

The Guiding Principles for the Doctrine of Fellowship

By Eric Schroeder

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Consider the following reactions to the topic of church fellowship, observed in conversations throughout the past year. As I made a remark about the one hundred or so fellowship papers on the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary website (compared to seven on the forgiveness of sins), a fellow pastor replied, “The church has been struggling with fellowship for the past 2000 years; why should it be any different now?” One of our members recently asked how “the paper on the roles of men and women” was coming; he remembered hearing that it was an often-discussed and potentially hot topic, but forgot which one. And the one that really got my attention? “Fellowship is just plain ugly.” Not to mention the collection of groans, sighs, and murmurs whenever the subject seemed to come up.

Why do we face such challenges in appreciating, expressing, and applying Biblical truth as it applies to the doctrine of church fellowship? It is certainly not for lack of trying. Many inkwells, fountain pens, printer ribbons, printer cartridges, and toner supplies have been dried up in the production of books, papers, and theses on the subject. Church fellowship has been a front-burner issue within the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod in every generation, from its inception, through mergers, the Protes’tant Controversy, the split with LCMS and the CLC, and the formation of the CELC. And yet, despite all the study, all the explaining, all the preaching and teaching, our position has led many to label us as too strict and others to view us as too liberal. Part of the reason for the mixed reactions may be that in many cases, individual applications of church fellowship take more time than we are given to explain adequately the reason(s) behind our actions. A visitor asks if he or she may take communion; somehow it is almost always five minutes before the service starts. We can give a short answer; a lengthy conversation would certainly benefit both parties. A member wonders aloud in the closing minutes of a Bible class on Christian love, “Then why don’t we work with organizations like the Salvation Army?” The unexpected questions don’t always receive the most thoughtfully-worded answers. We could take weeks when we are given a few days (or a few hours) to explain to a grieving family why we urge so strongly that a funeral soloist be a member of our confession. We may be invited to join an interfaith community clergy forum, and our convictions lead us to decline before we have the chance to explain our reasoning to the group. In each common (or not-so-common) case, the time and timing of the situation are simply less than ideal. We may think of a quick response that makes perfect sense to us, but in reality, the message may not come through so clearly on the other side of the conversation.

Another reason for our difficulty is that the doctrine of church fellowship often is virtually a foreign language to the intended audience, especially in our current society. The lasting impact of postmodernist relativity and the resulting inclusivism (and a new wave of ecumenism) can be seen in the utter absence of sound doctrine and practice of church fellowship in many current denominations of Christianity. As just one example, during the mid- to late- 1990’s, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America has established “full communion” with the Moravian Church, the Episcopal Church, the Reformed Church in America, the United Church of Christ, and the Presbyterian Church (USA), in addition to publishing the “Joint Declaration on Justification” with the Roman Catholic Church. At the same time, the recent push for nondenominational Christian churches gives evidence that segments within Christianity are, on the one hand, not inclined to formally align themselves with any existing synod or denomination. On the other hand, many Evangelicals are

more than willing to form larger networks or loose partnerships based on what they consider to be the “fundamental truths” of Scripture. At any rate, WELS and others in agreement with us are in the minority when it comes to the way we teach and practice church fellowship.

And so it is good for us to go back to the Source of all doctrine, the inspired and inerrant Word of God. To be sure, perhaps we often find ourselves in situations where we might long for a case-by-case procedure manual so we could just point to the “rules” and say (for instance), “Aha, here it is. Rule 814.65-m: Participation of Non-WELS Lutherans in an Area Lutheran High School Band in a Christmas Concert That Includes Hymn-based Choral Music.” Although we may be wise to establish certain detailed policies where applicable, our Scriptural basis is found in passages that require some interpretation and much wisdom in their application. Even so, God assures us that his Word is sufficient to provide what we need in every situation. We must only seek God’s guidance in the principles he lays out for us and then apply them in a sanctified way. Before the scope is narrowed, however, please allow a brief moment or two to set the stage. The doctrine of Church fellowship does not exist in a vacuum, but is closely related to the doctrine of the Church, the doctrine of the Word and sacraments, and even the doctrine of justification, in addition to any other teaching that may be in question at a particular time. A dialogue on church fellowship is typically either the result of or the reason for a much larger discussion. In our case, we will start with God’s will for the entire church, and then see how we as individuals may carry out God’s will in situations where we are bound to employ the guiding principles for church fellowship.

God desires unity—complete togetherness—among believers

“My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, *that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you.* May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, *that they may be one as we are one:* I in them and you in me. May they be brought *to complete unity* to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. (John 17:20-23)

This prayer comes at a crucial time in the redemptive work of Jesus, a pivotal point between his preaching and teaching and his suffering and dying. Jesus is on his way with the eleven disciples to the Mount of Olives, a few brief hours from his betrayal. The divine Son of God—but remember, as human as you or I—experiences a time of great personal testing and unimaginable agony of body, soul, and spirit. And yet he prays for his disciples, not just the eleven who would all turn away, but also the countless others who would hear their witness following a blessed restoration from the Risen Christ. Conceivably, Jesus speaks for the eleven to hear (and surely for us to read centuries later); Jesus wants us to know his will in this matter. And what is his greatest desire? Unity—not just an outward union or partnership, but a perfected and ongoing state of oneness (ἵνα ὡσιν τετελειωμένοι εἰς ἓν). This oneness of believers is to be modeled after the mysterious and miraculous interpersonal unity within the Holy Trinity (καθὼς ἡμεῖς ἓν)—a lofty goal indeed. And our unity has a purpose.

When believers live in a state of joyful unity (Psalm 133), the truth of the gospel holds its well-deserved, central position as the focus, the conversation, and the mission of the church. When unity is absent, the truth lies in question among them as something to be debated, is itself hidden behind a fog of false doctrine, or takes a back seat to the differing opinions and interpretations of various groups within the Church. My father speaks of his own experience, time spent making an effort to speak the truth of the gospel to

unbelieving or questioning coworkers in the break room of the factory. Picture a faithful man sharing his beliefs with a potential mission prospect, when suddenly Christians of other denominations join in the dialogue. What is the unbeliever to think about Christianity when Christians cannot agree on what the Bible says? No wonder Jesus sought (and undoubtedly still seeks) unity among believers, “to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.” Disunity and division within the church are great obstacles to the Great Commission. More on this subject later in the paper. For now, let’s focus on some good news: God not only desires unity within the church; he also creates unity.

In a sense, every believer is one with each other.

To the Galatians, some of whom were being deceived by the supernomian heresy of the Judaizers (3:1ff), Paul wrote, “You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for *you are all one in Christ Jesus*” (Galatians 3:26-28).

To the Ephesians, some of whom may have questioned whether their Gentile heritage prevented them from enjoying the same blessed inheritance as the Jewish believers, Paul wrote, “For [Jesus] himself is our peace, who has *made the two one* and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was *to create in himself one new man out of the two*, thus making peace, and in this *one* body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him *we both have access to the Father by one Spirit*” (Ephesians 2:14-18). To the Corinthians, who had allowed competitive infighting, arrogant favoritism and personal rivalries to invade their assemblies, Paul wrote, “Now you are the body of Christ, and *each one of you is a part of it*” (1 Corinthians 12:27). Also, “Now it is God who makes *both us and you* stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come” (2 Corinthians 1:21-22).

In these and other clear passages, we see how all true believers are members of the same universal church, even if some questions or doubts are present. Those who are saved all have the same Savior (Acts 4:12) and are thus united in fellowship with God (1 Corinthians 1:9, 1 John 1:3-7); their God-given faith holds to the same simple message (Romans 10:17) and is fed by the same Spirit through the same Word and sacraments (Ephesians 4:5, 1 Corinthians 12:13, 1 Corinthians 11:26), and their individual spiritual gifts are used to build up the same body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:11-12), righteous and holy before God (Philippians 3:9, Ephesians 5:25-27). While it is definitely true that the visible church remains divided on many levels, the invisible church is and always will be one for all eternity (Revelation 21:1-4).

When we are experiencing and enjoying glory, we will finally be able to fully experience and enjoy the perfect togetherness of the invisible church. Until then, however, we must practice caution. Although we ought to rejoice (and, at the same time, there *is* much rejoicing in heaven) when any man, woman, or child confesses Christ, there are times when we must refrain from openly expressing unity with certain individuals and visible church bodies out of love for God and his Word, and out of love for souls of both believers and unbelievers. Especially because of the warnings of Scripture and the certainty of temptation that leads to false doctrine (2 Timothy 4:3), the reality of the spiritual fellowship we enjoy as part of the one invisible church must not prevent us from adherence to both sides of the scriptural principles of church fellowship.

What is church fellowship?

A careful search of the New International Version will reveal that—like the words *Trinity*, *sacrament*, and *absolution*, etc.—the term *church fellowship* does not appear, nor is there any single Greek word that entirely encompasses its definition. Yet God’s will is clear on this matter, thanks to a number of clear directives from God to his people, especially to those in the New Testament church. And so we maintain our working definition of church fellowship as both a status and an activity whereas united Christians actively join together in expressing their unity and carrying out the work of the church. In the remainder of this paper, we will examine the Scriptural principles of the doctrine of church fellowship as they apply in three categories: our duty to God and his Word, our duty to those outside our fellowship, and our duty to those in fellowship with us.

Our Duty to God and His Word

God knows how far we have fallen. God watched as Adam and Eve gave up perfect fellowship with him and (at least temporarily) established fellowship with the devil. And yet God yearned to restore fellowship with fallen mankind through a righteousness that was now foreign, but was a gift of his grace to us (Romans 5:19). Until the time came for our Substitute to act, to prove his identity while he walked among our race, and to reveal him to the world after his saving work was completed, God gave us his Word as the means of that gracious restoration to fellowship with him. In other words, to combat the lies of Satan and all their damaging—yes, their damning—results, God gave us truth.

As God gradually revealed the truth to mankind through prophets, evangelists, and apostles, he periodically reminded us that truth comes from Him, and not from anywhere else, including the best and brightest ideas of humankind. This principle applies specifically to God’s holy laws (*Do not add* to what I command you and *do not subtract* from it, but keep the commands of the Lord your God that I give you. Deuteronomy 4:2, cf. Deut. 12:32), his saving message of the gospel (...and teaching them to obey [or guard, preserve, and hold on to] *everything I have commanded you*. Matthew 28:19-20), and generally to every other detail, down to the letter—at the risk of certain and everlasting penalty (Revelation 22:18-19). For this reason we embrace and express what God says about his Word as a guiding principle of church fellowship, sometimes referred to as one half of the “unit concept”: every word of Scripture is “God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16-17). Jesus said, “Scripture cannot be broken” (John 10:35). In other words, where Scripture is clear, man has no right to decide which teachings are necessarily agreed upon and which are open for an “agree-to-disagree” philosophy. Every doctrine has a practical purpose, and agreement on every teaching is essential for true fellowship.

Those who understand that the Word of the Lord is a “lamp for my feet and a light for my path” (Psalm 119:105) also realize that when one makes any attempt to add to God’s Word, he takes away from it and therefore obscures the rays of light that shine forth from it. Those who understand both the simplicity and the depth of God’s Word never wane in their desire to learn and share its treasures (Matthew 13:52). Those who understand that God’s Word is truth (John 17:17) and “every man a liar” (Romans 3:4) also realize that only One has the words of eternal life (John 6:68). Any departure from the truth of Scripture in any way puts souls at risk.

This caveat applies not only to preaching and teaching, but also to the way the Word is applied in our lives. No matter what we might say, no matter how calculated and well-worded our arguments, the Christian’s actions are also a powerful witness to the truth. A hypocritical disciple is not only one who secretly rejects parts

of God's Word (John 8:32), but he also may be called a hypocrite who fails to put it into practice. Jesus gave his disciples the command to love one another as a witness to the world of our own discipleship (John 13:34-35). And so in our daily struggle against the devil, the world, and our own sinful flesh, we make every effort to put what we have learned into practice (Philippians 4:8-9). The world is watching. As just one example, Paul instructed Titus to encourage slaves to work in a way that would "make the teaching about God our Savior attractive" (Titus 2:9-10).

In our testimony and in our lives, then, our duty to God and his Word is simply this: "We cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth" (2 Corinthians 13:8). Through our love for the truth, through our learning of the truth, through our letting loose the truth, and through our living of the truth, we make it our goal to echo John the Baptist when he humbly declares, "He [Jesus, that is] must become greater; I must become less" (John 3:30). In the application of the principles of church fellowship, we are not to do what is easiest, what is most popular, or whatever fits most comfortably with our own personal fancies. We are to seek God's will and let it be done in our lives out of love for Him and His Word, and out of love for souls bought by the blood of Christ.

To that end, we employ the truth of God's Word as the touchstone by which we "test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world" (1 John 4:1). When another church or individual claims to offer a message of truth to us, we run "to the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, they have no light of dawn" (Isaiah 8:20). The Bereans tested the Apostle Paul's teachings (Acts 17:11); how much more we ought to use the truth as our measuring stick to determine who is and who is not in agreement with God's Word! Only after we have applied the litmus test of truth can we accurately recognize or determine who is and who is not in fellowship with us; truth is also the reason we may be led to declare a break in fellowship with another individual or church body in the case of unrepentant sin (Matthew 18:17, 1 Corinthians 15:1-6) or persistence in teaching or adhering to false doctrine (Romans 16:17-18, Titus 3:10).

Our duty to those who are not in fellowship with us

It needs to be said again that our motivation is love for God and his Word, and love for each individual, that guides us in our application of the truth (1 Timothy 1:3-5). In the case of those whose confession prevents us from joining in fellowship with them, we must not only consider our words and actions carefully, but we must also speak and act in a way that communicates the reason behind them. The Apostle Paul had clear instructions for Timothy, who would certainly be confronted with heresy during his ministry: "Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with *great patience and careful instruction*. For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear.

They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. But you, *keep your head in all situations*, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry" (2 Timothy 4:2-5). Whether one has intentionally turned aside from the truth or has been unknowingly misled by false teaching, our commission remains the same. When one is in danger because of false doctrine, we are to testify to the truth. We are to point out the lies, warn of the real and lasting danger, and encourage with the truth. We are to understand the struggle against the sinful nature (and we ought to, because it is our struggle, too), and be willing to put in the time and effort it takes to make disciples or lead disciples closer to Christ. Let's face it. We have faced rejection before, and we will face it again. But the same love that led us to proclaim the gospel once to a sinner will lead us to proclaim it again and again, as often as we have the chance. Satan would love for us to get

frustrated and give up, or get fed up and blow up, so that we judge a heart as hardened and diagnose the unforgiveable sin. But Peter writes, “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But *do this with gentleness and respect*, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander” (1 Peter 3:15-16). We may not be able to control the reaction, but with God’s help and with God’s Word we can control our actions and the words that go along with them. If one will listen, let’s uphold our title of “minister of the gospel” and leave the final judgment up to the judge.

At the same time, we do have scriptural basis for refusing to engage in any and all activities that may be construed as joint expressions of faith. God instructs us through the Apostle Paul, “I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. *Keep away from them*. For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naïve people” (Romans 16:17-18). The reason we do not pray, or worship, or commune with those outside our confession is because we do not want to give any impression that we are willing to tolerate falsehood among us. On this subject, we listen to Luther:

When error is admitted into the Church, it will be found that the stages of its progress are always three. It begins by asking *toleration*. It’s friends say to the majority: You need not be afraid of us; we are few, and weak; only let us alone; we shall not disturb the faith of others. The church has her standards of doctrine; of course we shall never interfere with them; we only ask for ourselves to be spared interference with our private opinions. Indulged in this for a time, error goes on to assert *equal rights*. Truth and error are two balancing forces. The Church shall do nothing which looks like deciding between them; that would be partiality. It is bigotry to assert any superior right for the truth. We are to agree to differ, and any favoring of the truth, because it is truth, is partisanship. What the friends of truth and error hold in common is fundamental. Anything on which they differ is *ipso facto* non-essential. Anybody who makes account of such a thing is a disturber of the peace of the church. Truth and error are two co-ordinate powers, and the great secret of church-statesmanship is to preserve the balance between them. From this point error soon goes on to its natural end, which is to assert *supremacy*. Truth started with *tolerating*; it comes to be merely tolerated, and that only for a time. Error claims a preference for its judgments on all disputed points. It puts men into positions, not as at first in spite of their departure from the Church’s faith, but in consequence of it. Their recommendation is that they repudiate that faith, and position is given them to teach others to repudiate it, and to make them skillful in combating it. (my emphasis)

Jesus warned of the yeast of heresy and hypocrisy; so did Paul (Matthew 16, Mark 8, Luke 12, 1 Corinthians 5); Paul also compared false teaching to gangrene (2 Timothy 2:17). Luther echoed the danger and the admonition 1500 years later with the above words and others. Has anything changed in the centuries since? The truth certainly has not; nor has the threat of false teaching, through which Satan seeks to lead believers astray.

Ultimately, we don’t have the ability to read hearts and minds; only God can do that. Yet for the sake of all who may be deceived by error (and, for the sake of the errorists themselves), we are instructed to refrain from any partnership in the spread of falsehood (2 John 10,11). We make this sanctified choice on the basis of what is preached, taught, and confessed, or by one’s refusal to listen to the truth (1 John 4:6); at the same time, we take each opportunity to communicate *why* we refuse—not because we are better, or smarter, or any more “saved” than they are, but because we are convinced that only the Holy Scriptures are able to make us wise for

salvation (2 Timothy 3:15). Only the word of Christ produces genuine faith (Romans 10:17). Only God's Word is guaranteed to accomplish what he desires and achieve the purpose for which he sent it (Isaiah 55:11). Anything other than truth is an obstacle to faith.

And so our duty to those outside our fellowship is to remain intentionally and openly separate from them until their entire confession stands firmly on the foundation of truth. We hold this line not to make enemies, but as an honest and sincere preaching of the law to those we hope to gain as friends and brothers in the end. "The Lord's servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Those who oppose him he must *gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will*" (2 Timothy 2:24-25). By following these divine instructions, we work for the truth of the gospel in an evangelical approach, even toward those outside our fellowship.

Our duty to those in fellowship with us

God's Word says much more about our interaction with those inside our fellowship than how we deal with those outside it. How much more, then, we seek to celebrate the truth of the gospel in our dealings with our brothers and sisters who are by their confession united with us in faith—we who share an understanding of the Word and the Sacraments and an appreciation of the one-hundred-percent-free forgiveness, life, and salvation God gives through them! With such great blessings in common, how could we ever lose sight of the fact that we are not only members of the same organization, but members of the same body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:27, 10:17)? How could we ever fail in our mission to *love each other, pray for and with each other, encourage each other, admonish each other, greet each other, serve each other, teach and learn from each other, accept each other, honor each other, bear each other's burdens, forgive each other, submit to each other, be devoted to each other, and rejoice with one another?*

I can think of two reasons, although neither is a good excuse. One reason we may fail in our duty to our brothers and sisters is that we overemphasize the obvious: as much as we have in common, in many ways we are different from one another. We have different backgrounds, different levels of spiritual maturity, different gifts and abilities, different preferences in worship style and environment, different challenges and different cultures in our different communities, and the list goes on and on. In other words, we may feel an urge to push for uniformity rather than celebrating our unity. The second reason, which is closely related to the first, is that our sinful nature is always trying to convince us that "my way is the best way" or—worse yet—"my way is the only way." In order to curb the ignorant and arrogant sinful nature and celebrate the fellowship we do enjoy, we need to remember who is still the Head of this body (Ephesians 4:15). None of us can claim to have the perfect faith—even the Apostle Paul was aware of his limitations, and chose to boast about those things that made him weak, because he wanted to point others struggling with their own weakness to the One who is perfect in power and grace (Philippians 3:12, 2 Corinthians 12:8-9).

One of the main priorities of church fellowship, therefore, is mutual encouragement that leads to maturity and unity. As we "work together for truth," we cannot help but notice that truth is both the means and the end. Also note how Paul includes himself when he writes,

It was [Christ] who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers,¹² to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up¹³ until *we all* reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.¹⁴ Then

we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming.¹⁵ Instead, **speaking the truth in love**, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ.¹⁶ From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work. (Ephesians 4:11-16)

The Holy Spirit inspired the wisest man in the world to write, “As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another” (Proverbs 27:17). Led by the truth, we are able to identify the strong and the weak (referring to weakness as it occurs both in ourselves and in others), and then sharpen one another with the appropriate use of law and gospel in our preaching, in our conversation, and in our activities as individuals, especially those of us who serve as called congregational representatives within our fellowship. Where there is sin, we are to confront the sinner, not just tell others about it (Matthew 18:15). Where God blesses a fellow congregation with noticeable growth, we are to rejoice that the lost have been found, rather than allow jealous rivalries to manipulate us into a feeling of defensive loss (Luke 15:31). Even when there is a dispute among us, we must “keep on loving each other as brothers” (Hebrews 13:1) and communicate with one another to see how we may best act “in line with the truth of the gospel” (Galatians 2:11, 14). Where there is misunderstanding or an immature faith, we must be careful not to break the bruised reed or snuff out the smoldering wick (Matthew 12:20). Where there is error, we are to instruct patiently and carefully, with clear warnings and genuine concern (2 Timothy 4:2). Where a conscience is bound in a matter of adiaphora, we are to exercise and emphasize Christian freedom (Romans 14, 1 Corinthians 8 and 9); where Christian freedom is abused, we are to exercise and emphasize the law of love (Galatians 5:13-15). No matter what the circumstance may call for, we must be willing to do what it takes to hang onto the fellowship we have. We must “make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3).

At the same time, in an interest to preserve fellowship, we must occasionally break fellowship when actions or confession call for it. As previously mentioned, Scriptural reasons to separate include the case of one who, despite brotherly admonition, continues in a willful sin with no indication of repentance and no desire to seek forgiveness. Out of love for the soul of the impenitent sinner and the souls who will remain in our fellowship, we answer the call to “expel the wicked man from among you” (1 Corinthians 5:12, Matthew 18:17); yet we also long to welcome him back should he experience a change of heart (2 Corinthians 2:5-10). If the ongoing sin consists of a prolonged adherence to and endorsement of false doctrine, whether by an individual or a larger group, we must cease in our joint expressions of fellowship and treat them as those who are no longer united with us in doctrine (Titus 3:10). In short, our duty to those in fellowship with us involves eradicating everything that threatens those who are gathered with us around the truth.

Let us always remember that unity for the wrong cause is useless. An army united in retreat may have strength in numbers, but such a force has already lost all hope of winning the battle. So, too, a church body united around anything other than the truth is just an organization of sinful people—together, but ineffective. As we work together for the truth, let us never forget that God has promised to work through the proclamation of his Word. In order to proclaim it, we must hold to God’s Word as our great heritage—not just the tradition of our fathers that was handed down to us, but also what we impress upon our children, what we talk about when we are at home and when we walk (or drive) along the road, when we lie down and when we get up (Deuteronomy 6:7). Paul wrote good advice to Timothy that we would do well to practice: “Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers” (1 Timothy 4:16). As we work together for truth, our duty to those in fellowship with us calls us to study unceasingly the Scriptures that have the power both to kill and to give life (2 Corinthians 3:6), and then to

proclaim without hesitation “the whole will of God” in our sermons, Bible studies, confirmation and Bible information classes, and every chance we get (Acts 20:27).

Closing Remarks

If we had to sum up God’s will as it applies to our duty to Him and his Word, our duty to those outside our fellowship, and our duty to those within our fellowship, we could do so in a few words: “Speak the truth in love.” Both truth and love are necessary for any joint expression of faith, and both are crucial in any contact with those outside our fellowship. If we speak the truth without love, we end up merely trying to win an argument, without any concern for the souls involved. If we try to love without truth, we end up operating in hypocrisy; this mode may make people “happy,” but will not benefit souls in the end. If, however, we seek to speak the truth in love in everything we say and do as we carry out the great commission, we can be assured that we are following the guiding principles God lays out for us in his word. May God bless each one of us as we practice church fellowship for his glory and for the salvation of his people!