasks them, as he did Ananias and Sapphira (Ac 5:1-11). Otherwise, they continue in the outward fellowship of the church until Judgment Day when the tares, the hypocrites, will be separated from the wheat, the true believers.

Now the question arises: If we are spiritually united with all true believers in Jesus Christ, can we not give expression to that unity here on earth? Can we not practice fellowship across denominational lines? There are indeed many who believe and practice this.

We are living in what has been called "the ecumenical age." Churches of various denominations jointly hold ecumenical services or join in conducting marriage services, funerals, and the like. Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, ELCA Lutherans, and even Roman Catholics ignore their differences and worship together. They may also practice intercommunion. In reality, such actions constitute a statement that they consider their differences to be nonessential and nondivisive. One such interdenominational group that originated in the last few years is called Promise Keepers. Its aim is to encourage men to be responsible husbands and fathers. Its meetings are conducted, however, in a framework of worship and prayer.

On mission fields ever since the Edinburgh World Conference of Missions in 1910 the argument has been made that Christian missionaries should disregard their differences and present a united front to the heathen. This, it was said, would be more effective in gaining the heathen for Christianity. Except for such basic doctrines as the Trinity and Christ's work of redemption, all other doctrines are considered nonessential and nondivisive.

It is sad, but also true, that some believers in Jesus Christ are enmeshed in groups that adulterate the pure, saving Word of God with human error and false doctrine. Even regarding members of the Church of Rome, the church of the Antichrist, Luther wrote, however, "I do believe that many were saved under the papacy. In the agony of death a crucifix was held before them, and they were told: Do you believe on the Christ whose image this is and who was crucified for you? Fix your hope on Him, and you will be preserved; for He is the One who poured out His blood for you" (Ewald M. Plass, *What Luther Says*, I, #374).

Fellowship in the Visible Church

What guidelines does Scripture give for the practice of fellowship? With whom may we practice fellowship? It is important, first of all, to be clear on what we mean by "fellowship." Our synod's "Statement on Fellowship" points out that "church fellowship is a term that has been used to designate both a *status* and an *activity*" (1970, p 49). As a status it is a situation "in which individuals or groups on the basis of a common confession of faith have recognized one another as Christian brethren and now consider it God-pleasing to express, manifest, and demonstrate their common faith jointly" (*ibid.*). As an activity church fellowship "includes every joint expression, manifestation, and demonstration of the common faith in which Christians (individuals or groups) on the basis of their confession find themselves to be united with one another" (*ibid.*).

Noteworthy in both of these definitions are the phrases, "on the basis of a common confession of faith" and "on the basis of their confession." These phrases indicate the all-important role which confession plays in determining with whom fellowship may be established and practiced. If we want to know what someone or some church believes, we can only go by what they say. Their confession is the flag under which they sail. Jesus once said that a tree is known by its fruit and declared, "By your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned" (Mt 12:37).

What is the basis for a God-pleasing fellowship in the church on earth? It is confessional agreement. It is complete and wholehearted agreement in all that Scripture teaches and commands. It allows for no compromise, no addition and no subtraction from the clear and authoritative teachings of Holy Scripture. In Ephesians 4:3 Paul urges us to be patient, humble, and loving and, to "make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace." 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). Where such agreement exists, fellowship not only can but should be recognized and practiced.

An example of this agreement and the fellowship that followed is found in Galatians 2:9, where Paul writes, "James, Peter, and John, those reputed to be pillars, gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognized the grace given to me." By this gesture they demonstrated and gave expression to their complete, wholehearted agreement. In Romans 16:16 Paul encourages the Christians in Rome to "greet one another with a holy kiss." This, too, was an expression of fellowship. In Psalm 133 David exclaims, "How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity!" (v 1).

The converse of full agreement is division and disagreement. In 1529 at the Marburg colloquy Luther and the Zwinglians agreed on fourteen points of doctrine. On the fifteenth point, however, that dealt with the Lord's Supper, they could not agree. Addressing Bucer, who represented the Zwinglians, Luther stated, "You have another spirit than we" (H. Sasse, *This Is My Body*, 213f.). The Lutherans were willing to regard the Zwinglians as friends, since one is obligated to love even an enemy, but not as brethren and members of the church (E. G. Schwiebert, *Luther and His Times*, 713).

Jesus warns his disciples against the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees (Mt 16:6). The leaven or yeast he was talking about was their false doctrine. False doctrine is like yeast. It spreads the way yeast spreads through a whole batch of dough (1 Cor 5:6; Ga 5:9).

When a person in spite of admonition holds to a false doctrine, one cannot know what effect this false doctrine has had on his faith in Christ. It may have completely subverted and destroyed it. That is why the Apostle Paul speaks so vehemently against error. He tells the Galatian Christians, "Even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned" (1:8). The Judaizers, who insisted that it was necessary to keep the laws of Moses for salvation, were teaching a different gospel, which in reality was no gospel at all (Ga 1:6,7).

Christ sounds the same warning as Paul, "Watch out for false prophets" (Mt 7:15). He compares these false prophets with ravenous wolves. They are dangerous and must be avoided. To consort with them is to invite eternal destruction. The admonitions of Scripture to avoid errorists are based on love. The Good Shepherd does not want any of his sheep to be lost. He wants them to graze on the green pastures of his life-giving, saving Word.

That was Paul's concern also when he warned the Christians at Rome, "I urge you, brothers, to watch out (*σκοπεῖν*, a present infinitive, indicating continuing action), for those who cause divisions (*τας διχοστασίας*) and

put obstacles (τα σκανδαλα) in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them (ἐκκλίνετε ἀπ' αὐτῶν)" (Ro 16:17). Those who cause divisions and put obstacles in the way of Christians, he says, do not serve the Lord Jesus Christ "but their own appetites (κοιλια, belly)" (v 18), that is, their own self-interest. They may clothe their error in smooth words and flattering speech, but their aim is to deceive the hearts of simple, unwary Christians. What a tragedy it is when naive Christians are led astray by them! How important it is that we continue to grow in our knowledge and understanding of the Scriptures that we may be able to recognize false doctrine! We need to be on the watch continually for those who invent and promulgate soul-destroying error.

One may wonder: Since God is all-powerful and good, why does he permit false teachers to arise and try to mislead God's people? Paul's answer in 1 Corinthians 11:19 is this: "No doubt there have to be differences (αἰρεσεις) among you to show which of you have God's approval." It was for the purpose of testing his people that God allowed false prophets to arise in Israel. In Deuteronomy 13:3 Moses explains, "The LORD your God is testing you to find out whether you love him with all your heart and with all your soul."

Jesus predicted the coming of false teachers: "False Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect if that were possible" (Mt 24:24). In Matthew 18:7 he declared, "Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to sin (σκανδαλα, stumbling blocks, booby traps for faith)! Such things must come, but woe to the man through whom they come." False, man-made teachings are such σκανδαλα. At Miletus Paul in his farewell address to the elders of the congregation in Ephesus said, "I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them" (Ac 20:29,30). Paul tells Timothy, "The Spirit clearly says that in later times some will abandon the faith and follow deceiving spirits and things taught by demons" (1 Tim 4:1). Peter likewise predicts, "But there were also false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you. They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them—bringing swift destruction on themselves. Many will follow their shameful ways and will bring the way of truth into disrepute. In their greed these teachers will exploit you with stories they have made up" (2 Pe 2:1-3).

Should we then be surprised that in the visible Christian church today there are countless sects that teach contrary to the Holy Scriptures? In the days of the apostles there were the Judaizers, whose modern counterparts are the Seventh Day Adventists. There were also the gnostics with their human wisdom, whom Paul opposes in his letter to the Colossians. There were the many antichrists who, St. John says, "have come" (1 Jn 2:18),

Today, in addition to the Arch-antichrist, the Roman papacy, which was exposed in Luther's Reformation, there are the many non-Christian cults like Jehovah's Witnesses and the Mormons, who call themselves The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. Both of these groups claim to follow the Bible and deceive an evergrowing number of adherents with their humanly devised doctrines. Mary Baker Eddy's Church of Christ Scientist still attracts gullible people with its Christian Science reading rooms and its denial of sin and its consequences. More recent is the New Age cult, which peddles a mixture of Buddhist and Hindu philosophy with a promise of peace and contentment. Another 20th century fraud is the so-called Church of Scientology. Woe to its victims! Paul warns Timothy, "Guard what has been entrusted to your care. Turn away from godless chatter and the opposing ideas of what is falsely called knowledge—which some have professed and in so doing have wandered from the faith" (1 Tim 6:20-21). Similarly, he cautions the Colossian Christians, "See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ" (Col 2:8). The lure of science falsely so called is as real in our time as in the days of the apostles.

In Luther's day he had to contend not only with the papacy and its defenders but also with the sacramentarians, the followers of Zwingli, who maintained that God does not expect us to believe anything that is contrary to reason. There were also the enthusiasts like Thomas Muenzer and the Zwickau prophets, Nicholas Storch, Thomas Drechsler, and Marcus Stuebner, who claimed to have received direct revelations from the Holy Spirit (LW 36,233). Their modern representatives are the many types of Pentecostals, some groups of which are interdenominational. Luther called them *Schwaermer*, enthusiasts, fanatics. Today we call them charismatics. They are people of whom Luther, alluding to the dove as a symbol of the Holy Spirit, said they had "devoured the Holy Spirit, feathers and all" (LW 40,83). Then there were the turncoats like Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt, the radical reformer responsible for the disturbances in Wittenberg while Luther was at the Wartburg, and John Agricola, the antinomian. These men began, as supporters of Luther but then went their own separate ways. There were also the Anabaptists, who denied the efficacy of infant baptism. Common to many of these sects is the error of millennialism, the expectation that Jesus will return to establish an earthly kingdom for a thousand years.

The Sin of Pluralism (Unionism)

To withhold or break fellowship because of non-doctrinal differences is the sin of causing schisms, also called separatism. Differences in nationality, race, customs, ceremonies, or other adiaphora are not legitimate, scriptural grounds for separation. Refusing to join together with fellow believers is not God-pleasing (He 10:25). As he designed the human body "so that there should be no division (σχισμα)" in it, so he also desires that there be no schism in the spiritual body of Christ (1 Cor 12:25).

Equally serious is the sin of pluralism, also called unionism. This is an agreement to disagree. It is the practice of fellowship without agreement in doctrine. Some examples of this were mentioned earlier. It is the basis of such organizations as the World Council of Churches and the Lutheran World Federation. They practice fellowship on the least common denominator principle. The International Lutheran Conference (ILC), the organization of various Lutheran bodies led by the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, includes churches that differ on such important matters as membership in the Lutheran World Federation.

Scripture is abundantly clear on the command that we are to separate from errorists. Earlier we mentioned Jesus' warning, "Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves" (Mt 7:15). False teachers are agents of the devil, who wants nothing more than to kill Jesus' sheep. In Luther's Morning Prayer we ask our heavenly Father, "Let your holy angel be with me, that the wicked foe may have no power over me."

Romans 16:17,18, a passage we also mentioned earlier, has been a bone of contention. It says, "I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them. For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people." The argument is made that this does not apply to present-day situations but only to errorists that were current in Paul's day like the Judaizers and gnostics. Again, it is claimed that belly servers (KJV) are people living an immoral life like gluttons, drunkards, adulterers, fornicators, sexual perverts, and others Paul mentions in 1 Corinthians 6:9,10, who will not "inherit the kingdom of God." It should be noted, however, that Paul's warning in Romans 16 is very general. It comes in the context of cordial greetings to the Christians at Rome. There is no restriction or qualifier on "those who cause divisions and put obstacles" in the way of Christians with the single exception that what they teach is "contrary to the teaching you have learned."

In thought, the Romans passage is parallel to 1 Timothy 6:3-5, where Paul tells his spiritual son Timothy, "If anyone teaches false doctrines and does not agree to the sound instruction of our Lord Jesus Christ

and to the godly teaching, he is conceited and understands nothing. He has an unhealthy interest in controversies and arguments that result in envy, quarreling, malicious talk, evil suspicions and constant friction between men of corrupt mind, who have been robbed of the truth, who think that godliness is a means to financial gain." The KJV, following some manuscripts, adds, "From such withdraw thyself"

In Titus 3:10,11 Paul instructs Titus, whom he calls "my true son in our common faith" (1:4), "Warn a divisive person (αἰρετικὸν ἀνθρώπων) once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him. You may be sure that such a man is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned." A αἰρετικὸν ἀνθρώπων is a person who chooses his own way instead of "the sound instruction of our Lord Jesus" (1 Tim 6:3). He is factious, disposed to creating sects. Such a person is identified by the fact that he continues in his perverse way, his anti-scriptural opinions, in spite of repeated admonition. He is to be rejected, dismissed, driven out of the group of true believers. He condemns himself by the very fact that he has been shown what Scripture says but stubbornly adheres to his own contrary ideas.

In 2 Corinthians 6:14-18 Paul writes, "Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common (μετοχή, sharing, partnership)? Or what fellowship (κοινωνία) can light have with darkness? What harmony (συμφωνησις, agreement) is there between Christ and Belial? What does a believer have in common (μερίς) with an unbeliever? What agreement (συγκαταθεσις) is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God." Then Paul quotes various Old Testament passages reminding God's people that he wants them to separate themselves from the heathen: "Come out from them and be separate, says the Lord. Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you. I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty."

Some have argued that this passage cannot be applied to false teachers within the visible Christian church because they are not heathen. As was mentioned earlier, however, false teachers are agents of the devil. Every false teaching comes from the devil. Embracing and promoting it are part and parcel of unbelief. They are collaboration with the devil in his attempt to separate believers from their Savior. In our Confessions this passage is cited against all those who, like the papacy, have departed "from the pure doctrine of the Gospel" (FC, X,5,6).

The words of John, the apostle of love, are clear: "Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God; whoever continues in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take him into your house or welcome him. Anyone who welcomes him shares in his wicked work" (2 Jn 9-11). The motivation for John's warning is genuine love for the brethren and concern for their salvation.

That will also be our motivation as we apply the fellowship principles of Holy Scripture. In 1 Timothy 1:3-9 Paul warns his young coworker against errorists of various kinds. Then he adds, "The goal of this command is love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. Some have wandered away from these and turned to meaningless talk" (vv 5,6). Christian love requires separation from persistent errorists, separation for their sake as well as our own. Separation is for them a clarion call to repentance. It is an emphatic testimony to the seriousness of their error. Not to separate from them means also that we share in their wicked work. To continue in fellowship with them when their persistence in error has become evident means that we too will suffer the consequences of their devilish behavior.

It should be noted, however, that the separation applies only to religious activities. It does not necessarily apply to relationships in the family, in business, at work, or in social activities, although it may affect those relationships. To the Corinthians Paul writes, "I have written you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people—not at all meaning the people of this world who are sexually immoral, or the greedy

and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world. But now I am writing you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard, or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat" (1 Cor 5:9-11). He is warning against fellowship with such open and flagrant sinners who claim to be Christian brothers. In this same epistle he also writes, however, "If any brother has a wife who is not a believer, and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him....But if the unbeliever leaves, let him do so. A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances" (1 Cor 7:12-15).

Another passage that speaks about separation is 2 Thessalonians 3:6-14: "In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ we command you, brothers, to keep away (στελλεσθαι) from every brother who is idle and does not live according to the teaching you received from us" (v 6). The problem of some members of the Thessalonian congregation was that they thought Christ's return was so imminent that they stopped working to earn their living. They became busybodies, became meddlesome, expecting others to support them. They were guilty of an error in both doctrine and practice. Paul urges them to "settle down and earn the bread they eat" (v 12). If anyone disregarded this admonition, however, Paul directs the congregation to take special note of that person and "not to associate (μη συναναμιγνυσθαι) with him, in order that he may feel ashamed" (v 14). Again, this does not refer to secular activities. Rather, various forms of church fellowship are to be suspended. The purpose is to bring him to his senses. They are not to "regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother" (v 15). They are to treat him as a person with whom the final step of a conclusive break in fellowship has not yet been taken.

The Cost of Discipleship

In John 8:31,32 Jesus tells us, "If you hold to my teaching (λογω, word), you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." Being a faithful disciple of Jesus is not always easy, however. It involves bearing a cross. One of the crosses we have to bear is the cowardice and opposition of our Old Adam. He does not want us to make waves, to roil the waters. He does not want us to make enemies. In the world as well as in the visible Christian church, however, there is no real understanding of the scriptural principles of fellowship. A faithful confession of Christ often causes antagonism and arouses resentment. Persistent errorists object vehemently to being called false teachers. When we refuse to participate in ecumenical pluralism, we are called loveless, hardnosed, and narrow-minded.

Such reactions should not surprise us, however. After Jesus had miraculously fed the multitude of five thousand men together with thousands of women and children, he told them that they needed to believe in him if they wanted to have everlasting life. Then we are told, "From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him" (Jn 6:66). They were unwilling to accept him as the only way to salvation. Think of the reaction of the Jewish Sanhedrin to Jesus' sworn testimony that he was the Christ, the Son of God. Caiaphas spoke for the group when he declared, "He has spoken blasphemy!" The council then decreed, "He is worthy of death" (Mt 26:63-66).

Now Jesus has told us, "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first....If they persecuted me, they will persecute you....In fact, a time is coming when anyone who kills you will think he is offering a service to God" (Jn 15:18,20; 16:2). He told his disciples, "All men will hate you because of me" (Mt 10:22). Correcting a misimpression about the purpose of his coming into the world, Jesus testified, "Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword" (Mt 10:34). Citing the prophet Micah (7:6,7), he declared, "I have come to turn 'a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law—a man's enemies will be the members of his own household.' Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not

worthy of me" (Mt 10:35-38). Jesus uses very drastic language to emphasize that love for him must outweigh a natural love for family members, earthly possessions, and even one's own life: "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple. And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple" (Lk 14:26,27).

How many families have been split over questions of religion! Faithful followers of Jesus have been ostracized by members of their family. Our missionaries to Japan can cite many examples of this. It also happens, however, in our stateside congregations. The separation between our WELS and the Church of the Lutheran Confession (CLC) occasioned much animosity. In his high priestly prayer on Maundy Thursday evening Jesus spoke to his heavenly Father about his faithful disciples, "I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world, any more than I am of the world" (Jn 17:14). Again he said, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Mt 16:24).

Cross bearing is a figurative term for the suffering Christians undergo in this life. It is a general term that includes sufferings of various kinds. Paul reminds us that "we must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God" (Ac 14:22). While crosses come to us from God, he often permits the devil or the unbelieving world to afflict us. Remember the story of Job. God testifies that Satan moved him to test Job through various trials "without any reason" (2:3). Whatever the suffering of God's children may be, we are assured that it is always evidence of God's love. Calling to mind Proverbs 3:11,12, the author of the letter to the Hebrews writes, "My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you; because the Lord disciplines (παιδεύει, trains) those he loves, and punishes (μαστιγοί, flogs, scourges) everyone he accepts as a son.' Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? . . . No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it" (12:5-11).

In applying the fellowship principle of separation from persistent errorists we need to practice Christian love and Christian judgment. It may be that not everyone comes to the decision that separation is called for at the same time. The Evangelical Lutheran Synod (ELS) terminated its fellowship with the LCMS in 1955. Our WELS felt that the new committees which had been appointed to recall the LCMS from its unionistic course should be given an opportunity to complete their work, if possible. Then, when it was clear that our admonition had been heard and rejected, fellowship was suspended in 1961.

On a personal level, too, as we have seen from Titus 3:10, it may take some time to determine that someone caught in the web of false doctrine is persistent in his error. If he is persistent, separation is called for. It should not, however, be carried out in a legalistic spirit. Sadly and with a manifestation of Christian love we are to reject and avoid the heretic or heretical group. Termination of fellowship is in this respect parallel to excommunication (Mt 18:15-18), in which the entire procedure is to be permeated with Christian love. Whether within a family or outside it, in no case will a true Christian become guilty of rudeness or act in an uncivil manner. In Romans 12:18 Paul admonishes, "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone." It is an admonition echoed by the writer to the Hebrews, "Make every effort to live in peace with all men, and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord" (12:14). Jesus himself tells us, "Be at peace with each other" (Mk 9:50).

Some have claimed that it is impossible to do mission work under the fellowship principles of the WELS. When a proper law-gospel foundation has been laid, however, and under the blessing of the Holy Spirit unbelievers have come to love their Savior and his holy Word, they will be ready to accept God's direction.

There are a great number of situations in daily life where the scriptural principles of fellowship need to be applied. It is important to remember, however, that the New Testament is not a rule book or code of laws. God does not treat us New Testament Christians like children, as he dealt with the people of Israel in the Old Testament. Consider the principle of the God-ordained order of creation and the God-pleasing roles of men and women. God does not tell us in specific instances, "This you may do, but that is forbidden." He impresses the principle on our hearts and trusts us to apply the principle evangelically. That does not mean, of course, that we will test the limits to see how far we can go.

Some situations may be cases of casuistry where the judgment of fellow Christians may differ. But in every case brethren will want to act as Abraham Lincoln put it so well, "With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right" (Second Inaugural Address). When correction and reproof are called for, let us be certain that we are "speaking the truth in love" (Eph 4:15). The Apostle Paul closes his great chapter on Christian love (ἀγάπη) with the words, "Now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love" (1 Cor 13:13). God grant us his Holy Spirit that all that we do, including the application of the scriptural principles of fellowship, be done in love.¹

¹a helpful discussion of many practical situations see John F. Brug, *Church Fellowship: Working Together for the Truth* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1996).