

Joining Together In Prayer And The Lord's Supper: The Scriptural Principles of Fellowship Applied to Prayer and Holy Communion

[A Doctrinal Paper delivered at South-Central Conference - South Atlantic District - WELS on
October 2, 1995]

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Some of you may be old enough to remember the time before 1961 when our Wisconsin Synod was in fellowship with the Missouri Synod. If not, at least you remember learning about the Synodical Conference in which these two synods together with two other synods, the Norwegian and Slovak synods, as they were generally called, were working and worshipping together. Some of you may have been members of the Missouri Synod and joined a congregation of the Wisconsin Synod more recently.

It is significant that it was agreement especially on the doctrine of fellowship that enabled the Wisconsin and Missouri synods to have a part in establishing the Synodical Conference in 1872. Likewise, it was disagreement on this doctrine that resulted in the break between Missouri and Wisconsin in 1961. What the Bible has to say about Christian or church fellowship has played a prominent role in the history of our synod and of Christianity. It has determined with whom we worship, commune, and carry on church work.

Has this doctrine's importance been overemphasized? Has it been misunderstood, misapplied? The church mergers and fellowship practices that aim at uniting all Lutheran churches, if not all who call themselves Christians, are evidence that the Biblical doctrine of fellowship generally is not recognized, understood, or taken seriously. Scripture is either ignored or interpreted to say what human reason, feelings, and emotions want to hear.

The Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod together with the synods that have formed the Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Conference are among the minority of Christians that are concerned to listen to what Scripture has to say on the subject of fellowship and to live according to it. This can often be difficult in a religiously confused Christianity and society. We need to turn to Scripture again and again to reaffirm our understanding and examine our practices. That is why you have assigned this essay. We propose to proceed as follows: We begin by hearing what Scripture says about the fellowship we have in Christ, examining various aspects of it. We next consider the principles Scripture provides to guide us in our fellowship practices. We shall also examine several points that we need to remember in applying the principles. Then we shall look at practical situations and problems as we apply the principles to prayer and to Holy Communion.

I. OUR FELLOWSHIP IN CHRIST

When we speak of fellowship in the church, we have in mind the fellowship we have in Christ. "You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:26). We were brought into the fellowship of God's family when already in baptism we were brought to faith in Jesus and were clothed in his righteousness.

John writes: "We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his son Jesus Christ" (1

John 1:3). The relationship that faith establishes goes in two directions: horizontally we have fellowship with one another and vertically we have fellowship with the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Furthermore John shows that this fellowship is brought about through listening to what the apostles saw and heard as they were with Jesus. "Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ" (Romans 10:17).

Paul writes to the Corinthians that God is faithful, "who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord" (1 Corinthians 1:9). Paul tells the Philippians that whenever he remembers them he joyfully thanks God in his prayers "because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now," (Philippians 1:5).

As we listen to God in these words from the inspired Scriptures, these facts impress themselves on our hearts and minds: Our gracious God brings us into a close relationship, into fellowship with himself, when he calls us to faith. This fellowship consists in his sharing all the blessings of salvation with us. This he brings about through the preaching of the gospel. At the same time he brings us into a close relationship with all believers, who likewise have a share in his salvation in Christ. Through faith in Jesus each believer has become a child of God and as such an heir of God. But each believer also has a close relationship and partnership with all other believers, as each has a share of the same inheritance through Christ. How we should thank God as we remember this fellowship in the family of express!

But this is a fellowship we know only by faith. By faith we know that it is real. We cannot see it, since it embraces only those, but all those, whose hearts have been moved to believe in Jesus as their Savior.

Whoever believes in the risen Lord in his heart will, however, also confess with the mouth, "Jesus is Lord." "For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved" (Romans 10:9,10). While we cannot see the faith that is in the heart, a confession with the mouth is not hidden. I can see and hear those who confess. And so on the basis of a person's confession I can recognize the fellowship that exists between us, or among an entire group that jointly confess. On the basis of their common confession we may speak of this as confessional fellowship. This is not only a matter of faith, but is recognized as existing among those who make the same confession. Thus on the basis of the confessions of the WELS and the Evangelical Lutheran Synod we can say that these two church bodies are in confessional fellowship.

Scripture shows that fellowship that exists and is recognized will also express itself in action. Already of the congregation that had its origin on Pentecost day we are told: "they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer" (Acts 2) They confessed the same Lord. they gave expression to their confessional fellowship in joint worship, communion, and prayer. The Ephesians were encouraged to "speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs" (Ephesians 5:19). the Antioch congregation sent out Paul and Barnabas as world missionaries (Acts 13:2,3). The believers in Jerusalem shared their possessions with the needy in their confessional fellowship (Acts 4:32,34,35). Even a hand shake could express the confessional fellowship the apostles recognized (Galatians 2:9). When we through some actions or activities give expression to the common faith we confess we say that we are practicing religious or church fellowship.

From the above we may note three aspects of fellowship: 1. fellowship as it exists among all believers and their God through faith in the Lord Jesus; 2. fellowship as it is recognized and known by the confession of the mouth; 3. fellowship as it expresses itself in joint activities. We can sum this up in three words: faith, confession, action. The first is worked and known and seen

only by God. The second and third are also worked only by God, but recognized and done also by us. It is with these two latter aspects that we Christians are directly involved as we live together in the world.

II. SCRIPTURAL PRINCIPLES FOR PRACTICING FELLOWSHIP

God wants the members of his family to worship and work together, to “fellowship” with one another. We also noted that we can recognize those with whom we are in fellowship of faith by what they confess with their mouth. “For it is with your heart that you believe. . . it is with your mouth that you confess” (Romans 10:10). We should expect that what is confessed with the mouth correctly reveals what is in the heart. We recognize fellow believers by their confession.

But what kind of confession are we to look for? Paul tells the Romans to “confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord’” (Romans 10:9). The faith in the heart that is confessed with the mouth centers in Jesus Christ, our crucified and risen Savior. Without him there is no saving faith and no true confession.

What does it mean to confess: Jesus is Lord? Some, in fact, many today will say: “That’s simple. A basic confession to the Lordship of Christ is all that this calls for. To ask for subscription to a collection of confessions such as the Book of Concord or even to special dogmatic formulations goes far beyond this.” And so there are Lutherans who contend that this is also what the Augsburg Confession says in Article VII: “To the true unity of the church it is enough to agree concerning the doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments.” And so they assert that we have no right to require a more comprehensive confession than to the simple gospel as we have it in John 3:16. That “is enough.”

But what does it really mean to confess: Jesus Christ is Lord? Does this limit the content of our confession? To call Jesus Christ Lord is to place oneself under him. It is to say: Speak, Lord, your servant is listening. And what does our Lord say? He tells us to teach everything he has commanded (Matthew 28:20). He tells us that those who hold to his teaching are really his disciples (John 8:31). He reminds us that the Scriptures testify of him (John 5:39). To confess Jesus as Lord is to accept the whole of Scripture and everything it teaches. Such a confession recognizes that to reject any truth God revealed in the Scriptures thereby denies the Lordship of Jesus. This is a comprehensive confession, broad, inclusive.

This truth is expressed in the WELS statement on Fellowship when we read: “A Christian confession of faith is in principle always a confession to the entire Word of God. The denial, adulteration, or suppression of any word of God does not stem from faith but from unbelief” (Doctrinal Statements, B, 2, p 52).

This is not to say that every confession can or must be all-inclusive. This is not to say that the confession must reveal a perfect understanding of everything Scripture teaches and a perfect trust in every situation. Paul said of himself that he had not yet been made perfect, that he was still pressing on toward the goal of “taking hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me” (Philippians 3:12). The author of Hebrews writes of those who “by this time ought to be teachers,” but who still needed someone to teach them the elementary truths, who still needed milk, not solid food (Hebrews 5:12). There are times when many a Christian cries out as did the man who sought healing for his son, “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief” (Mark 9:24).

In our weakness we are to help one another. How patiently Jesus dealt with his disciples when they showed their “little faith” and their lack of understanding. He carefully instructed them and opened to them the Scriptures. “Accept him whose faith is weak,” Paul writes to the Romans (14:1). The Judaizers in Galatia needed firm correction. The Thessalonians needed

reassurance regarding their departed loved ones. The Corinthians needed warning against false divisiveness and some of their fellowship practices.

And how weak is the confession of our lives! How often we do not do the good we want and do the evil which we do not want. We know our Savior's instructions in such circumstances, how we are to seek to "win our brother" when he sins (Matthew 18). Paul reflects our Savior's concern when he writes: "Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted" (Galatians 6:1).

The WELS theses on fellowship say regarding the weak: "Weakness of faith is in itself not a reason for terminating church fellowship, but rather an inducement for practicing it vigorously to help one another overcome our individual weaknesses. In precept and example Scripture abounds with exhortations to pay our full debt of love toward the weak" (Doctrinal Statements B, 4, p 53). The passage that has received more attention in our fellowship discussions than any other is Romans 16:17-18: "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." Entire papers have been written on these verses. We shall content ourselves here with drawing attention to the basic thoughts the passage presents.

What Paul writes to the Romans has general application to all Christians. Paul admonishes us to watch out for certain people, to take note of them, keep an eye on them. Whom? "Those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way [offenses, KJV]." What kind of divisions and offenses? Such as have to do with doctrine, as are "contrary to the teaching you have learned," contrary to what Holy Scripture teaches. The word that is translated "cause" in the Greek is a present participle, showing this is not an isolated incident but something in which the "causers" are continuing. They keep on causing the division by persisting in their erroneous teaching. They persist in spite of repeated efforts to instruct and correct them. We use the term "persistent errorists" for them. When they have shown themselves to be persistent in their false teaching, we are to keep away from them. In what way? Scripture clearly states that it is not possible to keep away from them in every way, that is, in all normal human contacts we have with people. Cf. 1 Corinthians 5:9-11. The "keeping away" has to do with the practice of Christian or religious fellowship. This passage reminds us of our Savior's warning against false prophets in the sermon on the mount (Matthew 7:15).

The principle expressed in these and other passages of Scripture is summed up in our WELS theses on fellowship as follows: "Persistent adherence to false doctrine and practice calls for termination of church fellowship." Persistent errorists are described as those "who in spite of patient admonition persistently adhere to an error in doctrine or practice, demand recognition for their error, and make propaganda for it" (Doctrinal Statements, B,5, p 54).

But does this apply only to those who are the teachers and leaders in churches whose confessions contain false doctrine, whose practices are contrary to Scripture? That is what some have contended. However, St. John reminds us that "if anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take him into your house or welcome him. Anyone who welcomes him shares in his wicked work" (2 John 10-11). Taking into one's house and welcoming a religious teacher has reference to more than courteous hospitality which we may show to a stranger. It has reference to giving the false teacher support, making common cause with him, thus encouraging him in his false teaching. Those who follow and support leaders who are false teachers are sharing in the wicked work. This principle leads to the conclusion that members and supporters of a church body whose teaching and practice includes error have a share in that "wicked work."

Our WELS theses on fellowship thus state: “Those who practice church fellowship with persistent errorists are partakers of their evil deeds. II John 11.”

We can sum up the Scriptural principles that guide us in making fellowship decisions as follows:

1. We can recognize those who are one in faith with us on the basis of the confession of their lips and actions.
2. Weakness in faith and life calls for loving admonition and correction, helping one another grow through the Word.
3. We are not to practice religious or church fellowship with those who persist in false doctrine and practice. This applies to both the teachers and their followers.

For many years the above principles were held and practiced within the Synodical Conference and its member synods. These principles were recognized as applying to all forms of Christian fellowship. (Cf. pamphlet “Fellowship Then and Now”) Most often fellowship was spoken of as pulpit, altar, and prayer fellowship. In practice, these three were the forms that generally came into consideration.

We noted above that disagreement on the doctrine of fellowship in 1961 brought about the break in fellowship between the WELS and the LCMS. It will be helpful to look briefly how this came about.

Of the three, pulpit, altar, and prayer fellowship, it was disagreement regarding prayer fellowship that began to disturb the unity within the Synodical Conference. In the late 1930s the negotiations between the LCMS and the ALC seemed to have reached a point at which they might declare themselves in fellowship. Some Missouri pastors and congregations as a result jumped the gun and began fellowshiping with the ALC. In 1941 the LCMS convention warned that “it is to be understood that no pulpit, altar, or prayer fellowship has been established between us and the American Lutheran Church.” This statement was reaffirmed at the 1944 convention. Nevertheless, the following statement was accepted by the convention: “However, joint prayer at intersynodical conferences, asking God for His guidance and blessing upon the deliberations and discussions of His Word, does not militate against the resolution” (1944 Missouri Synod Proceedings, p 251). With this statement the synod was approving of what had been practiced at the joint meetings between the LCMS and the ALC. This made the claim that there can be joint prayer which is not actually prayer or religious fellowship. This was a departure from the Synodical Conference position that had been practiced since its inception.

This distinction between joint prayer and prayer fellowship also allowed Missouri Synod seminarians, theological professors, editors of church papers and similar groups to participate in meetings with Lutherans with whom they were not in doctrinal agreement at which joint prayers and devotions were a part of the program. They were only joining in prayer and not practicing prayer fellowship, it was claimed.

By 1960 the LCMS had progressed further in asserting this position and refined its presentation. Their Theology of Fellowship, part II, prepared for the Joint Union Committees of the Synodical Conference, contains this statement: “It would be a dangerous oversimplification to say that any one of the manifestations of fellowship such as joint prayer, always necessarily presupposes and involves every other manifestation, such as pulpit and altar fellowship.” Thus there are supposed to be different principles that govern the various forms of fellowship practices. As to joint prayer, its propriety or impropriety must be evaluated in each case, they said. How is this done? “This evaluation must consider the *situation* in which such prayer is

offered, the *character* of the prayer itself, its purpose, and its *probable effect* on those who unite in the prayer.” (Emphasis in original, “Four Statements on Fellowship,” 1960, p 45)

This was applied in the document to prayer on civic occasions: “Public prayer at civic functions is justifiable as the public witness of the church’s intercession for all sorts and conditions of men and of the Christians’ readiness to participate in every work that promotes the weal of mankind.” (Four Statements, p 46) This finally has brought the LCMS to its present position of “degrees of fellowship.” At least this appears to be the position of many, including prominent leaders, within the Missouri Synod. In this position the extent to which there is doctrinal agreement determines the extent to which fellowship can be practiced, whether all forms of fellowship are possible or only lesser forms, like prayer.

Thus fellowship, especially prayer fellowship, became the issue that led to the impasse which finally resulted in the break in fellowship between the LCMS and the WELS. We can hardly hope for understanding of our position or practice on the part of most people in Missouri or in general among Lutherans outside the newly formed Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Conference. And certainly not among non-Lutherans. Those who do not share our Scriptural doctrine and principles will hardly understand the practice that we believe is called for by these principles. That we consequently will be faced by difficult situations is to be expected. That we will have to bear ridicule should not surprise us. Only let us be guided by the Word of our God, and not by reason, feelings, or fears. We confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. We must let Christ be our Lord.

III. POINTS TO REMEMBER IN MAKING APPLICATIONS

Before we proceed to consider specific fellowship situations, we shall call attention to points to remember when making applications.

1. We must take care that an application does not establish or modify the principle. We may let our feelings, emotions, or logic lead to a particular application and then modify the principle to agree with our action. The principle thus is treated like putty that can be shaped to fit the case in hand. This appears to be what happened when the LCMS determined that not every joint prayer is prayer fellowship. The practice had been to engage in joint prayers at the meetings with the ALC, although they acknowledged that they were not in prayer fellowship. This led to the principle, based on what was being done and not on Scripture, that there can be joint prayer which is not prayer fellowship.

2. We must guard against letting specific applications become set rules which are followed rather than examining the principle that was applied in that particular situation. In applying the principle of male headship at Corinth, St. Paul said the women should not pray or prophesy with the head uncovered, 1 Corinthians 11:3-5. This application to the head covering took the custom of the day into account. There are those who have made the application a rule and say that a woman must wear a hat or head covering whenever she attends a worship service, that this must be followed by Christians in all societies and times. True, the principle involved, “that the head of the woman is man,” must be recognized and upheld by Christians in every society and time. The particular application, however, to covering the head, which had a particular significance in Corinth, is not a rule for all times and circumstances.

3. We must remember that there are cases of casuistry. These are situations in which it is not clear which Scriptural principle applies. In such cases not everyone may arrive at the same conclusion, depending upon a person’s knowledge and understanding of the circumstances. Care must also be taken that we do not hastily pass judgment on one another when we disagree with

the way a certain case of casuistry was handled in a sister congregation or by a brother pastor. We may not know all the circumstances that led to the course of action that was followed. We must, however, assure ourselves that we agree on the scriptural principles.

4. This leads to another factor that is always present when we apply scriptural principles. We are called on to judge the situation, to determine whether it is one in which a particular principle applies. Human judgment does not determine the scriptural principles. These are established by the Word of God. But human judgment must evaluate the situation. This, for example, is what makes the proper use of law and gospel a pastoral skill that requires life-long learning. The distinction between law and gospel in principle is easy to understand and put into words; the application in each given case requires pastoral wisdom. The situation in which the sinner finds himself must be examined and evaluated. Then the word that fits that situation should be spoken and guide the practice.

5. In applying the principles that are to guide us in our fellowship practice, we have two principles that require skill in evaluating a given situation. Am I dealing with a weak brother who needs encouragement and brotherly help? Or am I dealing with a persistent errorist with whose error the Lord does not want me to become identified by practicing religious fellowship? I must judge and evaluate on the basis of what is open to my perception and evaluation. I must look at the person's confession. What does he say? Does his life contradict his confession? Is this person willing to be corrected by the Word of God? In asking such questions, in forming conclusions, I must guard lest I try to look into the person's heart. This can happen in either of two ways. I may say: "I don't think he really believes what he is saying; his words sound good, but I think he's a hypocrite." Or I may say: "I think he's better than he sounds. He has a good heart; he's really sincere even though his confession and life don't show it." In either case I am attempting to judge the heart rather than what is openly visible to me.

IV. APPLYING FELLOWSHIP PRINCIPLES TO PRAYER

As we proceed to applying scriptural fellowship principles to our prayer life, let us first look at some specific considerations about prayer that will be helpful.

1. Joint prayer, praying with someone, is always an act of Christian fellowship even as it is always an act of Christian fellowship to go to Holy Communion together at the same altar. Of a handshake I may say: This handshake as you are installed as pastor is an expression of our unity of faith and is an act of Christian fellowship. Another handshake may be a mere friendly greeting with no religious fellowship implications. When we pray together, however, we cannot say: This prayer is nothing more than an act of friendship. The fact is that joint prayer always has religious implications, simply because prayer always is, or should be, a religious action.

2. On the other hand, praying for someone is not the same as praying with someone. The latter is an act of fellowship, the former may not be. When Paul urges that "prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone - for kings and all those in authority" (1 Timothy 2:1-2), such prayer does not express Christian fellowship with "everyone," with all kings and rulers for whom intercession is made. On the other hand, when Jesus prayed for his disciples (John 17:6-19), they must have recognized this as an expression of the fellowship of faith that bound them to him.

3. Praying in the presence of someone is not necessarily prayer fellowship. When Paul was an board ship on the way to Rome, in the midst of the violent storm that ultimately resulted in shipwreck, Paul urged all on board to eat. Then we read: "He took some bread and gave

thanks to God in front of them all” (Acts 27:35). There was no invitation to the pagans on board to join Paul in this prayer. Yet Paul did not hesitate by his prayer of thanks to confess God before the pagans who were present. Luke and Aristarchus, Paul’s brothers in Christ, who also were present, no doubt in their hearts joined Paul in his prayer of thanks.

4. A Christian may find it necessary to be present at worship and prayers where he cannot practice religious fellowship. We are mindful of Naaman (2 Kings 5:17-19), the commander of the army of the king of Aram. After being healed of his leprosy and having come to faith in the one true God of Israel, he asked this favor of Elisha: “Let me, your servant, be given as much earth as a pair of mules can carry, for your servant will never again make burnt offerings and sacrifices to any other god but the Lord.” Thus he would confess his new faith in the one true God in the heathen country to which he was returning. But then he had another request: “But may the Lord forgive your servant for this one thing: When my master enters the temple of Rimmon to bow down and he is leaning on my arm and I bow there also when I bow down in the temple of Rimmon, may the Lord forgive your servant for this.” Elisha’s response was: “Go in peace.” In this case the bowing down on the part of Naaman was not an act of worship to the heathen idol. His confession by bringing sacrifice only to the true God on soil brought from Israel made that clear. His necessary official presence in the temple of Rimmon did not need to disturb his peace of mind. “Naaman’s bowing before the idol would only seem to be the same action as that performed by the king . . . the danger of appearing to conform to idolatrous worship would be offset by his openly sacrificing to the Lord (5:17) and so making it clear that his allegiance belonged entirely to the God of Israel” (Franzmann, Bible History Commentary, O.T., p 464).

5. There can be simultaneous prayer which is not joint prayer or prayer fellowship. An example of this would be the moment of silence for prayer in a confessionally disparate group. While praying at the same time, each person may pray without joining with anyone else in prayer.

6. We must also distinguish between witnessing, or speaking the Word of God to someone, and joining in prayer. The Lord sends Christians as his witnesses into all the world, to confess his faith, to proclaim the gospel, everywhere, wherever they have the opportunity. He does not tell Christians to pray with everyone, to make disciples of all nations by praying with them.

Let us now proceed to apply the above principles to specific situations. In these examples we shall first look at such in which the church, or people as a group, are involved. These are situations that are public in their very nature. Then we shall look at examples of how these principles may be applied in private, personal situations. That in both cases the same principles apply should be self-evident. The Lord does not give us one set of principles for public, another for private actions. But the situations may differ so that different principles may take precedence in one or the other case.

A. EXAMPLES INVOLVING THE CHURCH OR GROUPS

Before looking at specific examples we need to remember that when churches, denominations, groups identified with a particular denomination are involved, we need to look at the public confession and practice of that group, church, or denomination. We will look at the public confession and do not judge the entire group by some false statement made by an individual member or pastor of any group. In these examples we are thinking of prayers that take

place in public where the public confession needs to be taken into account. We are aware of the fact that for many churches their published confessions are no longer considered normative. This creates problems in determining the true confessional position of a group or body. Not abiding by any confessional position is in itself, however, also a confession. We proceed to specific examples that involve the church as it carries out its work which involves prayer in public.

1. When we conduct church services, people not of our confessional fellowship may be in attendance. We even welcome such attendance, particularly on the part of the unchurched. When we invite the congregation to join in prayer, will not also those not of our fellowship join in that prayer? Are we thus promoting and practicing a false kind of prayer fellowship in our services?

When we invite the congregation to join in prayer, we are doing so on the basis of our confessional position *which* is shared by our members. The non-member who is present has a choice: to join in our prayer on the basis of our confession or to desist, perhaps pray his own prayer. In this situation we cannot in advance determine the confessional position of every guest and determine whether the one or the other is a persistent errorist or a weak brother and then tell the persistent errorist not to join with us in prayer. The prayer is ours on the basis of our confession in our service. That guests may be present who on their part decide to join in our prayers need not trouble us as long as they do not attempt to inject themselves into our worship and disturb our devotion. We are happy to have them present to hear our witness to the gospel.

2. The situation may be reversed. We are invited to attend services in a church not of our fellowship, one whose confession we know to be faulty. This may happen, for example, at a wedding or a funeral. Joint prayers are spoken at such services. Since I recognize that the church that is leading in prayer has an erroneous confession, I cannot join in the prayer. But how will I give evidence of this? I cannot verbally join in prayer that is spoken in unison. There are circumstances under which I may remain seated when the congregation rises for prayer or not fold my hands. If there is reason for me to somehow show that I am not joining in their prayers, I would have to do this in a way that will not disturb them in their devotion. I am not called on to become obnoxious in the manner in which I show my disagreement. We call to mind the scriptural example of Naaman.

3. Public prayer at civic or public school functions inevitably unites people of various faiths in prayer. Not only do we consider this contrary to our constitutional separation of church and state, but for a pastor to lead in such a prayer violates fellowship principles. This is not the same as having guests present at one's worship service. Nor is the pastor asked to pray his own prayer merely in the presence of the assembly. People of all confessions are there on an equal basis, and the pastor or leader is expected to lead them jointly in their prayer. When we are present at such gatherings, we will refrain from participating as a witness to the false practice of such prayers.

4. Should we begin and end adult Bible information classes with prayer? The primary purpose of the class is instruction in the Word of God and not worship. Yet we will want to implore the Lord's blessing on our study. Circumstances will determine whether I ask the class members to join me in the prayer or whether I will pray for myself and them in their presence.

The prayer must fit the circumstances. If I am meeting with someone or a group all of whom know nothing of the Savior and salvation, I can hardly ask them to join me in prayer. I would be asking them to do something of which they are not yet capable. Yet for me to speak my prayer in their presence may be a good witness of my faith. Frequently, however, the people in these classes may already know their Savior but are seeking instruction from us. They are

coming as weak brothers and sisters who wish to learn and who can be invited to join in asking the Lord's blessings on the hour of study.

5. At various times free conferences have been held. These conferences were called to bring together people from Lutheran church bodies who were not in confessional fellowship, who did, however common interest over against doctrinal aberrations making inroads into Lutheranism. They were free conferences in that those attending did not represent their church bodies but were present as concerned individuals. Should such conferences be opened with devotions and prayer? The answer is no. Although those in attendance may have common doctrinal interests and concerns and even though the participants do not directly represent their church bodies, yet they are still associated with them and the various individuals are not in confessional fellowship. They should not join in prayer and thereby practice a fellowship that does not exist, at least, as yet. The free conferences held in the 1960s were thus opened with time for silent prayer. This was simultaneous prayer which was not prayer fellowship. Also the free conferences held in the early years of this century were not opened with devotions.

B. PRAYING IN PRIVATE SITUATIONS

We repeat that in private situations the same biblical principles must be applied that guide us in our public actions. There is, however, this difference. In public actions the matter of offense more readily becomes a factor. This may not be present in private situations. In public we must carefully guard lest our prayer practices give the impression of indifference to doctrine, or even of agreement with false doctrine, either of which may be harmful to someone's faith. In private situations the personal confession of the individual may be expressed in such a way that calls for recognition. Not to acknowledge it could prove harmful to that person's faith. Particularly weakness in faith and understanding may in private situations call for action that may not be possible in public. We shall look at some specific private situations.

1. A frequent question has to do with table prayer when guests of another faith are present. That the host family can with good conscience speak its table prayers should be self-evident. What the guests do is up to them. They may avoid praying along; they may listen; they may join. The host may want to avoid misleading guests by extending an invitation like: "Let us all now join in prayer." But he will also not make a point of actively excluding them.

2. The situation may be different when there is a larger family gathering. Some of the relatives belong to a Lutheran church with which we are not in fellowship. Should we ask this gathering to unite in table prayer? If so, who should lead the prayer? Are there some in the family who have shown themselves very persistent in holding to the errors of their church? Or are they basically united in faith with us, ignorant or lacking an understanding of their church's false doctrine? It would seem advisable for a family to discuss the situation and recognize what may or may not be God pleasing. If the family gathering is in one family's home, the host family may proceed with its family prayer, recognizing that this is not necessarily a joint prayer of all present.

3. The situation may be difficult in mixed marriages. We hope that our members will be strong enough in their faith so that they will pray, also in the presence of their spouses. Should the spouse be invited to join? Hardly, if the spouse is a non-Christian. If the spouse is a confessing Christian who is a member of another denomination, but such membership is seen as a weakness in understanding, in the privacy of the home joint prayer may be called for. If, on the

other hand, the spouse has ridiculed the religion of our member, argues against what we teach, joint prayer hardly is possible.

Situations in mixed marriages may differ greatly. Much may depend on the Christian partners actions. Peter tells women who have husbands who do not believe the word to conduct themselves in such a way that the husbands “may be won over without words by the behavior of their wives, when they see the purity and reverence of your lives” (1 Peter 3:1). Husbands should be considerate and respect their wives. If they have wives who are heirs with them of the gracious gift of life they should conduct themselves in such a way that “nothing will hinder your prayers” (1 Peter 3:7). In the privacy of the home each spouse will be concerned not to do anything that will prove spiritually injurious to the other. This calls for much Christian love, tact, consideration, truthfulness, also in the prayer life of the family.

4. We may visit a sick relative or friend who is not of our fellowship. What do I do? Must I avoid any religious discussion and prayer? This may be a fruitful opportunity for Christian witness, to strengthen the sick person’s faith, to proclaim the Lord’s forgiveness, mercy, power to help, faithfulness. But what about prayer? A simple confession of faith in the Lord Jesus as Savior from sin and the only hope for salvation may be the only confession I need to join this sick person in approaching the throne of grace in prayer. This confession may well show that the person’s membership in a heterodox church is a weakness, that in this private situation his personal confession supersedes anything else I may know. When a confession is lacking I can still pray *for* the person, also in his presence. This is a time to build and strengthen faith.

5. We may come upon a person who is seriously hurt, a total stranger. What if that person should request that I pray with him? If there is no possibility for any kind of confession, I can speak a prayer to the Lord Jesus in his behalf. This may well comfort and meet the needs of someone who has faith in the Lord Jesus. If the person was a pious pagan, the Christian message in the prayer is the Holy Spirit’s means that may prove effective. On the other hand, if there is opportunity for a gospel witness and a response of faith, under these circumstances this is the only confession I need to join this person in prayer in his desperate need. If the person should request that I pray to the Virgin Mary in his behalf, I could not accede to his request. His request shows the error of his faith. I can, however, offer to pray for him to the Lord Jesus. Perhaps this will turn him away from his false hope in Mary to the Savior, whom we hope he has also learned to know.

This no doubt does not exhaust the examples we could discuss. These may serve to illustrate at least how the principles may be applied. They also may serve to show that there may be specific considerations that need to be taken into account in either a public or private situation. What a privilege the Lord grants in inviting us to bring our prayers before him! What a joy and comfort when Christians can do this together!

Lord, teach us how to pray aright, With reverence and with fear.

Though dust and ashes in your sight, We may, we must draw near.

Give deep humility; the sense Of godly sorrow give;

A strong desire, with confidence, To hear your voice and live.

Faith in the only sacrifice That can for sin atone, To cast our hopes, to fix our eyes On Christ, on Christ alone.

Give these, and then your will be done; Thus strengthened with your might We, through your Spirit and your Son, Shall pray, and pray aright.

V. APPLYING FELLOWSHIP PRINCIPLES TO HOLY COMMUNION

The fellowship principles to which Holy Scripture leads us have direct application to our Holy Communion practices. That will be evident as we first of all consider what Scripture tells us about this sacrament instituted by our Lord on the night before he shed his blood for our sins.

A. WHAT SCRIPTURE SAYS

1. To begin with, Scripture calls this sacrament of the body and blood of Christ the Lord's Supper (1 Corinthians 11:20) or also the Lord's Table (1 Corinthians 10:21). It is a supper or meal which the Lord instituted, at which he is the host, which he prepares for us, and to which he invites us to be his guests. It belongs to him. In what the church teaches and practices, it must listen alone to the Lord Jesus. In holy awe and reverence we remember that this is the *Lord's Supper*.

2. We also call it Holy Communion. This is based on what the Lord tells us through the inspired Paul when he writes: "Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation (communion - KJV) in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation (communion - KJV) in the body of Christ?" (1 Corinthians 10:16, 17). The Greek word, *koinonia* means "association, communion, fellowship, close relationship," also "participation, sharing in something." There is a close association between the bread and Christ's body, so close that Jesus actually calls the bread his body. We express it by saying that in, with, and under the bread we receive the body of Christ. Similarly with the cup and Christ's blood, in, with, and under the wine we receive the blood of Christ. Thus when we eat the bread and drink of the cup we participate in the body and blood of Christ. Hence this is a fellowship meal, bringing us into a close relationship with our Savior by eating and drinking his body and blood. Christians are pleased to partake of this meal according to the Lord's direction and will.

3. This, however, is also a fellowship meal in another sense. Paul continues by saying: "Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf" (verse 17). We not only participate in the body and blood of Christ, but this also brings us into fellowship with all those who eat and drink with us in this sacrament. Thus, receiving the Lord's Supper at the same table, eating of the same loaf, is an act of fellowship in the faith. It is a recognition or expression of unity, of being one body through faith in the same Jesus. Only among those who have confessional unity can their unity be acknowledged in this way.

4. Hence we find that Jesus nowhere commands the church to invite everyone to this Supper. The gospel, the good news, we are to preach in all the world. And regarding baptism Jesus says, "Baptize all nations." Never, however, does he say: "Give my body and blood to everyone." It was instituted in the close fellowship of the twelve. It is not for everyone. The Lord has to tell us under what circumstances or to whom this sacrament is a blessing.

5. The Lord does this when he says through Paul: "Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself" (1 Corinthians 11:27-29).

Paul warns that we can sin by eating and drinking in the sacrament. This can bring judgment on us. Is he trying to frighten us away from the sacrament, so that we are afraid to receive it? Certainly not. But the Corinthians had been frivolous in their use of it. Paul had just reminded them how the Lord instituted it, that in it he gives his body and blood, that when they eat and drink it they proclaim the Lord's death, the death that won forgiveness, life, and

salvation for them. What a marvelous gift of God! “Therefore,” unworthy eating and drinking was sin.

But what is unworthy eating and drinking? Paul writes: “Anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself “ Not recognizing Jesus’ body is unbelief, not believing what he says. Worthy eating involves recognizing or believing that you are eating and drinking not just bread and wine, but as discussed above, in, with, and under it the body and blood of the Lord. More than that, however, is involved in recognizing “the body of the Lord.” More is involved than recognizing what we call the “real presence” in the sacrament. It is recognizing that the body and blood of Jesus were given and shed for our sins, for my sins. To “proclaim the Lord’s death” in the sacrament is to proclaim the purpose of his death, the forgiveness of sins, and to believe it.

For worthy eating and drinking Paul therefore says, “A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup.” This self-examination does not concern itself with my personal worthiness. I am not looking at myself to determine whether I am “good enough” to eat and drink. If worthy eating and drinking depended on personal worthiness none of us could ever accept the Lord’s invitation.

I examine myself by asking certain questions. I begin by asking: Do I recognize that I am a sinner, that because of my sin I am a lost and condemned creature? But then I continue: Do I believe that Jesus’ body and blood were given and shed for the forgiveness of all my sins? Do I also recognize the body and blood of Jesus in the sacrament, do I believe that they are truly present as Jesus said? Do I purpose with the Lord’s help to fight the battle against sin in my life? Luther’s Small Catechism contains a list of 23 “Christian Questions for those preparing to receive the Lord’s Supper.” These include in greater detail the points mentioned above.

B. CONCLUSIONS FOR OUR COMMUNION PRACTICE

In considering our practice, it might be well to remember that we cannot speak of an “emergency communion” as we speak of “emergency baptism.” The Lord says, “He that believes and is baptized will be saved.” Nowhere do we read in Scripture, “He that believes and receives the Lord’s Supper will be saved.” Hence in our confessions we speak of baptism as necessary for salvation. The same is not said of Holy Communion. In saying this we do not want to give the impression as though Holy Communion is something we can take or leave at will. This will not lead us to become lax in our communion attendance. Knowing what we do about the gracious gift of our God, we will seek it often. We will appreciate every opportunity the Lord gives us for receiving it according to his gracious will. But we also recognize that when circumstances prevent us from receiving this blessing according to his will, we do not forfeit forgiveness or salvation. Knowing that this is the Lord’s Supper, we will look to his word for direction in our personal reception of it and in the practice of our church. Because of the particular emphasis of our topic, we will want to take special note of the scriptural principles of fellowship as they relate to this sacrament.

1. Conclusions that relate to our personal use

a. Conscious of our sins, we will often seek this very personal manner in which the Lord assures us of forgiveness and salvation.

b. According to the Lords’ direction, we will prepare for worthy reception by self-examination. I wonder whether we are as intent on this as our fathers were. When there was personal announcement to the pastor, this gave opportunity for individual preparation. I also

remember the time when there was a special confessional service or sermonet as part of self-examination and preparation. Perhaps we could draw more frequent attention to the Christians Questions and encourage their private use by individuals prior to the communion service or even the evening before.

c. Keeping in mind that Scripture teaches about fellowship practices, I will not receive communion in any congregation that is not of our fellowship. I will rather forgo using this means of grace than to receive it under conditions that are not according to the Lord's will. If for some reason I am present in a Lutheran church not of our fellowship, I may be invited to join the congregation at the Lord's Table. I will then remember what the Lord says about unity and fellowship and refrain until I can receive this blessing from the Lord with those whose confession agrees with mine.

2. Conclusions that apply to our congregational practice

a. A congregation and its pastor will recognize that responsible use of this sacrament calls for what we call "close(d)" communion. The gospel we will preach to anyone who is willing to listen. We do not distribute the body and blood of the Lord to anyone who may be willing to receive it. The Lord in his word leads to certain restrictions.

b. Self-examination requires prior instruction. Consequently we instruct the children who have become members of the congregation through Holy Baptism before they are invited to Holy Communion. They need to know the commandments of God that lead us to confess our sins. They need to know the Savior who died for their sins. They need to recognize the presence of Jesus' body and blood in the sacrament. For adults who wish to join our congregations we have Bible information classes. Thus they can learn to properly examine themselves prior to communing with us.

c. For self-examination there must be both the ability and the willingness to do so. A person's mental condition may be such as to make self-examination impossible. The impenitent sinner is not willing to examine himself/herself. Responsible distribution of the sacrament will keep this in mind.

d. Our topic, however, leads us to give special consideration to the biblical principles of fellowship as they apply to participation at the Lord's Supper. Since we noted that joint reception of the Lord's Supper is always an act of Christian fellowship, we need to make this application.

We will receive at the Lord's table those whom we can recognize as one in faith with us. And how will we recognize them? In stating the biblical principles of fellowship we said: "We can recognize those who are one in faith with us on the basis of the confession of their lips and actions." In this connection it is important to remember that membership in a particular congregation and church body is a confessional matter. By joining a particular congregation I am saying: "I am in agreement with your doctrine and practice." So the primary confession we look at is church membership.

Thus we are ready to express at the Lord's Table the unity we have with all those who are members of congregations that are in confessional agreement with the WELS. Normally a Christian will commune in his own congregation. The congregation has called its pastor to administer the means of grace to its members. We, however, also readily receive guests from sister congregations when we celebrate the Lord's Supper. Only one caution. Care must be taken

that this does not present an opportunity for a member to avoid the discipline of his own congregation. If clinging to a sinful action has resulted in suspension from communion in his own congregation, this person is not to evade that by becoming a guest communicant at a sister congregation.

In summing up the Scriptural principles of church fellowship we also concluded: “We are not to practice religious or church fellowship with those who persist in false doctrine and practice. This applies to both the teachers and their followers.”

Since joining in Holy Communion is always an act of fellowship, we cannot knowingly give the body and blood of our Lord to those whose confession does not agree with ours, whose confession we are convinced is flawed by persistent error.

Such are the Catholic churches and those we group under the general heading of Reformed. The confessions of all of these contain various false doctrines. The latter in general also reject the “real presence” of the Lord’s body and blood in the sacrament. They do not “recognize the body of the Lord.” To practice “open communion” by which we would receive such at the Lord’s table is irresponsible use of this precious sacrament. Some of our Lutheran forefathers came to America to escape the demand of their government in Germany to celebrate Holy Communion jointly with the Reformed or Evangelicals as they were called. They rejected such joint communion in “union churches” as sinful unionism.

But what about “other Lutherans,” those with whom we are not in fellowship, who, however, lay claim to the Lutheran Confessions. In them they confess the “real presence” in the sacrament and confess the same teachings as we. There are Lutherans who practice what they would call “close(d) communion” by communing all Lutherans, but only Lutherans. We must, however, consider the total confession of a church body and its members.

In doing so, we find that the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) fails in its public teaching in many doctrines, particularly in permitting a diversity of teaching in also basic doctrines. Their use of the name “Lutheran” and their official subscription to the Lutheran Confessions seem to have little if any doctrinal and confessional significance. To ignore this in our communion practice would be irresponsible.

What about members of the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod (LCMS)? In 1961 our synod recognized errors in the LCMS doctrine and practice which compelled us to suspend fellowship. Since then, the situation has not improved. To practice altar fellowship with LCMS members as we observe the Lord’s Supper in our congregations is to say that the action of our synod was contrary to God’s word or that conditions have changed and that we must withdraw the suspension. This we cannot say. We cannot go into detail here. Encouraged by our Commission on Inter-Church Relations, Northwestern Publishing House published *WELS and Other Lutherans* to give information on the differences among Lutherans in America.

In today’s ecumenical climate it may seem that the churches that comprise the Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Conference are out of step with the rest of Christendom in their fellowship and communion practice. A few quotations from Werner Elert’s book, *Eucharist and Church Fellowship in the First Four Centuries* (Concordia, 1954), describe the practice that the early church learned from the apostles. He writes: “The early church was never in doubt that unity in doctrine is a prerequisite of altar fellowship. No one who taught false doctrine might receive Holy Communion in an orthodox congregation” (p.109). “There is no period in the early church when the question of the conditions and boundaries of church fellowship was not acute” (p. 141). But did this apply only to the leaders and teachers and not to the laity? We read: “Never did the relations between two churches and their bishops provide for permitting the laity to

receive the sacrament while denying the clergy the privilege of officiating in it because church fellowship was somehow incomplete or because the congregations or their bishops were of different confessions or only in partial confessional agreement. There was either complete fellowship or none at all.” (p 164). “ The modern theory that anybody may be admitted ‘as a guest’ to the Sacrament in a church of a differing confession is unknown in the early church, indeed unthinkable” (p 175). It appears that our practice of “close(d) communion” has a long history. It is the practice to which the inspired apostolic writings lead us.

3. Practical problems

The congregation and pastor who are intent on following the Lord’s directives about communion attendance will face the problem of control. This applies to guests who are present at the communion service. Some may be visitors who happened to see your church, or are looking for a new church home. Others may be mission prospects whom you invited to the service. Some may be Lutherans from ELCA or LCMS. They came because your church is Lutheran. Others are guests from sister congregations. All are strangers and as such require special concern.

Somehow we need to inform guests of our communion principles and practice. How can we do this?

I believe one of the most common ways of doing this is through a notice in the service folder. Those I have seen generally briefly state that we practice close communion and that guests are asked to speak with the pastor before communing with us. A problem this presents is that “guests” may not read the notice in time to be able to speak to the pastor before the service. Or they may in fact not read it and simply appear at the altar in spite of the notice.

Most of our churches I believe make use of an announcement card for communion. This may contain a brief explanation of our communion practice. It may also provide for listing one’s home church. This would be for guests from sister congregations. I believe, however, that it would still be good practice for guests from sister congregations to inform the pastor that they wish to be received as a guest communicant. Courtesy and good order should lead the pastor subsequently to inform the guest’s home congregation.

I have been present at communion services in which the pastor in addition to the written notice announced at the beginning of the service or prior to distribution the congregation’s “close(d) communion “ practice. This may consist simply of drawing attention to the written notice.

Our members may also be helpful. If they have guests not of our fellowship whom they are bringing to the service at which we celebrate the Lord’s Supper, they can explain our practice to their guests in advance. If they find this difficult, they can refer them to the pastor.

The announcement informs guests from churches not in fellowship with us to speak with the pastor prior to communing. What can the pastor say to someone who comes? About all he can do at that time is to extend a hearty invitation to the service but also explain that our understanding of Scripture prevents us from having open communion. We may invite them to discuss this further after the service. If the person is not just passing through, but has a more permanent interest in our church, we can schedule a meeting for further discussion. The pastor will do this in a manner that does not call the person’s Christianity into question, but shows that we are bound by what we are convinced is the Word of God. I have also seen an excellent tract a pastor prepared explaining our “close(d) communion” practice. This can be given to the person with whom we cannot discuss our practice at length and give a more detailed explanation.

What should the pastor do when a stranger appears at the altar? Should he commune or pass this person by? A quick decision is called for. After our communion practice has been explained in advance, as noted above, the pastor need not accuse himself of irresponsible use of the sacrament if he distributes the elements to the person he does not recognize. In such cases the responsibility rests with the communicant. The pastor will, however, seek to speak with the “stranger” after the service. On the other hand, if a certain person is known to the pastor and congregation to be impenitent, communion must be denied at the altar. Failing to do so would be sharing in the person’s sin in communing unworthily.

Unfortunately there are many Lutherans who may not even know of which church body they are members or that their church body is not in fellowship with all other Lutherans. It may require more than a brief announcement for them to learn that not all Lutherans are in fellowship with one another.

4. Exceptions

Are there exceptions to the practice we have outlined above? There can be unusual circumstances where in private we may serve a person we cannot commune in a public service. In the private setting we may recognize the person’s true confession to Christ and realize that membership in an erring church body is a weakness in understanding. I’m thinking, for example, of an aged LCMS parent living with a child belonging to our congregation. The parent wishes to retain membership in the LCMS congregation. The pastor’s contact with the parent reveals a simple faith in the Lord Jesus and the teachings of Scripture, not aware of any doctrinal problems in the LCMS. The bed-ridden parent desires the comfort of the Lord’s Supper which the LCMS pastor is unable to provide. To deny the request for private communion of such a person would show little concern for a soul that is looking to the Savior for forgiveness, peace, and rest.

Being exceptions, each case needs to be judged individually. This does not set aside the need to look at the person’s confession but recognizes the situation where church membership may be a matter of weakness of understanding and does not call for primary consideration. The private setting in which the action occurs avoids the offense that can be caused in a public worship service.

May we never lose sight of the riches of God’s grace, granted to us in the Supper of our Lord. With minds captive to God’s holy word we stand in awe and reverence before the sacrament of the Lord’s body and blood, given and shed for our salvation. May we as congregations and pastors responsibly administer and use it as he directs so that the bonds of fellowship in Christ and with one another may be strengthened in the one faith we confess. May we labor under him to reach out to sinners, leading them to repentance and faith and to worthy reception of this gift of our Lord.

Lord Jesus Christ, you have prepared This feast for our salvation;
It is your body and your blood, And at your invitation
As weary souls, with sin oppressed, We come to you for needed rest,
For comfort, and for pardon.

Grant that we worthily receive Your supper, Lord, our Savior, And, truly grieving
for our sins, May prove by our behavior That we are thankful for your grace And
day by day may run our race, In holiness increasing.

For your consoling supper, Lord, Be praised throughout all ages!
Preserve it, for in ev’ry place The world against it rages.

Grant that this sacrament may be A blessed comfort unto me
When living and when dying. (CW 312, 1,7,8)