

# **An Essay on Church Fellowship**

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[This is an elaboration of the Church Fellowship statement by the Wisconsin Synod Commission on Doctrinal Matters, discussed by the Joint Union Committees of the Synodical Conference.]

## **I**

In an ever-increasing measure the subject of church fellowship has been in the foreground in our midst during recent years. To an unusual degree matters pertaining to church fellowship have become the subject of discussion in our synodical conventions, conferences, and congregations. There is nothing mysterious about this situation. It is simply the inevitable result of the intensified efforts which are currently being made to unite the various Lutheran church bodies of our land, which heretofore have differed in doctrine and practice. In the recent formation of TALC about one-third of the Lutherans in our country have been merged into a single Lutheran church body. Plans are well under way whereby more than another third of U. S. Lutherans are to be merged into another church body within several years. Besides these merger movements among Lutherans there are also intense efforts made to establish church fellowship between all Lutherans, or at least to bring about a greater measure of collaboration and cooperation between them. We must likewise realize that what is going on among Lutheran bodies in our country and what is going on among Lutherans throughout the world in the activities of the Lutheran World Federation, is but in line with a larger trend, the so-called Ecumenical Movement, which is taking on accelerated momentum. This Ecumenical Movement is making its impact upon Christian denominations throughout the world and aims to unite them all in a common fellowship of worship and work, though without any serious thought of reaching doctrinal agreement on the basis of God's Word. Not only the vast majority of Protestant churches but also most of the Orthodox Catholic groups are involved. Even dialogues with representatives of the Roman Catholic Church for the purpose of re-evaluating their differences and establishing greater mutual understanding have been enthusiastically advocated, and that with a prominent member of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod taking the lead in the matter.

As far as our own Synod is concerned, our convictions won from God's Word have kept us from participating directly in these union endeavors. We have found even the efforts in this direction which are currently being undertaken among Lutherans to fall short of what God in His Word requires for the establishment and exercise of church fellowship. This does not mean, however, that we have thereby been placed into the happy position where we could simply ignore these movements and endeavors. They affect us very deeply nevertheless. They are disturbing the fellowship in our own midst and they threaten to disrupt and terminate the precious fellowship which for so many years we have enjoyed with sister synods in the Synodical Conference.

Our Synod has frequently expressed the conviction that a unionistic trend, a weakening on the Scriptural principles of church fellowship, is really at the bottom of all the vexing issues which have arisen between our Synod and the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. Only amidst a weakening of fellowship principles and a unionistic trend could an inadequate treatment of controversial doctrines as we find it in the CC have been undertaken. A unionistic trend is certainly behind the issue of the Chaplaincy, of joint prayer with those who are not in doctrinal agreement, and of the communion agreement and other cooperative endeavors with the NLC. A blind spot concerning Scriptural principles of fellowship is ultimately also behind the issue of Scouting. For when we point out Scouting's false premises as to original sin and as to justification and sanctification, the Missouri Synod defenders will invariably assure us that they, of course, correct these things in their Lutheran handling of the Scouting program. What they fail to grasp and appreciate is their full responsibility concerning the whole Scouting organization by holding membership in it, namely, responsibility for all the Scouting programs in which the pernicious errors of Scouting are left uncorrected and unchided.

Because of this situation our own Synod's members at the Joint Synodical Conference Doctrinal Unity Committee meetings felt that the Scriptural principles on church fellowship should be given priority at these discussions. Gradually the entire group not only consented to this but also asked that the discussions should begin with a thorough study of the Wisconsin Synod presentation on church fellowship. During the past two years the greater part of our Joint Doctrinal Unity Committee meetings was devoted to the study, re-study, and detailed discussion of our Wisconsin Synod presentation on fellowship. The members of the Missouri Doctrinal Unity Committee took great pains to understand and to think through our view of the Scriptural principles of fellowship, on which we find so many of the practices of the Missouri Synod objectionable. They asked endless questions at every point. They brought up all kinds of practical cases to find out how we would apply our principles to them. Thus we had rich opportunity to amplify and elucidate our statements and to remove all kinds of misunderstandings by which the validity of individual points might be easily brushed aside. When the study of our Wisconsin presentation was finished in the April, 1959, meeting of the Joint Doctrinal Committees, members of the Missouri Synod committee admitted that if all the points of our presentation stood as fully Scriptural, they would have to change their practice on various points. We therefore asked the Missouri Synod Doctrinal Unity Committee to give us the points, if any, in writing on which they disagreed with our presentation and the Scriptural basis for such disagreement. In the May meeting of the Joint Doctrinal Unity Committees such a Missouri Synod presentation setting forth the points in which the convictions of its Doctrinal Unity Committee are at variance with those set forth in our own Synod's presentation was at hand and could be discussed. As a result of this discussion our Commission on Doctrinal Matters felt constrained to declare that an impasse exists between the two synods in the matter of fellowship principles.

It is the presentation on church fellowship of our Wisconsin Synod Committee that your District President has asked me to elucidate and unfold at this District Convention in the interest of full understanding in our own midst.

Let me say, first of all, that this presentation aimed at setting forth, as much as possible, the entire scope of what God in His Word has to say on the subject of Christian fellowship. The practical issues facing us in our Synod all tend to focus our attention on one phase of the subject of Christian fellowship or church fellowship, namely upon the limitations and restrictions which God in His Word has placed upon the outward exercise of Christian fellowship. But it would not be wholesome to think of Christian fellowship, or church fellowship, too exclusively in terms of what we might call its negative side. In carrying out our assignment we have, therefore, treated it in its wide scope that we may again be reminded what a glorious blessing is involved in Christian fellowship, that we may be deeply constrained by the abundant encouragements of Holy Writ to manifest it in all of its God-pleasing manifestations, to exercise it as long as we can possibly do this with the Lord's approval, that we may pay richly the great debt of love to all who are still weak in faith and Christian understanding. Then we will also gain new strength to observe the limitations which our Lord has placed upon the exercise of Christian fellowship in a faithful yet evangelical manner.

Right at the beginning of our presentation we sum up in a somewhat concise definition what we consider to be the Scriptural concept of church fellowship: As printed in the Proceedings of the 35th Convention of our Synod on pages 205-208, it read as follows: "Church fellowship is every joint expression, manifestation, and demonstration of the common faith in which Christians *are united* with one another." To remove all misunderstanding we later expanded this definition in our discussions at the Joint Committee meetings. In its expanded form it reads as follows: "Church fellowship is every joint expression, manifestation, and demonstration of the common faith in which Christians *on the basis of their confession find themselves to be united* with one another." In other words, the "are united" in the earlier definition has been expanded to read "on the basis of their confession find themselves to be united." By this expansion we did not change the meaning of the original definition; we merely spelled out how alone for the practical exercise of church fellowship we can recognize a common faith.

After having stated from the outset what we hold the Scriptural concept of church fellowship to be, our presentation now proceeds to show under A. *How Scripture leads us to this concept of church fellowship*. This is done by six points, numbered Arabic 1-6 under A. It needs to be borne in mind that the first two points, and to a

certain extent also 3 and 4, do not yet treat of church fellowship as defined in the opening statement. They treat of the fellowship in the *una sancta*, even though the reality of this spiritual fellowship cannot be established by us concerning any specific individuals in an absolute way. Church fellowship, as we shall also be reminded in later points of this presentation, must content itself with assuming the reality of the spiritual fellowship on the basis of the confession of the individuals or groups involved. Yet to lose sight of the spiritual fellowship which is assumed to be present on the basis of an acceptable confession, would mean to externalize the whole concept of church fellowship.

With this preliminary clarification let us therefore take up point for point the steps by which Scripture leads us to its concept of church fellowship.

**A.1** Point A.1 reads: “*Through faith in Christ the Holy Spirit unites us with our God and Savior.*” Yes, through a God-given, Spirit-wrought faith in Christ our Savior God has become our dear Father and we lost and condemned sinners His dear children. For St. Paul says very clearly in *Gal. 3:26*: “Ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus.” St. Paul unfolds this precious truth in the *fourth chapter*, saying: “When the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons.” And then he states in the *sixth verse* of that chapter, as listed under this point: “And because ye are sons, God hath sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying, Abba, Father.” Through the Gospel message of Christ’s finished redemption, the Holy Spirit continually gives us the assurance of faith that our sins are all blotted out and that God is thus our dear Father. Thereby He enables us to look to God in confidence, trust, and hope as His dear children and constrains us to speak to Him as our dear Father in supplication, praise, and thanksgiving.

The unmerited blessing of this fellowship with God through Christ Jesus ought to thrill our hearts as it thrilled the heart of *St. John* when he wrote in *Chapter 3, verse 1*, of his *first epistle*: “Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God.” In his joy over his station as God’s son through faith he is also conscious of its glorious future implications, for he writes: “Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be; but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is.”

**A.2** In Point A.2 our presentation now goes on to say: “*This Spirit-wrought faith at the same time unites us in an intimate bond with all other believers.*” Yes, from the very moment that we sinners were received into this blessed fellowship with our God through faith in Christ our Savior, we also entered upon another fellowship that should likewise thrill our hearts. We were intimately united with one another, with every other believer in Christ. This is intimated by St. John even when he speaks of his blessed fellowship with God, for he glories in it as something which he has in common with all of his Christian readers. Throughout he speaks in terms of “we” and “us.” But the apostle also speaks of it very explicitly. He does so when at the very beginning of his epistle he sets forth the purpose of his testimony as an eye and ear witness of the Savior and His works, saying (I John 1:3): “That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ.” And after having sounded the warning that this blessed fellowship with the Father and the Son will be lost by those who again choose to walk in the darkness of sin, he says once more: “But if ye walk in the light as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another” (1:7). Faith in the Savior, which unites us individually with God and makes us His children, at the same time unites us with one another, makes us spiritual brothers and sisters.

All believers the world over, regardless of race, nationality, age, sex, and station in life, together with those who have already departed out of this life in faith, constitute one spiritual family with Christ as its Head. Its members may differ ever so much as to ancestry, education, habits, pursuits, and political convictions, yet a living faith in Christ binds them closely together. This glorious unity of the invisible Church, and that which all of its members have in common to unite them, is set forth with great fullness in *Ephesians 4:4-6*. Here St. Paul says: “There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.” The invisible Church of believers constitutes the *mystical body of Christ*. One and the same Spirit dwells in the hearts of all its members, the Holy Spirit who through a common call has given them the same identical hope of salvation. The

Lord and Savior of all is the same, not only in His wonderful person as true God and true man, but also in His work. He did not prepare a complete salvation for some and a salvation that must be supplemented by works for others. The faith by which Christ's merits are appropriated is the same in every case. It is not that some trust in Christ completely while others rely to some extent on their own honor and merits. This faith is produced in every member completely by the Holy Ghost. All ordinarily share in one baptism of regeneration. Through their common faith in the one Lord and Savior, wrought in their hearts by the same Spirit through the same means of grace, they have one God and Father who is above all as the Creator and Master of all, who is through all using them to carry out His plans, who is living and dwelling in them through His Spirit.

*This glorious reality of the unity of the Church is also emphasized by many other striking metaphors of Holy Writ.* Christ's believers are called the *temple* of God in which the individual Christians are living stones fitly framed together; a city of the living God, a commonwealth, in which the believers are fellow citizens; a family, in which we are sons and daughters of our Father in heaven; a royal priesthood, in which all those who are washed from their sins are kings and priests together; branches of the one Vine, from whom they all draw strength and sustenance; one fold in which all believers are sheep of the one Good Shepherd.

This glorious unity and invisible fellowship of believers, like the fellowship with God out of which it flows, is not man-made, but a gift and creation of God. Faith which unites us with Christ and with one another is wholly the work of the Holy Spirit. He creates and preserves this unity. This blessed fellowship is rooted in the eternal counsel of God, who predestined us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be His children and therefore brothers in one holy family, and who purposed to gather us together in time. This fellowship of believers is made possible by Christ and His atoning work. On the night before the completion of His redemptive work, He prayed for the consummation of this Christian fellowship (*John 17:20,21*): "That they all may be one: as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me." This prayer is fulfilled in the growth, expansion, and preservation of the invisible Church of believers. The blessed work of leading men into this fellowship with Christ and with one another and of preserving them in this unity is effected through His Word, through the Gospel of reconciliation. Jesus prayed for the twelve: "Sanctify them through thy truth; thy word is truth;" and He added: "Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word; that they all may be one." As the exalted Lord, Christ gives pastors and teachers to His Church that through their ministration of the Gospel His body of believers may be built up, that ever more may be added to it by faith, and that they, together with those who have already come to faith, may be strengthened, nourished, and preserved in this fellowship.

This truth needs to be emphasized in our day when union of all Christians is sought by means other than God's Word and Spirit, when cooperative endeavors without doctrinal unity, when representative gatherings with social problems on the agenda are envisioned as effective means for bringing about Christian unity. The truth that God's Word and Spirit unites Christians needs to be emphasized when the fulfillment of Christ's prayer for the unity of his Church is so frequently misunderstood, when it is thought of as being fulfilled by men through the effecting of an outward organizational unity among Christian denominations. The blessed fellowship of believers is and remains an invisible one, which is not to be equated with any outward church organization.

**A.3** But church fellowship as we use the term is something outwardly visible and manifest. Hence the next points of our presentation, A.3-5, remind us what Scripture has to say about the expression and manifestation of faith. The point A.3 reads as follows: "*Faith as spiritual life invariably expresses itself in activity which is spiritual in nature, yet outwardly manifest, e.g., in the use of the means of grace (John 8:47) , in prayer, (Gal. 4:6), in praise and worship, in appreciative use of the 'gifts' of the Lord to the Church, (Eph. 4:11-14), in Christian testimony (Acts 4:20; II Cor. 4:13), in furthering the cause of the Gospel (I Peter 2:9; Gal. 2:9), in deeds of Christian love (Gal. 5:6).*

**A.4** Point A.4 stands in the closest relation to the previous point. It states: "*It is God the Holy Ghost who leads us to express and manifest in activity the faith which He works and sustains in our hearts through the Gospel*" (Gal. 4:6; John 15,26,27; John 7:38,39; Acts 1:8; Eph. 2:10).

Faith which unites believers with their God and Savior and with one another is spiritual life, wrought, nourished, and sustained by the Holy Spirit. Because faith is spiritual life it will like all life manifest itself in activity. We know that to be true of physical life. Also physical life itself we cannot see. But the life which throbs in a human body and which pervades all its members manifests itself through heart and pulse beat, through growth and change, through movement and activity. It is also thus with faith, spiritual life. It manifests itself through activity. We shall presently have something more to say about this activity.

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

This is not a comparison of our own devising. It is one which God himself makes in His Word, one which the Holy Spirit employs in great detail through the Apostle Paul in the 12<sup>th</sup> chapter both of Romans and I Corinthians. It will not do, of course, to press the comparison beyond the points which it is to clarify in a vivid manner. In all comparisons the analogy is never complete in every point. The fact that the spiritual life of faith manifests itself in activity and that as spiritual life common to all believers it manifests itself in joint activity does not mean that through such activity the invisible Church of believers now actually becomes visible. In the sphere of physical life a doctor, by taking note of pulse and heart beat, may detect and determine quite conclusively whether there is still life present or not in a body even though life may be at a very low ebb. It is not so with spiritual life. The activity by which faith indeed expresses itself can as far as its outward manifestations are concerned—and that is all we mortals can observe—still be feigned and imitated by those in whose heart no faith is throbbing. Thus the presence of these outward manifestations of Christian life is not yet an absolute indication that those from whom they originate are truly believers. We may actually be dealing with an activity of hypocrites like the worship and the charity of Ananias and Sapphira, which, until exposed by God, however, passed for expressions of Christian faith. But this is a matter which we will have reason to take up more fully a little later.

**A.5** In the last two paragraphs we have already touched upon the truths which our presentation of church fellowship takes up in A.5. It states: *“Through the bond of faith in which He unites us with all Christians the Holy Spirit also leads us to express and manifest our faith jointly with fellow Christians according to opportunity: as smaller and larger groups (Acts 1:14,15; Gal. 2:9); as congregations with other congregations (Acts 15; I Thess. 4:9,10; II Cor. 8:1,2,18,19; II Cor. 9:2).”*

Let us now consider with greater detail what some of these activities, mentioned in Points A.3-5 are, by which believers manifest and express their faith individually and jointly with others. It is through the Word of God that faith has been engendered in our hearts, it is through the Word and only through the Word that the Holy Spirit nourishes and sustains this spiritual life of faith in our hearts. St. James says: “Of his own will begat he us with the word of truth.” Paul asserts: “Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God.” We already heard how on the night of His betrayal Jesus spoke of those who would believe through the Apostles’ word. We also heard how in His ardent concern for the continued faith of His disciples the Savior prayed: “Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth.” Believers, therefore, long for this indispensable food of the Word of God and cherish it for the nourishment and preservation of their spiritual life. Thus their faith will manifest itself, first of all, in hearing and pondering God’s Word. Jesus says, (*John 8:47*): “He that is of God heareth God’s words.” In the Christian’s bitter struggle with his Old Adam this longing may not always win out

and be able to assert itself fully, but it is there as long as there is faith in his heart. Holy Writ abounds with exhortations to encourage and build up our faith also in its longing and appreciation of God's Word. Inasmuch as the Holy Spirit has united all believers in this faith-born longing for the spiritual food of His Word, he also leads Christians to gather jointly about this Word. That they do so is an outward expression of Christian fellowship. We see it in the first Christian congregation upon the Pentecost outpouring of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:41-47). Of this entire company of believers we are told that they gladly received the Word of the Apostle. They saw their supreme treasure in the pure Gospel of Jesus Christ. Neither openly nor secretly did they find fault with any part of it. With their whole heart they clung to it, truly believed it, and earnestly shaped their lives according to it. Because they deeply appreciated the treasure of the Gospel they made diligent use of it. We hear: "They continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship..."; and again we're told that they continued with one accord in the temple and broke bread from house to house. Ever anew they assembled together to hear God's Word that their faith might be strengthened. It was a true expression of Christian fellowship. God has given His saving Word to His Church and to each individual member that His believers may nourish their souls with it. With this Word they are exhorted to minister to one another for their mutual edification. When they do so, this is an expression of Christian fellowship, Church Fellowship.

In entrusting His Gospel to His Church the Lord has also given it to them in the special form of the two Sacraments, Baptism and the Lord's Supper. It is the same Gospel message, yet with the seal of a visible token attached to it. In His great commission to His Church the Lord has bidden them to make disciples of all nations through Baptism as the washing of regeneration. When Christians jointly carry out this commission, this is an expression of Christian fellowship. On the evening before His death, Jesus ordained His Holy Supper for all of His present and future disciples with the precious promise that in, with, and under the bread and wine they would at every celebration receive His true body and blood. At this holy eating and drinking each of them would individually be assured in his faith: Jesus has willingly given His body into death for my salvation; He has shed His blood for the remission of my sins. Now I need not fear my sin and guilt and the wrath of God which I have deserved with them. I can be certain of my salvation, certain of God's grace and favor forever. But though this precious means of grace was meant for the believer's individual assurance of salvation, it was at the same time also to be an expression of the fellowship of faith. It was that when Jesus celebrated it with His disciples at its institution. He intended that it should continue to be that when it would be celebrated in the future, saying, "This do ye, as oft as ye drink it, in remembrance of me." When we are told of the Pentecost congregation that they continued steadfastly in the breaking of bread and that they broke bread from house to house, this has been commonly interpreted as referring to joint celebration of the Lord's Supper. Though this cannot be established with full certainty, we do know from I Corinthians 11 how the first Christians at Corinth jointly communed at the Lord's table in connection with their Agape feasts, which were in themselves an expression of Christian fellowship. The Apostle reminds the Corinthians (I Cor. 10:17): "We, being many, are one bread, one body: for we are all partakers of that one bread." Most appropriately, therefore, do we also for this reason call this sacred meal "Communion" and the guests at the Lord's table "communicants." When we approach the Lord's table, we bear testimony that we are of one faith with those who commune with us. We commonly refer to it as altar fellowship.

The Lord has also bidden His believers to proclaim His saving Word, entrusted to them, to those who have not yet heard it that such souls may be won to faith and become united with the body of Christ, His Church. He tells us: "Go ye into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature." It is the Holy Spirit who constrains us to carry out this privileged commission. On the evening before His death, Jesus told His disciples (John 15:26-27): "But when the Comforter is come, whom I will send unto you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, which proceedeth from the Father, he shall testify of me: and ye also shall bear witness, because ye have been with me from the beginning." Jesus promised that the Holy Spirit would testify of Him in and through his disciples. The Holy Spirit would bring to their remembrance all that their Savior had said and done before their eyes and ears. He would guide them to see it all in its true saving meaning. Thereupon the disciples would testify in the strength and power of the Holy Spirit and as His instruments. Witnessing for Christ is an expression of faith. It is still the Holy Spirit who constrains the believers to bear witness of the Lord. We,

indeed, have not been with Jesus from the beginning; but the Apostles were with Him for us. Through their inspired Word we have heard his gracious message and seen the mighty deeds with which He wrought our salvation. Through the Word of the Apostles the Holy Spirit has guided us into all saving truth and led us to embrace it with believing hearts. He has glorified Jesus before our souls as the perfect Redeemer. Through this gracious work the Holy Spirit now constrains us to bear witness of Jesus in word and deed. Like Peter and John, we cannot but speak to others of the great things that cheer our hearts (Acts 4:20). St. Paul expresses the same truth in II Cor. 4:13, saying: "We having the same spirit of faith, according as it is written, I believed, and therefore have I spoken; we also believe, and therefore speak." When Christians are conscious of the high position to which they have been raised by faith they will also be constrained to perform the task for which they have been raised to this position, even as we are told in I Peter 2:9: "But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light." The more fully we live in the Gospel, the more richly does the Holy Spirit prompt us to glorify our Savior before others with the testimony of our lips and our lives. When we do this jointly with others, this is an expression of Christian fellowship, Church Fellowship. It is fellowship in Church work.

Not only has the Lord given His Gospel in Word and Sacrament to His Church of believers and to each and every individual member, but He has also established the public ministry. As the ascended and exalted Lord, He gives gifts to His Church for the public ministration of these means of grace. Speaking of this in Ephesians 4:11-14, St. Paul says: "And gave some apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ..." In their God-given faith believers cherish and appreciate these gifts of the Lord. They long for the blessings that come to them through Christ's servants in their public ministration of the means of grace. Wherever, therefore, believers are found in the same locality, they will gather together in smaller and larger groups. We see it already in Acts 1:14,15, where we find a hundred and twenty disciples gathered together in prayer and supplication and listening to Peter's exposition of the Word of God. We see it again after Pentecost in the birth of the first congregation which continued steadfastly in the Apostles' doctrine and fellowship (Acts 2:41-47). Christians do not need to be commanded to form a congregation. Through their common faith the Holy Spirit gathers them together and moves them to establish the public ministry in their midst and to call public servants, such as pastors and teachers, to serve them with the means of grace. This is richly illustrated in the Book of Acts in the act of the founding of the first Christian congregations. When these public servants of the Word then minister to believers, and they on their part receive these ministrations, this is an expression of Christian fellowship, Church Fellowship. We commonly speak of it as pulpit fellowship.

Yet, even as the bond of faith which the Holy Spirit creates and sustains does not let individual believers stay aloof from one another but gathers them together in Christian congregations, so this same bond of a common faith also draws congregations together, so that they seek contact with each other and share with each other any special gifts which God may have given to one or the other congregation. We see this already in the first Christian congregations. Timothy of Derbe had a good report from the Churches at Lystra and Iconium, having worked and done creditable work in all of them. St. Paul had founded three congregations in Macedonia, some distance from one another. In his First Epistle to the Thessalonians, (I Thess. 4:9,10), Paul commends them for having practiced brotherly love "toward all the brethren which are in all Macedonia." There was at least one man who served all the congregations of Macedonia (II Cor. 8:1,2,18,19). They had enough of an organization to carry out a joint election, in which this particular man was chosen as a traveling companion of Paul, to represent these Churches in delivering the collection which they had gathered for the needy in Jerusalem. In connection with this collection Paul also says in II Cor. 9:2: "Achaia was ready a year ago." Thus we see that he thought of the three congregations of Athens, Corinth, and Cenchraea as a closely-knit fellowship in a common area. When Paul organized this great collection among the Greek Churches for the Church in Jerusalem, the chief purpose was thereby to cement two parts of the Church together, which stood in danger of

drifting apart. All these joint expressions of faith on the intercongregational level were an exercise of Christian fellowship. St. Paul stressed the divinely created bonds which united the Corinthians with the rest of the Church. When they were inclined to hide behind congregational independence, he rebuked them, saying: “What? came the Word of God out from you? or came it unto you only?” When Christian congregations outwardly accept one another as fellow believers, when they join hands in doing the work of the Lord, when they share servants of the Word, this is an expression of Christian fellowship. The association of congregations in the work of the Lord as we have it in our Synod, in our Districts, in our Conferences, their joint mission endeavors, their joint training of Christian workers, their joint supervision of Christian education—all these things are an expression of Christian fellowship. We need to remember that the specific forms in which believers group themselves together for the work of the Church, the specific forms in which they arrange for the use of the means of grace in public worship, the particular forms in which they establish the public ministry have not been prescribed by the Lord to his New Testament Church. The minute regulations of the old covenant have fallen away with the full revelation of God’s salvation. The Lord treats His New Testament children as His adult children. In and through their common faith the Holy Spirit leads them to create the adequate and wholesome forms which fit every circumstance, situation, and need.

Though our survey of the outward expressions of Church fellowship cannot possibly be exhaustive, we do want to touch upon one further manifestation, namely the vital manifestation of prayer.

Only a Christian can pray. The unbeliever, and that means every man as he is by nature, attempts to pray. Thus it need not surprise us that we find almost all people speaking about praying, that we find them engaged in what they consider to be prayer. This is due to the fact that every man has a natural knowledge of God, a consciousness of his accountability to God and of his dependence on God’s supreme wisdom and power. Yet in his sin-laden conscience man, as he is by nature, cannot approach God in true prayer. The very spirit in which he prays is an abomination in God’s sight. He vainly looks upon his prayer as a meritorious work or he thinks of prayer as a charm whereby he may gain some of the things he would like to have though his heart is estranged from God and he is otherwise little concerned about honoring and worshipping God. Of such prayers Jesus says that they are vain repetitions.

Through the Gospel message the Holy Spirit has, however, entered our hearts and led us to embrace the Savior’s pardon and with it the full gift of His salvation. Through this Gospel message the Holy Spirit gives us the assurance that God is our dear Father and now prompts us to speak to God as our dear Father. Paul says, (Gal. 4:6), “Because ye are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying Abba, Father.” This is Christian prayer, this alone is true prayer. In prayer the Christian speaks to his heavenly Father on the basis of the precious promises of His Word. All this communing, this talking with God, is done in Jesus’ name, in the faith that through Jesus, and through Jesus alone, God is our dear Father and we unworthy sinners His dear children. True prayer is an expression of Christian faith. When Christians, therefore, join in prayer, when they pray together, they express their common faith. Joint prayer is an expression of fellowship in faith. It is difficult to understand how with a Scriptural view of prayer anyone could think of making a distinction between joint prayers which are prayer fellowship and other joint prayers which are supposed to be something less than prayer fellowship. God would have His children come to Him together in prayer. Jesus Himself taught us this when He encouraged us to pray not “*my* Father, who art in heaven.” He wants us to remember that we are addressing the Father of a large family. God is our Father through Christ, but He is also the Father of many more children, who are our spiritual brothers and sisters. In our prayers God wants us to keep in mind that we stand before Him not merely as individual believers but as believers who are intimately joined together with all other believers here on earth and in heaven above as His dear family.

In this sense all of our prayers are really joint prayers. It is a blessed article of our faith that we know that all the children of God, though individually known to God alone, are constantly praying with and for us, that there is a blessed invisible fellowship of prayer going on constantly, in which the hearts of all believers are jointly raised to the throne of God’s grace in supplication and thanksgiving. In this sense we are engaged in joint prayer also with every child of God whom the Lord is preserving for Himself in the midst of errorist Church bodies, even in the church of the Pope, the very Antichrist. Yet in this sense also every other expression of faith



on the part of a Christian is at the same time an activity that he does together with all the other Christians as they are known to God alone, serving and benefiting them with his activity of faith, even as they also serve him with their expressions of faith. Thus our presentation on fellowship in a parenthetical remark under Point A.5 states “*Before God every activity of our faith is at the same time fellowship activity in the Communion of Saints.*” In support of this statement the following Bible passages are adduced: “I Cor. 12; Eph. 4:1-16; Rom. 12:1-8; II Tim. 2:19.” Yet this is not the activity of faith that we have in mind when we speak of church fellowship or Christian fellowship in our presentation. This pertains to the conscious selection of specific individuals for the joint expression and manifestation of a common faith. So also besides the invisible joint prayer which includes every Christian prayer the Savior also urges joint prayer in which we select specific individuals for the purpose of addressing a common plea to the Heavenly Father with them. This is prayer fellowship in the sense of church fellowship. In Matthew 18:19-21, Jesus says: “If two of you shall agree on earth as touching anything that ye shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.” We see such prayer fellowship in the mother Church in Jerusalem, of whom we are told that “they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in the breaking of bread and in *prayers.*” When Peter and John were released from prison, the believers at Jerusalem lifted up their voices to God with one accord (Acts 4:24). St. Paul’s Epistles are full of such joint prayers, prayers in which Paul and his associates pray for and with the Christians in the various congregations which he had gathered together through the Gospel, and prayers which these Christians on their part raised for and with the Apostle and his coworkers.

Now what is it that we especially want to note after having made this survey of the outward expressions of Christian faith? It is this that they are all manifestations of one and the same faith, and that as conscious and deliberate joint expressions they are all manifestations of fellowship in this common faith. We may classify these expressions of Christian fellowship according to the realm of activity in which they occur. Yet thereby they do not become so many different kinds of fellowship, each quite different from the other. It is not that pulpit fellowship involves something quite different from altar fellowship, and these again quite different from prayer fellowship. It is not that individuals may undertake to exercise fellowship in joint church work but that they are not yet sufficiently united to practice fellowship in worship. It is not that pulpit and altar fellowship require a certain high measure of unity, while prayer fellowship is quite possible among those who are less united. If these consciously undertaken joint manifestations of Christian faith are not a mere outward sham, then they are all expressions of one and the same fellowship of faith. This, however, is not a fellowship of man’s own making, but a gift and creation of the Holy Spirit.

**A.6** All this is expressed in Point A.6 of our presentation on church fellowship. It states: “We may classify these joint expressions of faith in various ways according to the particular realm of activity in which they occur, e.g., pulpit fellowship, altar fellowship, prayer fellowship, fellowship in worship, fellowship in church work, in missions, in Christian education, in Christian charity. Yet insofar as they are joint expressions of faith they are all essentially one and the same thing, and are all properly covered by a common designation, namely church fellowship.<sup>1</sup> Church fellowship should therefore be treated as a unit concept, covering every joint expression, manifestation, and demonstration of a common faith. Hence Scripture can give the general admonition “avoid them” when church fellowship is to cease, (Rom. 16:17). Hence Scripture sees an expression of church fellowship also in giving the right hand of fellowship (Gal. 2:9), and in greeting one another with the fraternal kiss (Rom. 16:16); on the other hand, it points out that a withholding of church fellowship may also be indicated by not extending a fraternal welcome to errorists and by not bidding them God speed (II John 10,11; Cf. III John 5-8).”

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<sup>1</sup> *Church fellowship* in itself is not a Biblical term. That, however, which we label as church Fellowship is Biblical, is set forth by Scripture. In the past not only church fellowship but various other expressions have been used to designate it. What we are interested in in this first part of the essay is not the term church fellowship but in the Scriptural truths which we cover with this term, namely the joint manifestations, expressions and demonstrations of the common faith in which Christians on the basis of their confession find themselves to be united. We are interested in the truth that Scripture handles all these expressions as being essentially the same and then bids us also to handle them in this way, no matter what we call them.

## II

This takes us to the second part of our Synod's presentation of the Scriptural principles of church fellowship. It is marked as *B* and reads: "*What principles Scripture teaches for the exercise of such church fellowship.*" This part is subdivided in Arabic points 1 to 5.

**B.1 B.1** states: "*In selecting specific individuals or groups for a joint expression of faith we can do this only on the basis of their confession. It would be presumptuous on our part to attempt to recognize Christians on the basis of the personal faith in their hearts* (II Tim. 2:19; Rom. 10:10; I John 4:1-3; I Sam. 16:7)."

Who are those with whom God would have us jointly express our faith? With whom would He have us engage in a joint prayer? With whom are we to join in worship? With whom will we commune at the Lord's Table? With whom will we join hands to spread the Gospel among men? The foregoing discussion, under Point A, did give us one obvious answer to all these questions, namely the answer: With Christians. All these activities are expressions of Christian faith, and only with Christians are we united in a common faith. Yet this answer does not settle our question. It only raises a new one. Whom can we select and acknowledge as Christian brethren? Faith is a matter of the heart and as such recognizable only by God. "The Lord knoweth them that are His" (II Tim. 2:19)." Since it is the Lord who has set His heart upon His believers and hence made them His own, and since it is He who also keeps them as His own, He really alone knows who His own, the members of His Church, are. It would be presumptuous on our part to try to recognize Christians on the basis of the personal faith in their hearts, "Man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart" (I Sam. 16:7). Since we cannot probe the heart, God would have us deal with men on the basis of the concession that they make concerning the attitude of their heart. Paul says (Rom. 10:10): "For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation." We are to accept every confession of faith as a sincere expression of the real attitude of the heart. In case a clash appears between the confession by mouth and the confession by deed, we accept the confession by deed in preference to the confession by mouth, since deeds speak louder than words.

St. John writes (I John 4:1-3): "Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world. Hereby know ye the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God." Here the Apostle bids his Christian readers, and that includes us, to discern and recognize the spirit that is in a man on the basis of his confession. Scripture, of course, tells us that there will be hypocrites, that the true attitude of the heart will not always correspond with the confession which men make. Yet that is beyond our responsibility. God will at His own time deal with hypocrites.

Yet what kind of confession are we to look for in order to recognize and acknowledge anyone as a Christian brother for a joint expression of faith, for a practice of church fellowship? Our presentation answers this question under *B.2* stating: "*A Christian confession of faith is in principle always a confession to the entire word of God. The denial, adulteration, or suppression of any word of God does not stem from faith but from unbelief.*" In John 8:31 Jesus says, "If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed; and ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." Also in His great commission to make disciples of all nations He bids us to teach them to observe all things whatsoever He has commanded us. On the other hand, he earnestly forbids His disciples to add to or subtract something from His Word (Matt. 5:19): "Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven." In I Peter 4:11, Christians are told: "If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God." In Jeremiah 23:28,31 we hear: "The prophet that hath a dream, let him tell a dream; and he that hath my word, let him speak my word faithfully... Behold, I am against the prophets, saith the Lord, that use their tongues, and say, He saith." In Deut. 4:2 we hear very clearly: "Ye shall not add unto the word which I command you, neither shall ye diminish ought from it, that ye may keep the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you." We also have a similar statement in the final book of the New Testament (Rev. 22:18,19): "For

I testify unto every man that heareth the words of the prophecy of this book, If any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book: and if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and from the things which are written in his book.” Hence *B.2* of our presentation goes on to say: “*We recognize and acknowledge as Christian brethren those who profess faith in Christ as their Savior and with this profession embrace and accept His entire Word.*” This is not a new thought in the Synodical Conference. It was very clearly expressed in the Theses on Open Questions by Dr. Walther, on the basis of which the Wisconsin and Missouri Synods established fellowship in 1869. To remind us of this, *B.2* of our presentation refers to Thesis 7 and quotes it in full: “*No man has the privilege, and to no man may the privilege be granted to believe and to teach otherwise than God has revealed in His Word, no matter whether it pertains to primary or secondary fundamental articles of faith, to fundamental or nonfundamental doctrines, to matters of faith or of practice, to historical items or other matters subject to the light of reason, to important or seemingly unimportant matters.*”

Yet in order to understand properly what we have just said concerning a truly Christian confession of faith as the basis and prerequisite for Christian fellowship we need to distinguish with Scripture between an adherent of false doctrine or practice and a weak brother. Hence *B.3* of our presentation goes on to say: “*actually, however, the faith of Christians and its manifestations are marked by many imperfections, either in the grasp and understanding of Scriptural truths, or in the matter of turning these truths to full account in their lives. We are all weak in one way or another.*” Weakness of one kind or another is nothing unusual among Christians. Also St. Paul says of himself: “Plot as though I had already attained, either were already perfect: but I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus” (Phil. 3:12). Weakness in understanding God’s truths and in turning these truths to full account in their Christian lives is presupposed by Paul’s prayer for the Ephesians in Chapter 3:16,18 where he prays that they may grow in Christian wisdom and understanding and become more fully rooted and grounded in love. The same presupposition of weakness among Christians underlies the apostolic admonition in I Thess. 5:14: “Warn them that are unruly, comfort the feebleminded, support the weak, be patient toward all men.” Paul points out that it is the very purpose of the gifts which the Lord gives to His Church that through their ministration of the Word the many weaknesses may be overcome which seek to undermine the blessed unity of the Church (Eph. 4:1,16). Through the Word the Church is to be edified “that we henceforth be no more children tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine by the sleight of men; and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive.” Both Heb. 5:12 and I Peter 2:2 speak of Christians who first have to be instructed in the milk of God’s Word and who are not even ready as yet for the strong meat of God’s truth. All this presupposes that there will be much weakness of faith and Christian understanding in the Church. Through the imputed righteousness of Christ His believers are indeed all perfect in God’s sight. Yet in its life Christ’s Church here on earth is at the same time a congregation of spiritual convalescents, under the constant care of their heavenly physician. Compare Walther’s Thesis 5: “*The Church militant must indeed aim at and strive for absolute unity of faith and doctrine, but it never will attain a higher degree of unity than a fundamental one.*” Any false conclusion from this Thesis is, however, immediately corrected by a consideration of Thesis 10, which says: “From the fact that the Church militant cannot attain a higher degree of unity than a fundamental one, it does not follow that any error against the Word of God may be granted equal rights in the Church with the truth, nor that it may be tolerated.” Yet in view of what Scripture does say about weakness of faith in all the members of the Church our presentation very correctly says in *B.4*: “*Weakness of faith is in itself not a reason for terminating church fellowship, but rather an inducement for practicing it vigorously to help one another in overcoming our individual weaknesses. In precept and example Scripture abounds with exhortations to pay our full debt of love toward the weak.*” This is then unfolded under four sub-points, a through d. A calls our attention to the general exhortations such as Gal. 6:1,3: “Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted. Bear ye one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. For if a man think himself to be something, when he is

nothing, he deceiveth himself.” The other general exhortations are the familiar ones in Eph. 4:1,16, and Matt. 18:15,17.

4.b lists “*weakness in laying hold of God’s promises in a firm trust,*” and then specially quotes Matt. 6:25,34: In the Gospels we frequently hear Jesus warning, rebuking, chiding His disciples for being of “little faith.” They gave way to anxious worries and cares about their earthly needs. In the midst of a storm at sea they were on the verge of giving way to despair. Their weakness of faith consisted in this that they showed a lack of trust in God’s gracious and provident care. It was not, however, that in principle they denied God’s fatherly care. It was not that they rejected the Savior’s testimony that through Him they had full access to God’s fatherly love. Their weakness rather consisted in this that they were not yet quite able to live up to these truths. The hand of faith with which they embraced and held them was still feeble. We all understand this weakness, for if we were wholly free from it we would not be troubled with any worries and cares. Such weakness of faith does not prevent expressions of Christian fellowship. It rather calls for them. Consider how Jesus dealt with His disciples when symptoms of little faith showed themselves. He rebuked them sharply, blamed them for having a Gentile mind. But He also instructed them with all patience and tenderness. In their worries and cares He lifted up their hearts by calling their attention to God’s providence in nature and then reminding them that they were more than the birds of the air and the lilies of the field in God’s eyes. In their fearfulness during the storm at sea, He with a searching question called to their remembrance the rich experience of His Savior’s love and power which they had been enjoying, which left no room for fear. Then He granted them a new manifestation of His grace and power in rebuking wind and sea before their eyes. The Lord is not pleased to see our faith weak. For a weak faith is in constant danger of dying out altogether and thus of losing the rich blessing which it still enjoys. Yet the Lord recognized also those of weak faith as His believers; and we will want to do likewise. With Him we are not to break the bruised reed or quench the smoking flax but lovingly to make every effort to restore them to healthy vigor. Weak brethren distinguish themselves from scoffers and unbelievers in their willingness to receive spiritual help and instruction. Their attitude will be that of the father of the lunatic in the Gospel who prayed (Mark 9:24): “Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief.” 4.c points to another type of weakness in Christians which need not be a reason for terminating fellowship: “*Weakness with reference to adiaphora in enjoying fully the liberty wherewith Christ has made us free.*” Rom. 1 and I Cor. 8 and 9 treat of this type of weakness which pertained to the use of adiaphora, things neither commanded nor forbidden in God’s Word. Also here as in all points of Christian life, doctrine was involved, but not in the sense that the weak brother did not know or understand the pertinent truths. The problem rather lay in this that the conscience of the weak brother had not yet risen to the level of his understanding. This prevented him from enjoying to the fullest extent the liberty wherewith Christ has made us free.

At Rome it was particularly the matter of eating meat. Both those who had no scruples about eating meat and those who were still inwardly disturbed about it were sincerely devoted in faith to their Savior. Likewise did they have this in common that they realized that as far as their relation to Christ and the enjoyment of His salvation was concerned all foods were alike. Yet pagan Rome was notorious for its gluttony, and the newly-converted Christians very properly had an abhorrence for such excesses. As a result some of the Christians still felt inwardly disturbed when they partook of the same food with which these gluttonous excesses were practiced. Paul warns such a weak brother not to judge those who ate meat without any scruples. For if he imposed his mode of living on others, demanding and requiring it, he would cease to be a weak brother; he would be on the way of becoming a schismatic and a heretic. At the same time the Apostle exhorted the brethren whose conscience was freed from such needless scruples: “Him that is weak in the faith receive ye, but not to doubtful disputations.” Any unwillingness to treat him still as a brother would be tantamount to despising him, it would mean refusing to receive him and to help him in love. In true brotherly love toward the weak brother they were to realize that they could not serve him with doubtful disputations, with overbearing argument, with condescending instruction. What he needed was to be cheered anew with the glorious liberty wherewith Christ has made us free that he might grasp its full implications and overcome his inner uneasiness. In the meantime they were to be very careful in their own use of this liberty that through their actions the weak

brother would not be shaken in his faith or be tempted to do something concerning which his conscience was still not free.

It is particularly this fast point which St. Paul felt a need of stressing in a similar situation at Corinth. Here spiritual weakness cropped up in connection with eating the leftovers from idol sacrifices which were consumed at public feasts and sold on the market. Through the Gospel all the Corinthian Christians had been brought to a blessed faith in the one true God and His grace in Christ Jesus. In this faith they all knew that the pagan idols did not really exist and wanted to have no further part in the worship accorded to these vanities. Yet in spite of this knowledge some were still weak in this respect that when it came to eating the leftovers from such idol sacrifices they could not rid themselves of the feeling that this meat was somehow contaminated through its connection with the parts actually sacrificed in the worship of idols. They again needed understanding love until the Gospel had dissolved this uneasiness for them. St. Paul earnestly warned their brethren not to hinder this by an inconsiderate use of their liberty. It would be a shameful unbrotherly abuse of their Christian liberty, if by eating such meat, though untroubled in their own conscience, they would induce the weak brother to eat of it with a troubled conscience, whereby his bond with his Savior would be disturbed. That they might learn true brotherly love through his own example, Paul then showed how he, being free from all men, made himself a servant unto all that he might win the more. He says, for example: "To the weak became I as weak, that I might gain the weak: I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some." These words have been grossly misunderstood and abused. Becoming all things to all does not mean taking liberties with the Word of God, adapting it to what men may be willing and ready to hear, taking off some of the sharp edges of the Law, making the Gospel less of an offense to them, or in general making some compromises and concessions on individual points of God's message. It is not for us to streamline God's Word into an effective message for our day. Paul does not mean that he pretended to be weak; he actually made their problems his own and fought their battles in his own heart. In this way he cultivated the ability to deal with the weak on their own level and thus to win them. In Gal. 1:6 he uses the figure of placing oneself under the other man's burden, exhorting: "Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ." It is in this way that we are to become all things to all men in order that by all means some might be saved. It is in this way that the Lord would have all of us pay our debt of love to the weak.

Before we close our consideration of this type of weakness which need not terminate fellowship, we still want to note a very important point. Both at Rome and at Corinth St. Paul clearly established which Christians were in the strong and which in the weak position. We see this from Rom. 14:17-23 and I Cor. 6:12; 10:23,25. Only thus could St. Paul pay his debt of love to those involved in this particular weakness within the Christian fellowship. If we are to pay our debt of love to those who are weak with reference to adiaphora within our Christian fellowship, it also must be clearly established who holds the position of the weak and who holds the position of the strong. It would be an impossible situation if each party considered itself the strong in faith and the other the weak. That would lead to confusion. Hence 4.c of our presentation includes the significant statement: "*The public confession of any church must establish, of course, on the basis of Scripture, which things are adiaphora so that it may be evident who are the weak and who are the strong.*"

4.d lists a final type of weakness in fellow Christians which fraternal love will first of all seek to overcome. The point reads: "*Weakness in understanding God's truth, and involvement in error. Acts. 1:6; Galatians (Judaizing error); Colossians (Jewish-Gnostic error); I Cor. 15; I Thess. 4:10-12,14; II Thess. 3:6,14,15; Acts 15:5,6,22,25. Note how in all these cases Paul patiently built up the weak faith of these Christians with the Gospel to give them strength to overcome the error that had affected them.*"

*Acts 1:6.* Even on the day that Jesus ascended into heaven the Apostles still showed a woeful ignorance as to the nature of Christ's kingdom, when they asked: "Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom of Israel?" In patient love Jesus corrected, instructed, and strengthened them as weak disciples. In His name we are to deal in a similar manner with all whom in their willingness to receive correction and instruction we may still regard as weak brethren. It is particularly through the apostle Paul that the Lord gives us rich guidance in doing this.

*Galatians* (Judaizing error). The Galatian congregations which Paul had founded were troubled by Judaizers, who taught that in order to enjoy the salvation won for them by Christ, they as believers still needed to submit to circumcision and observe the Mosaic festivals. The very heart of the Gospel was at stake. The error was not met properly by the Galatian Christians. Many were misled and confused by the enticing words of these Judaizers. Yet we note that Paul did not immediately sever fraternal relations with them. He indeed used very strong language against the seducers, a matter which we will have reason to consider later. The Galatians, however, who had shown themselves weak, he still treated as brethren, as weak brethren to be sure, but nevertheless as brethren. He repeatedly addressed them with this name of endearment in the course of his epistle. He still addressed this group of congregations as Churches and thereby assured them that all the glorious things which lie in that name still applied also to them.

*Colossians* (Jewish-Gnostic error). Paul dealt similarly with the Christians at Colossae, who had been troubled by a peculiar error, partly Jewish, partly Gnostic. As he came to their assistance by writing an epistle to them, he still addressed them as saints and faithful brethren in Christ. In both cases he wrote an entire epistle to these brethren who were weak in doctrine. Instead of isolating their error and refuting it directly with a number of arguments, which might have involved him in doubtful disputations, Paul at great length built up the weak faith of these Christians in Christ, their only and all-sufficient Savior, showing them that their error conflicted with the place of Christ in God's plan of salvation, and thus giving them strength and understanding to overcome the error that had affected them.

In two other cases the Apostle Paul devoted an individual chapter to an error that was troubling weak brethren. *I Cor. 15*: At Corinth current Epicurean philosophy had troubled some of the Corinthians, rousing doubts concerning the resurrection of the dead. Paul showed them the importance of the resurrection, showed them that denying a resurrection of the believers would be tantamount to denying Christ's resurrection. He explained what may be known about the resurrection, yet he instructed them as brethren, calling them that three times in the chapter. When those who have been our brethren show a lack of Christian understanding or become enmeshed in error, we too, are to treat them as weak brethren as long as we still have reason to assume that they are ready to receive correction and instruction. We shall make every effort to build them up in their faith that they may overcome their error. In much the same way the Lord would also have us deal with brethren who have deviated from Christian life. We are first of all to deal with them as weak brethren. Jesus says: "Moreover, if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone; if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother." The Apostle Paul writes: "Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness, considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted."

*I Thess. 4: especially 10 to 12, 14*: At Thessalonica many were not clear on the doctrine concerning Christ's return for judgment, His glorious appearance, which they assumed to be close at hand. The Apostle strengthened them by exhorting them, that instead of getting excited about the nearness of Christ's return, "they should rather be on guard against the terrible apostasy which Satan would cause through the advent of Anti-Christ, "who would be God's Judgment upon the Christians in their apathy toward the saving truth of the Gospel. Then he comforted them and strengthened them by pointing to their election. He still prayed for them and asks them to pray for him and his co-workers.

*II Thess. 3:6, 14, 15*. From II Thessalonians, we see how far Paul was willing to go in his patient efforts of overcoming an involvement in error and false practice. In spite of Paul's instruction and admonition some of the members of this church would not drop their false opinions concerning the nearness of Christ's return for judgment and began to act on their false assumptions in that they ceased to work. Note that Paul does not consider it a minor point of doctrine and life. When Paul sent his first epistle to the Thessalonians this disorderliness had already begun so that he wrote: "We beseech you, brethren...that ye study to be quiet and to do your own business, and to work with your own hands, as we commanded you; that ye may walk honestly toward them that are without, and that ye may have lack of nothing." He likewise urged: "We beseech you, brethren, warn them that are unruly..." Yet these busybodies had not taken Paul's instruction and admonition to heart, and the disorderly conduct had seemingly spread. In his second epistle Paul was therefore constrained to write: "Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourself from

every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the traditions which he received of us,” and furthermore: “And if any man obey not our word by this epistle, note that man, and have no company with him, that he may be ashamed. Yet count him not as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother.” Even now Paul does not recommend a complete break of fellowship relations. He is still ready to believe that the offenders are not hardened in their course, for he entertains the hope that they may still be brought to blush in penitent shame when they are given to realize how serious their brethren consider their disorderly conduct. Yet their fellowship is to be restricted now; final brotherly admonition is to be administered through the act of withdrawing from these offenders, through the act of no longer being utterly identified with them in the sight of others. Such withdrawal is to call his brotherly standing into question, so that he may realize that if he persists the congregation will be compelled to separate itself completely and conclusively from him, no longer considering him a Christian brother. It should be borne in mind that in these Thessalonian passages we do not have a general exhortation but counsel, practical counsel for handling a very specific disciplinary case. Naturally, it gives guidance for the handling of similar cases; yet not all cases can be handled in quite the same way.

Before closing Point *B.4* on weakness of faith our presentation bids us to compare Walther’s theses 2, 3, 4, and 8. The first three theses remind us that our Synodical fathers were mindful of the truths set forth under *B.4*. Thesis 8 again guards against their abuse.

*Thesis II.* The error of an individual member of the Church even against a clear Word of God does not involve immediately his actual forfeiture of church fellowship, nor of the association of brethren and colleagues.

*Thesis III.* Even if an open error against the Word of God has infected a whole church body, this does not in itself make that church body a false church, a body with which an orthodox Christian or the orthodox church would abruptly have to sever relations.

*Thesis IV.* A Christian may be so weak in understanding that he cannot grasp, even in a case of a fundamental article of the second order, that an error which he holds is contrary to the Scriptures. Because of his ignorance he may also continue in his error, without thereby making it necessary for the orthodox church to exclude him.

*Thesis VIII.* The Church must take steps against any deviation from the doctrine of the Word of God, whether this be done by teachers or by so-called laymen, by individuals or by entire church bodies.

In the efforts of which Walther speaks in Thesis 8 we may also come to a point when we must realize that we are no longer dealing with weak brethren.

This leads us to our final consideration in setting forth the Scriptural principles concerning church fellowship, namely, Point *B.5*.

**B.5** *Persistent adherence to false doctrine and practice calls for termination of church fellowship.* This Point *B.5* is sub-divided a, b, and c.

Point *5.a* reads: “*We cannot continue to recognize and treat anyone as a Christian brother who in spite of all brotherly admonition impenitently clings to a sin. His and our own spiritual welfare calls for termination of church fellowship* (Matt. 18:17; I Cor. 5:1-6). (Excommunication)”

*In Matt. 18* the Lord Jesus very clearly teaches us that we cannot continue to treat anyone as a brother who in spite of earnest brotherly admonition clings to a sin. We have already heard what the Lord would have us do when a brother falls into sin. He who is a witness of his sin shall want to swing into action at once to save him. If his brotherly admonition remains unsuccessful, the Lord would have him call in the help of one or two brethren. Even if they are unable to win the brother they will not yet despair in their brotherly concern and effort. The Lord bids them to tell the Church, the entire company of believers with whom the erring brother has been associated, doing so in the hope that through the unanimous testimony of his fellow Christians his heart may be won to repentance. Yet if he rejects also the Word of God which they have brought to him, he has with his action placed himself outside of Christ’s Church. He is to be told that he has manifested himself as a heathen

man and a publican, that he has broken the bond which united him with Christ and His spiritual body of believers. No further expression of fellowship is possible. This pronouncement of judgment is in itself an action born out of love, the only action of love still possible under the circumstances. It is meant to shock the sinner into a realization of what his impenitence really involves.

*I Cor. 5:1-6:* Paul's epistles to the *Corinthians* give us an illustration of such an effect. A member in this congregation was living in a sin of incest, offensive even to heathen. The sad thing here was that the members of the congregation were tolerant and indifferent about it. They had failed to function as true brethren. Since this fornicator now clung to his sin, abetted by their neglect, to deliver him unto Satan was all that was left for the Corinthians to do. Paul urged it, practically formulating the resolution of excommunication for them, in order that this man's Old Adam might be crucified and his spirit be saved, if possible, in the day of the Lord Jesus. Also their own spiritual welfare demanded such action. Paul warned: "Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump?" In his second epistle Paul is able to allude to the happy outcome. The congregation had taken the apostle's rebuke to heart and had dealt according to his instruction. As a result, the sinner had repented, and Paul could now urge the Corinthians to receive him anew as their brother.

With equal clarity the Lord tells us likewise in His Word that we can no longer recognize and treat those as brethren who in spite of earnest admonition persistently cling to an error in doctrine, who demand recognition and toleration for their error and make propaganda for it. Any expression of Christian fellowship with them is impossible.

*5.b "We can no longer recognize and treat as Christian brethren those who in spite of patient admonition persistently adhere to an error in doctrine or practice, demand recognition for their error, and make propaganda for it (Gal. 1:8,9; 5:9; Matt. 7:15-19; 16:6; II Tim. 2:17-19; II John 9-11; Rom. 16:17,18). If the error does not overthrow the foundation of saving faith, the termination of fellowship is not to be construed as an excommunication. Moreover an excommunication can only apply to an individual, not to a congregation or larger church group.*

*"The "avoid them" of Rom. 16:17,18 excludes any contact that would be an acknowledgment and manifestation of church fellowship; it calls for a cessation of every further joint expression of faith. Cf. I Cor. 5:9-11. Compare Walther's Theses 9 and 10."*

Gal 1:9: What is required over against persistent errorists is shown to us very clearly at the hand of Paul's treatment of the Judaizers who had come to the congregations in Galatia. It has already been pointed out that these men taught that in order to enjoy the salvation won by Christ believers still needed to be circumcised and observe the Mosaic festivals.

In Acts 15 we hear how Paul already had to face this error and oppose it when certain men of Judea came to Antioch in Syria and troubled the church with it there. As a result the Antioch congregation sent Paul and Barnabas to discuss this error with the Apostles and elders at Jerusalem. We are told that when this council was held in the midst of the congregation at Jerusalem, certain of the sect of Pharisees which believed openly voiced the opinion concerning Gentile Christians "that it was needful to circumcise them and to command them to keep the Law of Moses." Note that St. Luke speaks of these people as standing in faith. Did the apostles and the rest of the church immediately withdraw from them when they voiced this error? No, we are told that the Apostles and elders came together to consider the matter. The result was that after a frank discussion on the basis of God's Word this erroneous idea was unanimously rejected by all present, including those who had previously held to it because they had not yet thrown off all of their former Pharisaic notions. Yet they did not persist in their error when corrected by God's Word, and thus the fellowship was not broken.

It was different with the persistent errorists who came to the Galatian congregations. The apostles still treated the Galatians, who were troubled and misled by their false teachings, as weak brethren, seeking to build them up anew in their faith that they might overcome the error which has affected them. But to the Judaizers who deliberately opposed his Gospel Paul accorded quite a different treatment. In strong terms he rejected any connection with them, saying (*Gal. 1:8,9*): "If any man preach any other Gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed." And again, *Gal. 5:9*: "I would they were even cut off which trouble you." The



thought of practicing Christian fellowship with them was out of the question. In this Paul was merely following in the footsteps of Christ his Lord.

*Matt. 7:15-19:* Jesus openly opposed and denounced the Pharisees who taught men to seek God's favor by trusting in their own works. He likewise testified against the Sadducees, who denied a resurrection and the existence of angels. Very earnestly the Lord warned His disciples: "Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees." Also in a very general way Jesus urged: "Beware of false prophets which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves." False prophets are those who in their teaching deviate from God's Word, demand recognition for their errors, seek to spread them, and win adherents for them. False prophets come to us; they are not sent by God, for it is His desire that nothing but His pure Word be proclaimed to us. Often enough they are themselves deceived by their own sheep's clothing. Yet they are in reality "ravening wolves." They are that whether they are conscious of their false teaching or not. They threaten Christ's flock, His believers, with harm and destruction. Jesus would have us know that it is not a light and harmless thing to deviate from His Word. False doctrine undermines, breaks down, and destroys spiritual life. That the Lord in His grace often prevents it from becoming fatal, even in the false prophets themselves, is quite beside the point. In His Savior's love the Lord is seeking to preserve His precious Word for us and others, His Word which He has given to us as the bread of life, whereby alone faith is created nourished, and preserved unto eternal life. Adulterate the Word by omitting something, changing something, adding something, or compromising any part of it, and faith is endangered. Hence the Savior bids us to beware of false prophets, bids us to detect them, to recognize them for what they are, to be on guard against them, to have no fellowship with them, lest we suffer spiritual harm through their destructive activity. Whether their erroneous message is original with them, or whether they are peddling someone else's error, makes very little difference as long as they hold to it and persist in spreading it.

*Rom. 16:17,18:* We are all very familiar with the general exhortation which the Apostle Paul voices in the final chapter of Romans: "Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them." Note the solemn preface "Now I beseech you, brethren," with which Paul introduces the plea that the Roman Christians should take note of those who are causing divisions and offenses in opposition to the doctrine which had been taught to them. They had been properly instructed in Christian truth. They had again been taught by Paul in this very epistle addressed to them, in which he had veritably presented a thorough and connected discussion of the entire Christian doctrine. Thus they were well able to keep a watchful eye on anyone who deviated from the doctrine which they had learned. Paul earnestly urged them to do so. Also here Paul is not thinking of anyone who might casually make an erroneous doctrinal statement. No, he had such in mind as cling to their error and with it create divisions. He uses a present participle to bring out the fact that it is something which those against whom he is warning practice habitually. These they are to avoid, and that means cease all Christian fellowshiping with them. That he does not mean social contact or any of the other ordinary contacts of life, should be evident from what he told the Corinthians when they misunderstood his exhortation that they should have no company with fornicators. In *I Cor. 5:9-11* Paul wrote: "Yet not altogether with fornicators of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or with idolaters; for then must ye needs go out of this world." No Paul, when speaking of avoiding errorists, means any contact which would be an acknowledgment and expression of fellowship.

Those who question our application of this inspired exhortation to all who persistently deviate from any teaching of God's Word are apt to complain that we stress this seventeenth verse of Romans 16 but fail to do justice to the following verse, which goes on to say: "For they that are such serve not our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly; and by good words and fair speeches deceive the hearts of the simple." In applying verse 17 to all persistent errorists we have no thought of slighting this following verse. We will say, however, that it does not give a description by which Paul's bidding to mark and to avoid is restricted only to a certain class of those who cause divisions and offense contrary to true doctrine. It doesn't serve the purpose of telling us whom we are to mark and avoid. It sets before us God's own appraisal and judgment upon all those whom He would have us avoid, namely upon all persistent errorists. God would have us know that in the matter of clinging to error and disseminating it they are taking orders from their own heart, from their own desires—that is what belly means

here—instead of serving the Lord Jesus, whether they are fully conscious of it or not. We cannot fellowship with them as though ours and theirs were a common cause. All who follow such an errorist and make his confession their own help to spread it. They, too, make it impossible for us to recognize them as Christian brethren.

*II John 9-11:* St. John, the apostle of brotherly love, gives the same counsel and instruction in his inspired epistle. John says: “Whosoever transgresseth, and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God. He that abideth in the doctrine of Christ, he hath both the Father and the Son. If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house, neither bid him God speed: for he that biddeth him God speed is partaker of his evil deeds.”

This exhortation of St. John, rather than being a general exhortation, was called forth by a rather specific class of errorists. They were seemingly the same errorists mentioned in St. John’s first epistle (4:1-3), followers of Cerinthus, though taught that Jesus was the natural Son of Joseph and Mary, and that the Christ eon had descended on Jesus at His baptism but left Him before His great passion. Yet this denial of Christ’s incarnation involved also the gracious purpose, the blessed fruit, the glorious outcome of Christ’s entrance into the flesh. The specific errorists involved therefore overthrew the foundation of Christian faith. Thus John says of such an errorist that he “hath not God.”

Yet there is nothing to indicate that the withholding of fellowship to which St. John exhorts is to be restricted to the type of errorist of whom he happened to have a special occasion to speak. The reason adduced for withholding such fellowship, “For he that biddeth him God speed is partaker of his evil deeds,” would apply equally well to any persistent errorist. Cf. I Tim. 5:22.

When St. John warns against receiving such a man into one’s house and of bidding him God speed, he does not have an ordinary reception and a civil greeting in mind, such as we properly accord to all men, but a reception and greeting which would be understood as an acknowledgment of him as a Christian brother, in other words as an expression of Church fellowship. We are again reminded that Church fellowship is a unit concept. Its full implications are involved even when it is being expressed with a greeting and with a reception into one’s house.

*II Tim. 2:17-19:* “And their word will eat as doth a canker: of whom is Hymenaeus and Philetus; who concerning the truth have erred, saying that the resurrection is past already; and overthrow the faith of some. Nevertheless the foundation of God standeth sure, having this seal, The Lord knoweth them that are his. And, Let every one that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity.”

Paul says of the false teaching of Hymenaeus and Philetus, “Their word will eat as doth a canker.” Tolerating errorists involves us in the danger of losing the Word of God entirely. By bidding us to withhold fellowship from the adherents of false doctrine, the Lord is seeking to preserve His precious Word for us and others, His Word which He has given to us as the Bread of Life, whereby alone faith is created, nourished, and preserved unto eternal life.

That also our Synodical fathers saw clearly what God asks of us with respect to persistent errorists is evident from Walther’s theses 9 and 10.

*Thesis IX.* Such members as willfully persist in deviating from the Word of God, no matter what question it may concern, must be excluded.

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

Point 5.c reads: “*Those who practice church fellowship with persistent errorists are partakers of their evil deeds (II John 11).*” John says, “For he that biddeth him God speed is partaker of his evil deeds.” In more than one way will he who fellowships with an adherent of false doctrine be sharing in his evil deeds. He sins against the Lord, being indifferent to His Word. He sins against the church, for he gives offense to its members by leading them to believe that one doctrine is as good as another, thus making them indifferent. He sins against

the false teachers by strengthening them in their convictions that they possess the truth, instead of helping them by testifying against their error in all meekness. He sins against his own soul, because he exposes himself to the corrupting influence of error, which is never static but spreads (Cf. C.A. Hardt, *Christian Fellowship*, C.T.M., XVI, p. 520).

On the basis of all these points our Wisconsin Synod presentation of the principles of church fellowship closes with the following statements:

*From all of this we see that in the matter of the outward expression of Christian fellowship, the exercise of church fellowship, particularly two Christian principles need to direct us, the great debt of love which the Lord would have us pay to the weak brother, and His clear injunction (also flowing out of love) to avoid those who adhere to false doctrine and all who make themselves partakers of their evil deeds. Conscientious recognition of both principles will lead to an evangelical practice also in facing many difficult situations that confront us, situations which properly lie in the field of casuistry.*

*On the basis of the foregoing we find it to be an untenable position:*

- A. *To distinguish between joint prayer which is acknowledged to be an expression of church fellowship and an occasional joint prayer which purports to be something short of church fellowship;*
- B. *To designate certain non-fundamental doctrines as not being divisive of church fellowship in their very nature;*
- C. *To envision fellowship relations (in a congregation, in a Church body, in a Church federation, in a Church agency, in a cooperative Church activity) like so many steps of a ladder, each requiring a gradually increasing or decreasing measure of unity in doctrine and practice.*

Carl Lawrenz

## Church Fellowship

[This is the presentation of our Wisconsin Synod Union Committee, discussed by the Joint Union Committees of the Synodical Conference.]

Church fellowship is every joint expression, manifestation, and demonstration of the common faith in which Christians, on the basis of their confession find themselves to be united with one another.

- A. How Scripture leads us to this concept of church fellowship.
1. Through faith in Christ the Holy Spirit unites us with our God and Savior (Gal. 3:26; 4:6; I John 3:1).
  2. This Spirit-wrought faith at the same time unites us in an intimate bond with all other believers (I John 1:3; Eph. 4:4-6; John 17:20,21). Compare also the many striking metaphors emphasizing the unity of the Church, e.g., the body of Christ, the temple of God.
  3. Faith as spiritual life invariably expresses itself in activity which is spiritual in nature, yet outwardly manifest, e.g., in the use of the means of grace, in prayer, in praise and worship, in appreciative use of the “gifts” of the Lord to the Church, in Christian testimony, in furthering the cause of the Gospel, in deeds of Christian love (John 8:47; Gal. 4:6; Eph. 4:11-14; Acts 4:20; II Cor. 4:13; I Pet. 2:9; Gal. 2:9; 5:6).
  4. It is God the Holy Ghost who leads us to express and manifest in activity the faith which He works and sustains in our hearts through the Gospel (Gal. 4:6; John 15:26,27; John 7:38,39; Acts 1:8; Eph. 2:10).
  5. Through the bond of faith in which He unites us with all Christians the Holy Spirit also leads us to express and manifest our faith jointly with fellow Christians according to opportunity: as smaller and larger groups (Acts 1:14,15; 2:41-47; Gal. 2:9); as congregations with other congregations (Acts 15; I Thess. 4:9,10; II Cor. 8:1,2,18,19; II Cor. 9:2). (Before God every activity of our faith is at the same time fellowship activity in the communion of saints [I Cor. 12; Eph. 4:1-16; Rom. 12:1-8; II Tim. 2:19]).
  6. We may classify these joint expressions of faith in various ways according to the particular realm of activity in which they occur, e.g., pulpit fellowship, altar fellowship, prayer fellowship, fellowship in worship, fellowship in church work, in missions, in Christian education, in Christian charity. Yet insofar as they are joint expressions of faith they are all essentially one and the same thing, and are all properly covered by a common designation, namely, church fellowship. Church fellowship should therefore be treated as a unit concept, covering every joint expression, manifestation, and demonstration of a common faith. Hence Scripture can give the general admonition “avoid them” when church fellowship is to cease (Rom. 16:17). Hence Scripture sees an expression of church fellowship also in giving the right hand of fellowship (Gal. 2:9) and in greeting one another with the fraternal kiss (Rom. 16:16); on the other hand, it points out that a withholding of church fellowship may also be indicated by not extending a fraternal welcome to errorists and by not bidding them Godspeed (II John 10,11; Cf. III John 5-8).
- B. What principles Scripture teaches for the exercise of such church fellowship.
1. In selecting specific individuals or groups for a joint expression of faith, we can do this only on the basis of their confession. It would be presumptuous on our part to attempt to recognize Christians on the basis of the personal faith in their hearts (II Tim. 2:19; Rom. 10:10; I John 4:1-3; I Sam. 16:7).
  2. A Christian confession of faith is in principle always a confession to the entire Word of God. The denial, adulteration, or suppression of any word of God does not stem from faith but from unbelief (John 8:31; Matt. 5:19; I Pet. 4:11; Jer. 23:28,31; Deut. 4:2; Rev. 22:18,19). We

recognize and acknowledge as Christian brethren those who profess faith in Christ as their Savior and with this profession embrace and accept His entire Word. Compare Walther's "Theses on Open Questions," Thesis 7: "No man has the privilege, and to no man may the privilege be granted, to believe and to teach otherwise than God has revealed in His Word, no matter whether it pertains to primary or secondary fundamental articles of faith, to fundamental or nonfundamental doctrines, to matters of faith or of practice, to historical items or other matters subject to the light of reason, to important or seemingly unimportant matters."

3. Actually, however, the faith of Christians and its manifestations are marked by many imperfections, either in the grasp and understanding of Scriptural truths, or in the matter of turning these truths to full account in their lives. We are all weak in one way or another (Phil. 3:12; Eph. 4:14; Eph. 3:16-18; I Thess. 5:14; Heb. 5:12; I Pet. 2:2). Compare Walther's Thesis 5: "The Church militant must indeed aim at and strive for absolute unity of faith and doctrine, but it never will attain a higher degree of unity than a fundamental one." Cf. Thesis 10.
4. Weakness of faith is in itself not a reason for terminating church fellowship, but rather an inducement for practicing it vigorously to help one another in overcoming our individual weaknesses. In precept and example Scripture abounds with exhortations to pay our full debt of love toward the weak. (Compare Walther's Theses 2, 3, 4, and 8.)
  - a. General exhortations (Gal. 6:1-3; Eph. 4:1-16; Matt. 18:15-17).
  - b. Weakness in laying hold of God's promises in a firm trust (Matt. 6:25-34).
  - c. Weakness with reference to adiaphora in enjoying fully the liberty wherewith Christ has made us free (Rom. 14; I Cor. 8 and 9). The public confession of any church must establish, however, which things are adiaphora so that it may be evident who are the weak and who are the strong (Rom. 14:17-23; I Cor. 6:12; 10:23,24).
  - d. Weakness in understanding God's truth, and involvement in error (Acts 1:6; Galatians [Judaizing error]; Colossians [Jewish-Gnostic error]; I Cor. 15; I Thess. 4:10-12,14; II Thess. 3:6,14,15; Acts 15:5,6,22,25). Note how in all these cases Paul patiently built up the weak faith of these Christians with the Gospel to give them strength to overcome the error that had affected them.
5. Persistent adherence to false doctrine and practice calls for termination of church fellowship.
  - a. We cannot continue to recognize and treat anyone as a Christian brother who in spite of all brotherly admonition impenitently clings to a sin. His and our own spiritual welfare calls for termination of church fellowship (Matt. 18:17; I Cor. 5:1-6). (Excommunication.)
  - b. We can no longer recognize and treat as Christian brethren those who in spite of patient admonition persistently adhere to an error in doctrine or practice, demand recognition for their error, and make propaganda for it (Gal. 1:8,9; 5:9; Matt. 7:15-19; 16:6; II Tim. 2:17-19; II John 9-11; Rom. 16:17,18). If the error does not overthrow the foundation of saving faith, the termination of fellowship is not to be construed as an excommunication. Moreover an excommunication can only apply to an individual, not to a congregation or larger church group. The "avoid them" of Rom. 16:17,18 excludes any contact that would be an acknowledgment and manifestation of church fellowship; it calls for a cessation of every further joint expression of faith. Cf. I Cor. 5:9-11. Compare Walther's Theses 9 and 10.
  - c. Those who practice church fellowship with persistent errorists are partakers of their evil deeds (II John 11).

From all of this we see that in the matter of the outward expression of Christian fellowship, the exercise of church fellowship, particularly two Christian principles need to direct us, the great debt of love which the Lord would have us pay to the weak brother, and His clear injunction (also flowing out of love) to avoid those who adhere to false doctrine and practice and all who make themselves partakers of their evil deeds.

Conscientious recognition of both principles will lead to an evangelical practice also in facing many difficult situations that confront us, situations which properly lie in the field of casuistry.

On the basis of the foregoing, we find it to be an untenable position:

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- C. To envision fellowship relations (in a congregation, in a church body, in a church federation, in a church agency, in a cooperative church activity) like so many steps of a ladder, each requiring a gradually increasing or decreasing measure of unity in doctrine and practice.