

Practical Applications of The Doctrine of Fellowship

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Introduction

Much has been written concerning the unity of the holy Christian church and the doctrine of fellowship. It is not the purpose of this conference paper to examine all that has been written. Rather, this paper will attempt to give scriptural guidelines regarding the practical applications of the doctrine of fellowship. In order to accomplish this purpose, the following principles will be examined: 1) God's Church is one; 2) God's Church is separate; 3) God's Church is motivated by love. Following the examination of these principles, practical applications will be considered which attempt to apply the principles.

It is the prayer of this writer that this paper may be an aid to his fellow Christians in joyfully carrying out the directive of our Savior to teach everything that he has commanded us. (Matthew 28:20.) Finally it is our LORD's Word that not only saves us but also guides us in Christian living which includes the practical applications of the doctrine of fellowship. (James 1:21; Psalm 119:105.)

God's Church is One

On the night he was betrayed, our LORD Jesus petitioned his heavenly Father that his disciples might be one. Jesus prayed, "that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you...I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me." (John 17:21,22&23.) And the heavenly Father cannot ignore the prayer of his beloved Son with whom he is well-pleased. (Matthew 3:17; 17:5.) Jesus testified to this truth when he prayed before the tomb of the four-day-dead Lazarus, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me." (John 11:41,42.) The Father hears and answers the prayers of his Son, including this prayer that the holy Christian church may be one.

In Jesus' high priestly prayer referred to above, he also describes the unity of believers as being like the unity that exists between the Father and the Son and also, therefore, the Holy Ghost. Jesus prayed that the unity of believers be like the unity that Jesus had with his Father—"as you are in me and I am in you." Jesus wanted his disciples to be one even as he himself and the Father were and are one. Jesus had made this essential unity of the Trinity clear to the Jews when he told them, "I and the Father are one," and when he claimed for himself the Old Testament title "I AM"—"Before Abraham was, I AM." (Cf John 10:30; 8:58; Exodus 3:14,15.) Jesus was and is one LORD with the Father and Holy Ghost. And the oneness and essential unity of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost would be a characteristic also of believers joined to the Holy Trinity through faith in Jesus.

Moreover, in his high priestly prayer, Jesus indicated how the disciples would be brought to complete unity. To his heavenly Father, Jesus prayed, "Sanctify them by the truth; your Word is truth." (John 17:17.) The disciples, believers, the holy Christian church, would be sanctified, set apart, separated from the world and brought into the family of believers by the Word of truth—the Word of God. People would be brought to faith in Jesus, converted from unbelief to faith, by the Word. St. Paul would write to the Romans (10:17) that "faith comes from hearing the message...the word of Christ." Individual believers would be united in perfect unity with all fellow believers. The Scriptures make clear that the unity of the holy Christian church is part of its essence.

The Apostle Paul speaks of this essential unity of believers when he states:

The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. For we were all baptized into one spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free—and we were all given the one spirit to drink. (1 Corinthians 12:12,13.)

Thus the holy Christian church, the communion of saints, the fellowship of those who believe in Jesus alone as their Savior—this church is one. It is one with Christ; it is one with its various parts and members, just as the various parts of a body are nevertheless still all combined into one body. And the visible church at the time of the apostles reflected this essential unity.

Concerning the early Christian church, Luke writes that the believers "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer." (Acts 2:42.) Notice the reflection of the essential unity of believers in this early visible church. They had God's Word in truth and purity—"the apostles' teaching." They were devoted to fellowship with each other. They celebrated Holy Communion—"the breaking of bread"—and from the context of Acts 2, we learn that the Sacrament of Holy Baptism was also used. And "they devoted themselves...to prayer." Later on, Luke describes the unity of this apostolic church as follows: "All the believers were one in heart and mind." (Acts 4:32a.) We notice that there were no levels of fellowship. Rather, their fellowship with Christ and with one another was expressed by "joint worship, by joint proclamation of the Gospel, by joining in Holy Communion, by joint prayer, by joint church work."² At the same time, the members of this church, the body of Christ, are truly known only to God.

When Samuel, the last judge of Israel, was sent by God to anoint one of Jesse's sons as the next king of Israel to replace the apostate Saul, Samuel at first thought that Jesse's son Eliab was the one to be anointed. "But the LORD said to Samuel, 'Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The LORD does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.'" (1 Samuel 16:7.) The Apostle Paul would write to Timothy, "The Lord knows those who are his." (2 Timothy 2:19.) Thus, one of the characteristics of the holy Christian church, the communion of saints, on this earth, is its invisibility. Yet there would be visible "marks" of the church's presence among men. These marks would be that by which God the Holy Ghost sanctified, called, gathered and kept believers—the Word of truth. The marks of the church would be the Gospel in Word and Sacraments. And it would be that Gospel in Word and Sacraments that would be the key for believers as they pursued that unity which is of the essence of the holy Christian church, the communion of saints. The Apostle Paul would urge the Ephesians:

Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit [in] the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit just as you were called to one hope when you were called—one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. (Ephesians 4:3-5.)

And Paul further indicated that it was through the Word of truth that the pursuit of unity was to take place on this earth. Believers were to "put off falsehood and speak truthfully" to their neighbors, "for we are all members of one body." "Speaking the truth in love" would be the way in which believers would "grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work." If this unity was not pursued through the truth of God's Word, then believers could only expect to be "infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming." (Cf Ephesians 4:11-16&25.) This spiritual infancy was part of the problem for the Corinthian congregation which Paul addressed in his first letter to them. Paul told them,

I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere men? (1 Corinthians 3:13.)

And so, St. Paul begins his letter to the Corinthians by saying,

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 Corinthians 1:10.)

The church on earth was to pursue unity and oneness through the truth of God's Word. Believers were to pursue that unity with the knowledge that such unity was a reality for the communion of saints, the invisible church. But because such perfect unity was not something enjoyed by the church militant—the church on earth—believers were also directed to separate themselves from those who proclaimed and believed errors and falsehoods that were contrary to the Word of truth.

God's Church is Separate

The Apostle Peter addressed his First Epistle to "God's elect, strangers in the world...who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, by the sanctifying work of the Spirit...." (1 Peter 1:1,2.) And later in that same letter (2:9), Peter referred to believers as "a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God...." And later still, Peter would address these believers as "aliens and strangers in the world." (2:11.) The words, "chosen," "elected," "sanctified," "strangers," "aliens"—all these words point to separation. Believers—the holy Christian church, the communion of saints—are separate. And so, those who hold to God's Word in truth and purity will separate themselves from the unbelieving world and from errorists and false prophets.

The Apostle Paul makes clear the LORD's command to separate from errorists in 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1,

Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial³? What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said: 'I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people.' [Cf Leviticus 26:12; Jeremiah 32:38; Ezekiel 37:27.]

'Therefore come out from them and be separate,' says the LORD. 'Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you.' [Cf Isaiah 52:11; Ezekiel 20:34,41.] 'I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters,' says the LORD Almighty. [Cf 2 Samuel 7:14; 7:8.]

Since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God.

Several things need to be noted about this section of Scripture. Objections to its application to fellowship with heterodox churches, groups and people have been raised, since the prohibition is against being "yoked together with unbelievers." The argument is presented that while other churches, groups and individuals may not hold to God's Word in truth and purity, yet we would not want to go so far as to accuse them of being unbelievers. Therefore to worship, pray and even commune with them on occasion is not wrong. That argument may sound kind, considerate and evangelical until one is reminded of what the Scripture said previously, that only God can look into the heart and only he knows who is and who is not a believer. (1 Samuel 16:7 & 2 Timothy 2:19.) Thus not only is it improper to say that a certain church, group or individual is unbelieving; but it is just as improper to say that it—a certain church, group or individual—is believing. God's Word does indicate that even within a heterodox church there will be believers, for his Word that goes out from his mouth accomplishes his desire and purpose. (Isaiah 55:11.) But who is and who is not a believer is known only to the LORD. Moreover,

one's focus is directed to the last statement of the section, 1 Corinthians 7:1, "Let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit."

St. Paul has stated that there can be no partnership, communion, fellowship, harmony, agreement (the Greek uses a series of synonyms for emphasis in this section)—there can be no fellowship between righteousness and wickedness (lawlessness), between light and darkness, between Christ and Belial (Satan, the devil), between believers and unbelievers, between the temple of God (believers) and of idols. When the believer unites himself in worship, prayer or other spiritual activity with a church, group or individual that does not hold to the truth of God's Word, then the believer is really uniting himself with the forces of darkness and with Satan himself, and the believer is permitting himself to be contaminated in body and spirit with the impure. God commands separation from errorists.

At the same time, God also indicates how believers are to determine and identify error. To God's Old Testament believers, Isaiah (8:20) proclaimed, "To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this Word, they have no light of dawn." The New Testament gives similar directives. The Apostle Paul directed the Thessalonians (2,4:19-22), "Do not put out the Spirit's fire; do not treat prophecies with contempt. Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil." Notice the implication here. When prophecies—the Word of God in truth and purity—are treated with contempt, then the Spirit's fire is "put out," for the Spirit of God is active through the Word and only through the Word. That is why God directed his Old Testament people to "the law and to the testimony"—the Scriptures. That is why "God's people" and "God's household," his church, are "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets [the Scriptures], with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone." (Ephesians 2:19-20.) Thus when Paul directed the Thessalonians to "test everything," he was telling them to test whatever was placed before them on the basis of the whole counsel of God—all of God's Word.

This testing of doctrine and practice on the basis of God's Word was also made clear by the Apostle John (1,4:1-3&b):

Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world....We are from God, and whoever knows God listens to us; but whoever is not from God does not listen to us. This is how we recognize the Spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood.

John tells believers to "test the spirits." Test the spirits to see if what they say is authentic, genuine. Test the spirits against the touchstone of God's Word. And when the spirits that were tested proved to be false, then John had this to say,

Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching [doctrine] of Christ does not have God; whoever continues in the teaching [doctrine] has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching [doctrine], do not take him into your house or welcome him. Anyone who welcomes him shares in his wicked work. (2 John 9-11.)

Seth Erlandsson in his booklet, *Church Fellowship*, comments as follows regarding what is meant by "the teaching [or, doctrine] of Christ." His comments also reflect what it means to acknowledge or confess "that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh." (1 John 4:2b) Erlandsson states,

'The doctrine of Christ' includes the whole Old Testament, for Jesus himself pointed to the Old Testament as God's Word and said, 'Scripture cannot be broken' (Jn 10:35). It [the doctrine of Christ] includes also everything that Christ himself taught, as well as everything taught by his

disciples. In a Word, everything in the Old and New Testaments is the doctrine of Christ. We are not to establish or practice church fellowship with anyone who does not continue in this doctrine, nor with anyone who comes to us without bringing along this doctrine. Church fellowship is bound up with the marks of the church, the pure preaching of God's Word and the correct administration of the Sacraments.⁴

The basic message of the Old Testament remains "Christ is coming"; and the basic message of the New Testament is "Christ has come." To add, subtract, twist or distort anything from the Old or New Testaments constitutes a denial of Christ's having come in the flesh, for Jesus himself states, "These...Scriptures...testify about me." (John 5:39b.) Therefore any departure from the Scriptures obligates believers to refuse to engage in fellowship. To continue in fellowship after false doctrine has been exposed and identified constitutes a sharing in the wicked work of the errorist. (2 John 11.) St. Paul would add his exhortation to this prohibition of fellowship with errorists: "I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them." (Romans 16:17.) The "teaching you have learned" is a reference to all of the Scriptures, for that is what St. Paul taught. He reminded the Ephesian elders that he had proclaimed to them the whole counsel of God. (Cf Acts 20:27, KJV.) And so believers will want to separate themselves from any church, group, organization or individual which does not proclaim and practice the whole doctrine of Christ—which does not hold to the Word of God in truth and purity. But there is another Scriptural principle involved in this truth that God's church is separate. And that principle is love.

God's Church is Motivated by Love⁵

It is the love of God in Christ Jesus that will be the motivating force for God's Church and therefore also for the individual believer. The Apostle Paul reminded the Corinthians (2,5:14-16),

Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.
So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view.

The love which moved the Savior to give up his life for the sins of the world will compel the Christian to live his life for Jesus—to live his life in accordance with what Jesus tells the believer in his Word. This love of Christ, which compels and motivates the Christian, will have application regarding with whom the Christian has fellowship and with whom the Christian refuses fellowship. This love will have three objects: 1) Love for God and his Word; 2) Love for one's own soul; 3) Love for the souls of others.

The Christian will be motivated to refuse fellowship with errorists (churches, groups, individuals) on the basis of love for God and his Word. The following verses from Psalm 119 indicate how the believer, who loves God's Word and promises, must, as a corollary, also hate and separate himself from everything that is contrary to that Word. The believer confesses,

Oh, how I love your law!⁶
I meditate on it all day long.
.....
I have kept my feet from every evil path
so that I might obey your Word.⁷
.....
How sweet are your promises⁸ to my taste,
sweeter than honey to my mouth!

I gain understanding from your precepts⁹;
 therefore I hate every wrong path.
 Your Word⁷ is a lamp to my feet
 and a light for my path.
 (Psalm 119:97,101,103-105.)

In the heart of the Christian, there is just no room for loving God and his Word and for also putting up with doctrine, teaching and practice which is contrary to that Word. Jesus made this same connection between love for God and love for his Word.

Jesus told his disciples, "Whoever has my commands and obeys [guards, keeps] them, he is the one who loves me." (John 14:21.) Love for Jesus will be marked by a love for his commands—his Word. And it needs to be repeated that Jesus' Word incorporates all of the Scriptures, both Old and New Testaments, for those Scriptures testify about him. (John 5:39b.) Again, Jesus told his disciples,

If anyone loves me, he will obey [guard, keep] my teaching [word]. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. He who does not love me will not obey [guard, keep] my teaching [words]. (John 14:23-24a.)

Notice immediately how fellowship with the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost is connected to obedience and keeping of God's Word. John makes this same point in his First Epistle (1:3) when he states, "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." The entire purpose of John's Gospel and Epistles and, in fact, of all the Scriptures is that people might "believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing [they might] have life in his name." (John 20:31.) This life means fellowship with God and with all fellow believers. And this life comes only through the Word of God in truth and purity. Thus love for God and his Word would be one of the reasons for a believer to separate himself from—not have fellowship with—errorists (heterodox churches, groups, organizations and individuals). A person cannot legitimately say, "I love God," "I love Jesus," and do, preach, teach or practice things contrary to the Word.

But there is a second reason for the believer to separate himself from errorists—to refuse to have fellowship with them—and that is love for his own soul. The believer will not engage in spiritual fellowship with the heterodox out of love for his own soul.

The Apostle Paul warned the Corinthians (1,10:12), "If you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall." The believer must remember that his faith is being challenged, not by "flesh and blood," but by "the rulers," "the authorities," "the powers of this dark world," and "the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms." (Ephesians 6:12.) False doctrine and practice is one of the tools used by the devil to tempt Christians away from faith in Jesus. Jesus warned his disciples against "the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees," "not the yeast used in bread, but...the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees." (Matthew 16:6,12.) The Apostle Paul described the false doctrine and practice of the Judaizers as the "little yeast [that] works through the whole batch of dough." (Galatians 5:9.) And Paul warned Timothy that false doctrine spreads "like gangrene" and "destroy[s] the faith of some." (Cf 2 Timothy 2:16-18.) Notice the bottom line of gangrenous false doctrine and practice: It destroys the faith of some.¹⁰ The believer will avoid false doctrine and those fellowships which hold to it and practice it. The believer's love for his own soul and the potential for destruction he faces from false doctrine will lead him to avoid spiritual fellowship with errorists.

And there is the third aspect of love which motivates the believer to refuse spiritual fellowship with errorists and that is love for the souls of others. Love for the souls of all people is what moved the heavenly Father to send his Son into the world to be the Savior of the world; and "God our Savior...wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth." (1 Timothy 2:3b,4.) In fact, the Christian has been left on this earth for the purpose of extending God's kingdom to others through the means of grace, the Gospel in Word and Sacraments. And so the Christian, having Jesus Christ as the LORD of his heart, will "always be prepared to

give an answer to everyone who asks [him] to give the reason for the hope that [he] has." And the Christian is to testify to this faith and hope in Jesus "with gentleness and respect." (1 Peter 3:15,16a.) But the question needs to be addressed as to how the refusal to have fellowship with others shows love for them.

Refusal to have fellowship with someone is always to be accompanied by an explanation of why that refusal has been given. This explanation will have its basis in God's Word which directs that no fellowship is to take place between those who hold to God's Word in truth and purity and those who do not. This process of explanation will be a proclaiming of the Word. James is pointing to this when he says,

My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner away from his error will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins. (James 5:19,20.)

The way in which a person who has wandered from the truth is brought back to the truth is by "speaking the truth in love" to him. (Ephesians 4:15.) In the same way, St. Paul encourages Titus to train elders to "hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he [the elder] can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it." And Paul goes on to warn that "there are many rebellious people, mere talkers and deceivers...[who] must be silenced, because they are ruining whole households by teaching things they ought not to teach." (Titus 1:9,10,11.) Love for the soul of the person who holds to error, either personally or by his membership in a heterodox church, group or organization, will move the believer to separate from that person. But this separation needs to occur with appropriate explanation from God's Word as to why fellowship activities cannot exist.

And so God's church, believers, the holy Christian church, the communion of saints, will separate itself from false doctrine and those who hold to it. But the motivation for that separation will be love: Love for the LORD and his true Word; love for one's own soul and the recognition that false doctrine and practice has the potential for leading one astray; and love for the souls of other people who are to be brought to the knowledge of the truth only by the proclaiming of the truth—the Word of God without addition, subtraction, twisting or distortion.

Scenarios for Practical Applications of the Doctrine of Fellowship

Any number of practical applications of the doctrine of fellowship could be examined. The approaches and principles of application will, however, be the same. The principles of the oneness of God's church, the separateness of God's church, and the motivation of love—for God's Word, for one's own soul and for the souls of others—these principles will all apply. One other consideration needs to be addressed and that is Christian freedom.

The Apostle Paul reminded the Galatians, "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery." And still later Paul told the Galatians, "You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love." (Galatians 5:1,13.) As we Christians apply the doctrine of fellowship, we are not to view that doctrine as some sort of slavish yoke with which we have been saddled. Christ has set us free. But our love for Christ our Savior will move us to be careful how we use our freedom, not to indulge ourselves but to serve others. Paul told the Corinthians, "be careful...that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak." (1 Corinthians 8:9.) The application of any principle of God's Word needs to be governed by this concern for others—a concern not just for their feelings, but for their spiritual welfare. Thus Paul stated, "Everything is permissible—but not everything is beneficial. 'Everything is permissible'—but not everything is constructive. Nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others." (1 Corinthians 10:23-24.)

Keeping this exhortation of Paul in mind we will examine some scenarios for the application of the doctrine of fellowship. The areas of application in this section will deal with public worship; prayer—public and private; Christian education; mission work.¹¹

Public Worship

Scenario #1.

A young lady from the congregation is going to get married in your church to a man who belongs to a different church [Roman Catholic]. In order to appease his family, she would like to have his priest pronounce a blessing on the couple at the wedding and have his sister sing a solo at the wedding. If you were the pastor, what would you say and why?¹²

God's church is one, but obviously we are not able to look into the hearts of the bridegroom, his priest and his sister. Their membership in the church of the Antichrist—the Roman Catholic Church—must be taken as evidence that they believe what that church teaches, confesses and practices. God's church is separate. To permit participation in the wedding worship service of those who hold to false doctrine and belong to a church which proclaims false doctrine is contrary to God's commands. But let us also look at the multifaceted principle of love—for God's Word, our own souls and the souls of others.

Love for God and his Word will not permit the Antichrist's priest to pronounce a blessing in the wedding worship service, nor will that love for God's Word permit the bridegroom's sister to sing in that worship service. Moreover, the bride must be brought to the realization that she is endangering her own soul's salvation by such a request, because her request gives the hint that she perceives no differences in the teaching and practice between her own church and the church of the Antichrist.

Finally there is the love for the souls of others involved. There is love for the priest's soul. Jesus died for him too. It would be appropriate for a WELS pastor as well as the WELS bride to call to the attention of this priest the denial by the Roman Catholic Church of the doctrine upon which the church stands or falls: Salvation by grace alone, through faith alone in Jesus without works, based on the Scriptures alone. There is love for the soul of the bridegroom himself. During the meetings that pastors normally have with those who are engaged to be married, opportunity can be taken by both the pastor and the bride to tell the young man about his Savior and the truths of God's Word. And then there is also love for the bridegroom's sister. It needs to be explained to her that those who lead and participate in our worship services are to be one in faith with us, and we would like to have the opportunity to study with her the truths of God's Word in order to establish that oneness of faith and confession.

And then there are also the souls of the rest of the members of the congregation. What damage might result to their souls if the requests of the bride were met? Would those souls, fed on the truths of God's Word, see their pastor and their sister in Christ—the bride—involved in a fellowship forbidden by God's Word, and would that event lead them into similar forbidden fellowships which would permit soul-destroying, gangrenous false doctrine to enter their hearts?

The answer to the bride's requests for the participation of her bridegroom's priest and sister in the wedding worship service is an obvious "no." But it is a "no" which is given with explanations from God's Word, so that his Word might possibly kindle and fan into flame faith alone in Jesus as Savior.

Scenario #2.

You are an accomplished organist and have been asked by your Methodist friend to play at her father's funeral which will be conducted by her Methodist pastor. What do you say and why?

If you have had the opportunity to speak with your friend about God's Word and about Jesus her Savior, then you will, of course, encourage her to hold on to her Savior during her time of grief. At the same time, the principle of separation from errorists will not permit you to play the organ at the funeral. You might explain to your friend that you hope that her father died believing in Jesus as his Savior, but that because the church to which she belongs teaches things which are not in the Bible and permits practices which the Bible forbids, you cannot join in the worship service.

Again, you would also need to consider your love for your fellow believers with whom you are in fellowship. Would your participation in such a service lead any of them into thinking that there was really no difference at all between what your church taught and what the Methodist church taught?

The same line of reasoning would apply to you and your congregation if you were in need of an organist for your worship services and were tempted to use an organist outside the WELS. An additional consideration in that scenario would be the lack of love being shown to the organist outside our fellowship, giving him/her the impression that there is no difference between a church which teaches, preaches, and practices God's Word in truth and purity, and his/her own church which in many instances departs from that Word.

Scenario #3.

Is there any situation in which a WELS pastor might commune a non-WELS person, either in the public service or privately?

The principles of unity and separation are again clear. While we are not permitted to make judgments on a person's personal faith, nevertheless God's Word requires us to make judgments regarding church affiliation and membership. If the person requesting communion is a member of an erring church body, then we will neither permit him to commune with us—publicly or privately, nor will we commune with him. Love for God and his Word and for those with whom we are in fellowship will permit us neither to practice open communion nor to participate in it. In love we would want to discuss with the person requesting communion the differences between the church of which he is a member and the WELS. If the person would happen to say that he believes what we believe, then encourage him to put that faith into action by severing his connection with his heterodox church body or organization (lodge, scouts, etc), study God's Word with us, and become a confirmed member with us.

Scenario #4.

You are the pastor of a WELS church and have been visiting a prospect. The person has heard the good news about Jesus and has confessed his faith in the Savior. He has agreed to take instruction leading to membership in your congregation, but before this can take place, he dies suddenly. Will you take the funeral?

The answer is probably yes, but love will require that careful consultation take place with everyone involved. Love for your congregation will move you to inform your church council of the circumstances and the confession of faith which this prospect made in your presence. You will also need to deal with the family of the prospect, and to them it must be made clear, that the funeral arrangements must be acceptable to a confession of faith in Jesus and his Word. Participation in the funeral worship service of those outside our fellowship—soloists, organists, participation of chaplains (American Legion, V.F.W.)—will not be permitted if you are to take the funeral. If the person who died confessing his faith in Jesus was also a lodge member, and you did not have the opportunity to deal with that topic because you had not had the opportunity to have him in an Adult Confirmation Class, you would have to make clear to the family and lodge officers that lodge rites would not be permitted if you were to take the funeral. Out of love for souls, however, every opportunity needs to be taken to explain both "yes" and "no" answers.

Prayer-Public and Private

Scenario #1.

Your basketball team is participating in a tournament at an LCMS school. The pastor of that school asks everyone to join in prayer at the beginning of the tournament. What do you do?

While it is certainly that pastor's prerogative to pray with his members, it is not his right to force WELS members into a situation where it appears that they are participating in joint prayer. In a loving way, that pastor and his congregation need to be informed that fellowship between LCMS and WELS does not exist. Scriptural reasons for that lack of fellowship may be mentioned. It should be made clear that the refusal to join in prayer should not be construed as being a judgment upon the personal faith of the members of his congregation.

Scenario #2.

You are a member of a right-to-life group. A peaceful, non-violent demonstration is planned to call the community's attention to the sin of abortion. Joint prayers will be offered. What do you do?

While membership in such a right-to-life group is commendable civic behavior and commendable before God, joining in prayer is not. Joint prayer is an expression of common faith and fellowship. The Bible makes no distinction when it refers to fellowship. Worship, prayer, Holy Communion, are all aspects of fellowship.

Moreover, the refusal to participate in joint prayer might also give you the opportunity to speak about the terrible spiritual consequences of abortion and the robbing of infants of the means of grace by which God brings them into his family of believers. Thus you would be showing your loving concern for the spiritual welfare of the unborn, as well as giving a testimony to others in the group about Jesus their Savior.

Scenario #3.

You are visiting your grandmother in the nursing home. She is a member of the LCMS. May you join her in private prayer?

This kind of scenario was addressed years ago in a pamphlet titled "Prayer Fellowship." The writer states,

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 such 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 not my plain duty to support and build up her faith by praying with her or otherwise expressing my own faith?¹³

It is assumed that this pamphlet was written in the 1960's when synodical splits were taking place. The grandmothers and grandfathers of those days may have been overwhelmed by the events of the separation of the various synods and did not comprehend the reasons for those separations. The situation is different in the 1990's.

A generation has come and gone. The reasons for the synodical splits have been explained and documented in abundance. Today's grandmothers and grandfathers have had ample opportunity to study the differences on the basis of God's Word. The individual Christian will have to determine whether or not love for the soul is best served by praying with the elderly relative or refraining from such prayer.

Scenario #4.

You're going to your grandparents' house for the annual Thanksgiving dinner. All the relatives will be there. You and your immediate family belong to the WELS. The rest of the family belongs to the ELCA and are well aware of the doctrinal differences separating the two church bodies. They've ridiculed you in the past about the WELS stand on church fellowship, especially joint prayer. It is the tradition that everyone join hands while praying together before eating. What would you do and why?¹⁴

This scenario is completely different from the one involving the grandmother in the nursing home. Here there is a blatant and rebellious attitude toward the truths of God's Word. Love for that Word will not permit participation in the praying circle of hands.

Love for the other souls, however, will guide the WELS members to a gentle and respectful giving of the reason for the refusal to pray with the rest of the family. If, after giving the reasons for your refusal to pray with them, the rest of the family continues its ridicule, the believer needs to remember that similar ridicule was directed toward the Savior and that believers have been called upon to take up their crosses and follow him.

Scenario #5.

You've been in the hospital for an extended stay. You've had plenty of opportunity to get to know your roommate, who is a non-practicing Roman Catholic. You've shared your faith with him/her, and he/she has deeply appreciated it. Suddenly, he/she is in need of emergency surgery. He/She asks you to pray with him/her. What would you do and why?¹⁵

A non-practicing Roman Catholic is the same as an inactive, non-practicing Lutheran. A person's faith is going to be reflected in his regular attendance at worship; his lack of faith will likewise be reflected in his absence from worship. You, however, have shared the Gospel with your hospital roommate, and he has expressed an appreciation for that Gospel. And now this non-practicing Roman Catholic has asked that you "pray with him." You would agree to pray out loud for him and include in your prayer the hope that your discussions of the Gospel and the forgiveness of sins and eternal life that he has through faith alone in Jesus his Savior will keep him regardless of the outcome of the emergency surgery.

Christian Education

Scenario #1.

The pastor and principal of a WELS congregation operating a Christian day school are approached by a Missouri Synod couple who wish to have their children enrolled in your school. They are willing to pay tuition, but they state that they have no intention of joining your congregation. What do you do?

There are a number of possibilities in this difficult scenario. First of all, however, pastor, principal, church council and school board must be united with regard to whatever policy for enrollment is taken. Moreover, these policies must be developed on the basis of God's Word, paying particular attention to love for the souls of all of the children in the Christian day school. Endangering their faith by permitting enrollment in the school by those outside the fellowship of WELS must not take place.

The pastor, principal, school board and church council may have in place a policy which permits enrollment, provided the parents, or at least one of them, takes the Adult Confirmation Class. And although the parents in this scenario have stated their resolve not to join the WELS, nevertheless the policy of having at least

one of them take the Adult Confirmation Class would provide opportunity for them to look at the differences in doctrine and practice between WELS and LCMS, so that the parents might see the truths of God's Word.

Pastor, principal, school board and church council would also want to appeal to the love that these parents have for their children. If they truly love their children, which apparently they do since they are seeking to have them trained in a Lutheran Christian Day School, then they would not want to do anything to undermine the faith in Christ of their little ones. But undermining the faith in Christ of their children is exactly what these parents would be doing if they sent their children to a Lutheran Christian Day School while, at the same time, refusing to study and embrace the truths of God's Word in the congregation providing the Lutheran Christian Day School. Love for the souls of their children ought to move these parents to at least enroll in an Adult Confirmation Class so that they might compare what their church body teaches and what is taught in the WELS.

Scenario #2.

This scenario was printed in the February 1994 issue of *The Northwestern Lutheran*.¹⁶ It relates to the area of Christian education in terms of what religious materials Christians permit to enter into their homes. Professor John F. Brug responds to the question posed.

I enjoy reading Family Voice, the magazine of Concerned Women for America, I have to give a minimum donation to get the subscription, but I do not join in any of the group's prayer activities or sign their petitions. How should we view organizations such as CWA?

Christians should not belong to or worship with any organization whose principles or teachings are contrary to the Bible. Nor should they offer financial support to such organizations. For the sake of obtaining information, Christians can buy books or subscribe to periodicals from groups whose philosophy they reject and which they would not join. The subscription price is for goods received.

Drawing clear lines may become more difficult when the organization is not religious, but has some religious activities. In such cases Christians need to decide to what degree they want to be involved.

As citizens, we may participate in political action groups that try to influence legislation and government policies to bring them into closer agreement with the moral principles set forth in the Bible.

A problem arises when organizations blur the line between religion and nonsectarian political action by including religious activities in their program. If the objectionable activity is incidental to the purpose and program of the group (such as prayer at the opening of a convention), Christians should refrain from participating in that activity and should express their objections. They may participate in the secular functions of the group.

Don't join any organization whose beliefs and practices conflict with the Bible. If incidental violations of biblical principles arise, object to them and do not participate in them. If membership involves you in beliefs or practices contrary to Scripture, or if activities involved in membership trouble your conscience, quit.

It should be noted that some of the things which Professor Brug states also apply to the above discussion of Scenarios #1 and #2, Prayer-Public and Private.

Mission Work

Christians who hold to God's Word in truth and purity will not join or support heterodox groups doing mission work, either home or foreign. There has recently, however, been a call for greater sensitivity to

different cultures as we do mission work both at home and abroad. Care must be taken that no teaching of God's Word is minimized by such a call to cultural sensitivity. Consider the following scenario.

Scenario #1.

A friend of Asian background and religion invites you to accompany him as he participates in a religious celebration of his culture. What do you do?

In his August 1993 WELS Convention Essay,¹⁷ Dr. Wayne Horgwardt stated that there is a "need for our students to become sensitive to the cultures of other peoples in other places."¹⁸ It might be stated that this is what St. Paul was getting at when he said, "I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some." Paul added, "I do all this for the sake of the Gospel..." (1 Corinthians 9:22,23.) And as an example, it might be pointed out how Paul presented the Gospel in Athens, beginning his presentation with a reference to the Athenian monument, "TO AN UNKNOWN GOD." (Cf Acts 17:16-34.) Was not Paul being sensitive to their culture?

It needs to be noted, however, that the Scripture describes Paul in Athens as being "greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols." (Acts 17:16.) Moreover, we also take note of the fact that Paul presented the Gospel to them, and that many of the Greeks "sneered" "when they heard about the resurrection of the dead." (Acts 17:32.) Paul's sensitivity to the culture of the Athenians and his becoming "all things to all men," did not lead him to forsake the presentation of God's Word in truth and purity.

In the above proposed scenario, an Asian friend invites a WELS member to observe an Asian religious festival. In Christian freedom the WELS member could attend. But if he does attend, love for his Asian friend would prompt the WELS member to search for some opportunity—as did St. Paul—to proclaim the truth of God's Word and Christ's redemptive work—that "salvation is found in no one else." (Acts 4:12.) Sensitivity to culture must never include a relinquishing of the truths of God's Word and our salvation.

Conclusion

The unity of the holy Christian church, the communion of saints, is part of its essence. The heavenly Father hears and answers the prayer of his beloved Son that his disciples may be one even as the Father, Son and Holy Ghost are one. That unity and oneness, however, will not be fully enjoyed by believers until they are in glory.

In the meantime, the church militant strives for unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. But such unity must never be pursued by surrendering even one small point of doctrine. While it is true that there are certain doctrines which must be held in order to be saved, such as the doctrines of the Holy Trinity, The Vicarious Atonement, The Person and Work of Christ, that does not mean that other Scriptural doctrines are inconsequential. God's command remains to teach and believe everything he has given us in his Word. But God's command to love one another and to do good to others must also, for Jesus' sake, move us to consider carefully any practical applications of fellowship. We have been set free; but we are free neither to sin nor to be a cause for sin to anyone else. We need to be aware of the implications surrounding the words we say or refuse to say and the actions we take or refuse to take. We are not to cause anyone to stumble.

Finally, the fact that God's church is separate and that his Word calls upon believers to separate themselves from anything false or contrary to his Word should not be viewed by believers as some sort of yoke or chain which prevents the communication of the Gospel and the extension of God's kingdom. God has not given his Word in order to stifle the extension of his kingdom. God has given us his Word in order that his kingdom might come, not only to us, but to others as well. The doctrine of fellowship gives Christians the opportunity to proclaim, teach and testify to God's Word in truth and purity, and in the final analysis, it will always be the Word that saves and not any false doctrine or error which is mixed into the Word.

May our gracious Savior grant that the WELS continue to be a church body that holds to, proclaims, teaches and practices his Word in truth and purity. And may he give us wisdom and knowledge and courage to use the Scriptural doctrine of fellowship for his glory and for the extension of his kingdom.

Appendix

A Summary Of Scriptures' Commands Regarding Fellowship Co-Ordinate with "Fellowship," Chapter Two of *Christian Concerns* by David P. Kuske¹⁹

Pp. 10 & 11

- 1a. John 17:20,21a. Jesus prays that all believers would be one in faith without any division or disagreement.
- 1b. Ephesians 4:3. The unity of the Spirit we are urged to keep is the one common faith in Christ.
- 1c. Hebrews 10:25a. We are not to give up meeting together for worship, Bible study and prayer.
- 1d. Hebrews 10:24,25b. We are to encourage one another—fellow believers—in one spiritual body through the Word.

Summary of Scriptures' Commands Forbidding Fellowship

Pp. 11&12

- 2a. Matthew 7:15. "Watch out" for false prophets.
Romans 16:17. "Watch out" and "keep away from" those who cause divisions and place obstacles in our way contrary to the Bible we have learned.
- 2b. 2 Corinthians 6:14. "Do not be yoked together with unbelievers."
2 Corinthians 6:17. "Come out," "be separate," "touch not."
2 Corinthians 7:1. "Let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and soul."
2 Timothy 2:17-19. "Turn away from wickedness."
2 Timothy 3:1-5. "Have nothing to do with them."
Titus 3:9,10. "Avoid," "warn," "have nothing to do with."
2 John 9,10. "Do not take them into your house," "do not welcome."

How much Doctrinal agreement need there be before we have Fellowship?

Pp. 12&13

- 3a. John 8:31. Those who hold on to, continue in, Jesus' Word are his disciples.
- 3b. Matthew 5:19. Not even the least of the Bible's commands or words is to be changed.
- 3c. Deuteronomy 4:2; Revelation 22:18,19. Neither add nor subtract, twist nor distort God's Word in any way.
- 3d. Matthew 7:21; 15:7-9; Galatians 1:7-9. False teachers, though pious and well-meaning, are condemned.
- 3e. 2 Thessalonians 3:14. After warning the erring or sinning brother, we are not to associate with him if he does not repent.

- 3f. Titus 3:10. The warnings given to an erring or sinning brother may be several and repeated.

Why does God not want us to have Fellowship with errorists?

Pp. 13&14

- 4a. 2 John 10,11. Those who welcome the errorist share in his wicked work—his wicked teaching.
Matthew 16:6,11; Galatians 5:9. As a little bit of yeast makes the entire batch of dough grow, so a little false doctrine can damage or contaminate saving faith in Jesus.
2 Timothy 2:17. False doctrine is like infectious gangrene which, if not treated, will kill the entire body.
Ephesians 6:12. False doctrine has such great power because its source is Satan and the angels of hell.
- 4b. Matthew 18:15-17, 1 Corinthians 5:1-5. God desires that the errorist or sinner be shown his error, repent and be saved.
2 John 11. If we welcome an errorist, he may think that we approve and share his error.
2 John 10. By not welcoming the errorist, we make plain to him that he is in error.
Galatians 5:9; 2 Timothy 2:17; Ephesians 6:12. We point out the errorist's mistake so that he may be corrected. If he is not corrected, his error may rob him of eternal life.
What is the only basis upon which we judge whether or not a person is an errorist, so that we do not practice fellowship with him

P. 14

- 5a. 1 Samuel 16:7. Only God sees what is in a person's heart.
- 5b. Romans 10:10; 1 John 4:1,2. We are to test what a person says he believes on the basis of God's Word.
- 5c. By holding membership in a church body—or other organization—one is saying or confessing that he holds to what that church-body believes and confesses.
- 5d. We cannot judge what people believe or do not believe by looking in their hearts; rather, we are called upon to judge and to engage in or refrain from fellowship on the basis of the confession that people make, which is usually done by the church membership they hold.

Endnotes

¹ An excellent Bible study of both the unity of the holy Christian church and the issue of fellowship is found in David P. Kuske's *Christian Concerns: A Bible Study Course For Adults*, Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1979.

² *This We Believe* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, rev. 1980), p. 19.

³ The term means "worthlessness" and is used as a reference to Satan, the devil.

⁴ Seth Erlandsson, *Church Fellowship - What Does The Bible Say?* Trans. Siegbert W. Becker (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1979), p. 6.

⁵ An excellent outline of the Christian's motivation of love in applying the Scriptural principle of fellowship is found in *Luther's Catechism: The Small Catechism of Dr. Martin Luther and an Exposition for Children and Adults Written in Contemporary English* by David P. Kuske (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2nd ed, 1989), pp. 214-217.

⁶ Torah, law, teaching, the revelation of God's will. A reference to all of God's Word with emphasis on the Gospel as the context of loving the law indicates. Cf *Theological Wordbook Of The Old Testament*, in 2 vols., ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., & Bruce K. Waltke, (Chicago: The Moody Bible Institute, 1980), 1:403-405, #910d.

⁷ *Dabar*, word. Cf *Ibid.*, 1:178-180, #399 & #399a.

⁸ *Amar*, sayings, word, utterance, speech. The verb can also mean to command or reveal something. Cf *Ibid.*, 1:54-55, #118 & #118a,b,c&e.

⁹ *Mipqudika* from *piqudim*, regulations, decrees, precepts, statutes, commandments—"a general term for the responsibilities that God places on his people." Cf *Ibid.*, II:732, #1802e.

¹⁰ This writer testifies personally to the potential of false doctrine for destroying faith. The writer was raised in conservative "Old Missouri." But the writer also attended Valparaiso University in the early 60's. Religion class discussions and essay assignments in which God's Word was quoted, were greeted with ridicule and low grades from some members of the religion faculty. The very "best" and sought after teachers included men like Bob Bertram, Kenneth Korby and Ed Schroeder, some of whom were instrumental in forming "Seminex." Old Testament theories of "JEDP" and deuterio and tritero Isaiah were proposed as feasible if not factual. New Testament studies were heavily influenced by the reading of Leonard Goppelt's *Jesus and Judaism*. Somehow and somewhere the Theology of the Cross was lost while students searched and strained to find the "kerygma"—message—that the biblical writers had placed into their writings. It is this writer's opinion that religion courses at Valparaiso University in the early 60's did more to raise doubt about salvation than to assure of salvation. Publications from and concerning Valpo seem to indicate that things have not gotten better but worse.

¹¹ Cf Kuske, *Luther's Catechism...In Contemporary English*, pp. 211-213; and *This We Believe*, p. 19.

¹² *Luther's Catechism EXERCISES* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, pub. 1992), p. 270. This Catechism workbook is also available on computer disc which makes it easier for the instructor to select those questions and exercises he wishes to include in each lesson. The particular section from which this example is taken deals with putting into practice the Scriptural principles of fellowship.

¹³ Unfortunately the writer does not have publication information pertaining to this pamphlet.

¹⁴ *Luther's Catechism EXERCISES*, p. 270.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Professor John F. Brug, Ph.D., "Your Questions, Please," *Northwestern Lutheran—Official Magazine Of The Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod*, 81, No. 2 (February 1994), p. 31. Dr. Brug teaches Theology and Old Testament at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, Wisconsin.

¹⁷ Dr. Wayne M. Borgwardt, "Worker Training: Preparing that 'Someone Preaching' and 'How Can They Hear Without Someone Preaching To Them?'" *Proceedings of the Fifty-second Biennial Convention* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1993), pp. 225-238.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 235.

¹⁹ David P. Kuske, *Christian Concerns*, Chapter Two: "Fellowship," pp. 10-15, 40-43.