

The Scriptural Principles Concerning Church Fellowship

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In an ever-increasing measure the subject of Church Fellowship has been in the foreground in our midst during recent years. With Church Fellowship we mean every outward expression and demonstration of Christian fellowship. To an unusual degree matters pertaining to Christian fellowship have become the subject of discussion in our district meetings, in our conferences, and also in our congregations. At our synodical conventions issues pertaining to Church Fellowship have for some time been the subject of long and earnest deliberations and far-reaching decisions.

There is, however, nothing mysterious about the development of this situation. It is simply the inevitable result of the intensified efforts that are currently being made to unite the various Lutheran church bodies of our land, which heretofore have differed in doctrine and practice. These are efforts of establishing Church Fellowship between some or all of them, or at least of bringing about a greater measure of collaboration and cooperation between them. We also realize that what is going on among Lutheran bodies 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. That there is such a movement is at present brought to our vivid attention through the publicity in the church press and the public press concerning the forthcoming meeting of the World Council of Churches at Evanston, Illinois, in August. The vast majority of the attendants are Protestant, and official delegates representing most of the Orthodox Catholic church bodies will also attend. That this Ecumenical Movement is not without relation to the union endeavors among the Lutherans is evident from the fact that also many of the Lutheran bodies that are pushing Lutheran union are participating in it.

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 that are currently being undertaken among Lutherans to fall short of what God in His Word requires for the establishment and exercise of Christian fellowship. This does not mean 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 threaten to disrupt and terminate the precious fellowship which for so many years we have enjoyed with sister synods in the Synodical Conference. As a matter of conscience we have found it necessary to declare inadequate and unacceptable the Common Confession which our sister synod of Missouri and the American Lutheran Church have drawn up and accepted as a full settlement, in the doctrines treated therein, of the doctrinal differences which in the past have been a hindrance to fellowship relations between them. After many years of fraternal discussion and consultation we have also found it necessary to tell our sister synod very clearly that we simply cannot join it in its stand in a number of other related issues. It is this situation that has made Christian fellowship the subject of such intensive study and discussion in our midst.

Without a doubt this is also the reason why a consideration of *The Scriptural Principles Concerning Church Fellowship* has been requested and deemed fitting for the doctrinal essay at this District Convention. To defend our stand, which is indeed not a popular one, and to hold it with full conviction, we have every reason to study and ponder all that God in His Word has to say on 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, namely the limitations and restrictions, which God in His Word has placed upon the outward exercise of Christian fellowship. But it would not be wholesome to think of Christian fellowship too exclusively in terms of what we

might call its negative side. In carrying out our assignment we have, therefore, treated it in its wide scope that we may again be reminded what a glorious blessing is involved in Christian fellowship, that we may be deeply constrained by the abundant encouragements of Holy Writ to manifest it in all of its God-pleasing manifestations, to exercise it as long as we can possibly do this with the Lord's approval, that we may pay richly the great debt of love to all who are still weak in faith and Christian understanding. Then we will also gain new strength to observe the limitations our Lord has placed upon the exercise of Christian fellowship in a faithful yet evangelical manner. We shall begin by speaking of

I. The Invisible Fellowship of Christian Believers

When in our theme we speak of Church Fellowship, we mean the outward expression and demonstration of the intimate relation in which all Christian believers are united with one another. This invisible fellowship of believers is, however, the blessed fruit and complement of an even greater fellowship, the glorious fellowship in which every believer has been united with his God and Savior. Through God-given faith in Christ our Savior God has become our dear Father and we lost and condemned sinners His dear children. St. Paul says: "Ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus." He unfolds this truth, saying: "When the fullness 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 because ye are sons, God 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 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 ever to thrill our heart as it thrilled the heart of St. John when he wrote in his first epistle: "Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God... 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."

Yet 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 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 work, saying: "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." 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 of 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. 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.¹ This faith is produced in every member completely by the Holy Ghost. All share in one baptism of regeneration. Through their common faith in the one Lord and Savior, wrought in their hearts by the same Spirit through the same means of grace, they have one God and Father who is 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.²

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 substance; one fold in which all believers are sheep of the one Good Shepherd.³

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 predestinated 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. Christ and His atoning work make this fellowship of believers possible. On the night before the completion of His redemptive work, He prayed for the consummation of this Christian fellowship: "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.⁴ 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. But since our theme speaks of Church Fellowship, which is something outwardly visible and manifest, we are now led to speak of

II. The Outward Expression of Christian Fellowship

1. Its Manifestations

Faith unites believers with their God and Savior and with one another. Faith 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 that throbs

¹ Joh. P. Meyer, *Prayer Fellowship*, *Quartalschrift*, XLVI (1949), p. 253.

² *Ibid.*, p. 253.

³ C.A. Hardt, *Christian Fellowship*, *Concordia Theological Monthly*, XVI (1945).

⁴ Hardt, *op. cit.*, p. 440.

in a human body and which pervades all its members manifests itself through heart and pulse beat, through growth and change, through movement and activity. It is also thus with faith, spiritual life. It manifests itself through activity.

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

This is not a comparison of our own devising. It is a comparison God Himself makes in His word, and one the Holy Spirit employs in great detail through the Apostle Paul in the 12th chapter both of Romans and I Corinthians. It will not do, of course, to press the comparison beyond the points. 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 we will have reason to take up more fully a little later.

For the present we want to consider what some of the activities 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 fruit 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, "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 born upon the Pentecost outpouring of the Holy Spirit. 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.

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 that 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 call this sacred meal “Communion” and the guests at the Lord’s table “communicants.”⁵ 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: “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. The more fully we live in the Gospel, the more richly does the Holy Spirit

⁵ Hardt, *op. cit.*, p. 443.

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. 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, 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. They 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. 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.⁶ In his First Epistle to the Thessalonians, Paul commends them for having practiced brotherly love “toward all the brethren which are in all Macedonia.” There was at least one man who served all the congregations of Macedonia. They had enough of an organization to carry out a joint election, in which this particular man was chosen as a traveling companion of Paul, to represent these Churches in delivering the collection they had gathered for the needy in Jerusalem.⁷ 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.⁸ All these joint expressions of faith on the intercongregational level were an exercise of Christian fellowship. St. Paul stressed the divinely created bonds that 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.⁹ 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.

⁶ Meyer, *op. cit.*, p. 256.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 256.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 258.

⁹ Gal. 4:1-7.

Our survey of the outward expressions of Christian fellowship is not meant to be exhaustive. The observations we shall presently make on the basis of what has been said about these manifestations will make it quite evident why the survey need not be exhaustive. Yet, before we close our survey we will 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. 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," but "*our* 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 besides this invisible joint 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. 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, "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 he had gathered together through the Gospel, and prayers that 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 fellowship? It is this that they are all manifestations of one and the same faith, and that as 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. We may speak of pulpit

fellowship, of altar fellowship, of prayer fellowship. We may speak of Christian fellowship in worship and of Christian fellowship in Church work. 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 something quite different from prayer fellowship. It is not that individuals may well exercise fellowship in joint Church work but 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 joint manifestations of Christian life 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. It is this Scriptural truth and principle that Christian fellowship is a unit concept that is so largely disregarded in present-day union movements. We find evidence of it also in the union movements among Lutherans. Church bodies, Church federations, Church agencies, cooperative endeavors are envisioned and set up like so many steps in a ladder, each requiring a gradually increasing or decreasing measure of unity. Let us elucidate with an example. The American Lutheran Church is a member of the National Lutheran Council. Within this Church agency it practices fellowship in prayer and in joint Church work with all the members of the National Lutheran Council, though it has not established pulpit and altar fellowship with some of them, like the United Lutheran Church. Again the American Lutheran Church is a member of the American Lutheran Conference. This is a Church federation in which the American Lutheran Church practices altar and pulpit fellowship with all the five participating Lutheran Church bodies. Yet before it would think of entering upon a contemplated merger of these same Lutheran synods into a single Lutheran Church body, it saw the need of framing a new document of doctrinal agreement, the *United Testimony of Faith and Life*. Surely these fellowship arrangements do not do justice to the truth that every manifestation of Christian fellowship is an expression of the common faith that unites Christians. Yet this leads us quite naturally to a further point of consideration in speaking of Church fellowship, namely the vital point of

2. Its Basis or Prerequisite

Church fellowship, and that means every outward expression of Christian fellowship, has to do with specific individuals. 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 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 may we recognize and acknowledge as Christian brethren? Faith is a matter of the heart and as such recognizable only by God. It would be presumptuous on our part to try to recognize Christians on the basis of the personal faith in their hearts. Since we cannot probe the heart, God would have us deal with men on the basis of the confession that they make concerning the attitude of their heart. Paul says: "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.¹⁰

St. John writes (1 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 that men make. Yet that is beyond our responsibility. God will at His own time deal with hypocrites.

¹⁰ Joh. P. Meyer, *Prayer Fellowship*, *Quartalschrift*, XLVII (1950), p. 288.

Yet what kind of confession are we to look for in order to recognize and acknowledge anyone as a Christian brother? In the statement of St. John just quoted the requirement at first glance might seem to be a very narrow one, namely the confession that Jesus Christ is come into the flesh. But very obviously St. John is not satisfied with a mere confession of Christ's incarnation, for that alone does not set forth the heart of Christian faith as St. John teaches it. Out of a very practical interest the Apostle mentions only the particular point of doctrine that was being perverted by Cerinthus, who with his false teaching was troubling the Christians to whom John is writing. Yet the denial of Christ's incarnation involves also the gracious purpose, the blessed fruit, and the glorious outcome of Christ's entrance into the flesh. As soon as you bear this in mind, you will not be able to stop short of including the entire Word of God, for it is all a revelation of Christ and His salvation.

That is also what Jesus Himself sets forth as a mark of His believing disciples: "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 commanded us. Thus our answer to the question: Whom can we recognize and acknowledge as Christian brethren? It must of necessity be this: those who profess faith in Christ as their Savior and with this profession embrace and accept His entire Word. With them, and only with them, can we express fellowship of faith in all of its manifestations. That this is the prerequisite which the Lord sets up for our expressions of Christian fellowship becomes all the more certain and obvious when we consider what He has to say about persistent deviation from His Word and its bearing on Christian fellowship. But in order to understand properly what we have just said about the basis and prerequisite for Christian fellowship we need to distinguish with Scripture between an adherent of false doctrine or practice and a weak brother.

3. Our Debt of Love to the Weak

Weakness of one kind or another is nothing unusual among Christians. Though we profess faith in Christ as our Savior and full acceptance of His Word, all of us will to our dying day show a measure of weakness, be it in our grasp and understanding of God's truth, be it in the matter of turning these truths to full account in our lives. Also St. Paul says of himself: "Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect: but I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:12). Weakness in faith is in itself not a barrier for Christian fellowship. It is rather an inducement for exercising our fellowship for the purpose of helping our brethren overcome their weakness. If weakness of faith were a barrier for Christian fellowship, then all expressions of Christian fellowship would have to cease. Then all prayers for growth in Christian wisdom and understanding, for becoming more fully rooted and grounded in love, which St. Paul voices in behalf of those whom he calls his brethren, would have to fall away, also all admonitions such as: "Warn them that are unruly, comfort the feeble minded, support the weak, be patient toward all." Through the imputed righteousness of Christ His believers are indeed all perfect in God's sight. Yet in its life Christ's Church here on earth is a congregation of spiritual convalescents, under the constant care of their heavenly Physician. Paul points out that it is the very purpose of the gifts 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. 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." Such a purpose, however, presupposes that there will be weakness of faith in the Church

Scripture also speaks very concretely of weakness of faith as it is found in believers and lets us distinguish a number of types.¹¹ In the Gospels we frequently hear Jesus warning, rebuking, and 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

¹¹ Meyer, *op. cit.*, p. 33-45.

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 that 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."

In Romans 14 and I Corinthians 8 and 9, St. Paul speaks at some length of another class of weak Christians. Their weakness 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 raised 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 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 last point that 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 that 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 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, un-brotherly 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 or acted as one who was weak, but that he placed himself into the position of the weak; he actually made their problems his own and fought their battles in his own heart. In this way he cultivated the ability to deal with the weak on their own level and thus to win them. In Gal. 1:6 he uses the figure of placing one's self under the other man's burden, exhorting: "Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ." It is in this way that we are to become all things to all men in order that by all means some might be saved. It is in this way that the Lord would have all of us pay our debt of love to the weak.

By precept and example Holy Writ finally also shows us how we ought to deal with the weak brethren whose weakness manifests itself in a lack of understanding of Christian truths, in an involvement in error, or in a deviation from Christian life.

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 who 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. 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 Galatian Christians did not properly meet the error. 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 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 that lie in that name still applied also to them. 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 a single chapter to an error that was troubling weak brethren. 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 Antichrist,"¹² who would be God's

¹² Meyer, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

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. 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 is 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." Yet in these efforts 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

4. Its Limitations and Restrictions

In Matthew 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 that they have brought to him, 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 that 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.

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. Moreover, the congregation's 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. This 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 who 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 for 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 that had 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: “If any man preach any other Gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed”; and again: “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. 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, but 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 for others, the Word 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.

We are all very familiar with a similar general exhortation which the Apostle Paul voices in the final chapter of Romans: “Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them.” Note the solemn preface “Now I beseech you, brethren,” with which Paul introduces the plea that the Roman Christians should take note of those who are causing divisions and offenses in opposition to the doctrine which had been taught to them. They had been properly instructed in Christian truth. Paul had taught them through this epistle, 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 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 that 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. 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 that 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 theirs and ours 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.

St. John, the apostle of brotherly love, gives the same counsel and instruction in his inspired epistle. In II John 10,11 he writes: “Whosoever transgresseth and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ hath not God... 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.” When St. John speaks of receiving such a man into his 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 mean an acknowledgment of him as a Christian brother, in other words, an expression of Christian fellowship. We are again reminded that Christian fellowship is a unit concept Its full implications are involved even when it is expressed with a greeting and with a reception into one’s house.

He who fellowships with an adherent of false doctrine is a partaker of his evil deeds. In more than one way he will be sharing in his evil deeds.¹³ He sins against the Lord, being indifferent to His Word. The Lord says: “To this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit and trembleth at my word” (Isaiah 66:2). 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. In II Timothy 2:17–19, Paul says of the false teaching of Hymenaeus and Philetus “Their word will eat as doth a canker.”

From all of this we see that in the matter of the outward expression of Christian 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 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 meeting many difficult situations that confront us, situations that properly lie in the field of casuistry.

We may learn this from Paul in his dealing with the problem at Thessalonica, to which previous reference has already been made. 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. Paul does not consider this a minor point of doctrine and life. When Paul sent his first epistle to the Thessalonians this disorderliness had already begun so that he

¹³ Hardt, *op. cit.*, p. 520.

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.” II Thess. 3:6,14,15. Even now Paul does not recommend a complete break of fellowship relations. He still is 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 to a final brotherly admonition administered through the very act of withdrawing from these offenders. The brethren are to mark each such offender, and that for the purpose of not associating with him. Here again Paul is, of course, speaking strictly about church life, about an associating which is an expression of Christian fellowship, such as joint prayer and worship. 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.

May God give all of us a rich measure both of Paul’s love for the brethren and of his faithfulness to the Lord and His precious saving Word.