

THE PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICE OF
CHURCH FELLOWSHIP

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Nearly two-thirds of the present WELS pastors were too young to have been involved in the 1961 decision to suspend fellowship with the Missouri Synod. I was in high school at the time and, although I knew it happened, I paid little attention. I did not study the issues involved or read the pamphlets written at that time. I and most of the other 700+ pastors of my age or younger have not been called upon to make the principles of church fellowship our own to the degree that the pastors of that tumultuous time were. For us those principles have been to a large extent a list of things we do not do with people who believe differently than we. Our application of those principles has had a decidedly negative tone.

In 1987 by the grace of God and the appointment of the Conference of Presidents I became a member of the Commission on Inter-Church Relations. There I saw a different side of church fellowship. There I saw how far our leaders were willing to go to build up ties with other Christians. I saw the many years spent patiently helping the struggling church in East Germany. I saw what efforts were made to assist a handful of pastors in Sweden. I saw how the CICR was willing to travel to Eau Claire, Wisconsin, in the dead of winter in hopes of reestablishing the bond of fellowship with the Church of the Lutheran Confession. I saw in the activities and attitudes of the CICR a positive, exciting and upbuilding side to church fellowship.

I undertake this study in the hope that it will help me to understand more fully the principles and practice of church fellowship. As a result I hope to be better equipped to live up to the responsibilities God has given to every Christian to "build up the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."

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"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" (Ga 3:26-28). The Holy Spirit, working through baptism, has brought each Christian to faith and made him a child of God. A special bond unites us and holds us close to our Lord.

That bond embraces more than the individual Christian and his God. The Holy Spirit has brought many others to faith in Christ also. He draws all such believers into the body of Christ, the Holy Christian Church. A special bond of unity and closeness holds together all God's children, for we are living bricks built together to form the temple of God.

This spiritual bond of unity and our God-given desire to enjoy it have brought us together with like-minded Christians in an earthly body known as the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. In this body we enjoy a special fellowship based on oneness in faith and confession. Our heartfelt desire is to preserve that unity which we enjoy, but we desire more than that. We want to extend the body of Christ so others are drawn into oneness with us.

This thesis will be an in-depth and extended look at the scriptural doctrine and practice of church fellowship. I am confident God will bless this study of Scripture so that my faith in Jesus is strengthened and my understanding of his will is increased. It is my prayer that this study will benefit others also and contribute in some small way to a

God-pleasing and united practice of church fellowship in our beloved synod.

In the first part of this thesis I will give a brief historical overview of fellowship practices from New Testament times to the present. I will concentrate especially on that part of the history which is significant to us as WELS Lutherans today. The second part of this thesis will step back and make an exegetical and systematic study to rediscover the principles and practice of church fellowship. I say "rediscover" because I hope to make an original study. I do not intend to follow the products of previous studies although certainly I will refer to them at times. The third part of this thesis will address a plethora of related principles. There is an abundance of other scriptural teachings which complement what the Bible says on fellowship. I plan to explore some of these complementary principles which are also necessary for a fully scriptural doctrine and practice of fellowship. The final part of this thesis becomes practical and discusses the application of scriptural principles to a number of everyday situations.

May God bless this effort!

I. HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF CHURCH FELLOWSHIP

From the earliest days of the Christian church, believers have desired to express and enjoy the fellowship that is theirs in the body of Christ. We see that already in the days after Pentecost. "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer" (Ac 2:42). The oneness of faith they shared led them to special acts of closeness and love.

All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God...." (Ac 2:44-47).-

As the church grew and spread throughout the world, the Christians cherished their fellowship and continued to cultivate it. When discord threatened the unity of the Corinthian congregation, Paul wrote: "I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought" (1 Cor 1:10). Under the blessing of the Holy Spirit the Christians enjoyed their special relationship with each other and with their God. "If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin" (1 Jn 1:7).

When the children of God have a good thing going, you know that Satan is sure to disrupt it. So it was in the early church; false prophets and false brothers sought to invade the fellowship and destroy it. The New Testament church soon found it could not include in its fellowship all who claimed to be brothers and sisters in the faith. The apostles had to write with tears in their eyes of instances when fellowship could not be practiced.

There were cases when fellowship had to be severed with one who formerly was part of the unity. Jesus had warned that day would come when he spelled out the steps to follow "if your brother sins against you." When all else fails, fellowship with that unrepentant sinner must be broken. "If he refuses to listen to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or tax collector" (Mt 18:15-17). Paul instructed the Corinthians to do just that with the adulterer who took his father's wife.

Shouldn't you rather have been filled with grief and have put out of your fellowship the man who did this?...I am writing you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat. (1 Cor 5:2-11)

Severing of fellowship in the New Testament church came not just when someone was impenitent of sin in his conduct, but also when a brother held to a false doctrine. This was the case in Thessalonica where false understanding concerning the immediate return of Christ led some to refuse to work. Paul wrote:

In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command you, brothers, to keep away from every brother who is idle and does not live according to the teaching you received from us.... If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of him. Do not associate with him, in order that he may feel ashamed. (2 Th 3:6&14)

That early Christian church also found that outsiders came desiring to be included in the fellowship and accepted as family-members of God. Some, however, came with false teachings to stir up trouble. To such false brothers the hand of fellowship was not to be extended. John wrote: "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 Jn 10-11).

There was one other group to whom the Christians could not extend the hand of fellowship. All around them were the unbelievers who chose to follow the false gods of the day.

Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God.... Therefore come out from them and be separate, says the Lord. Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you. (2 Cor 6:14-17)

Church fellowship principles and their application took on new importance and a new twist with the coming of the Reformation. Now for the first time in the history of the church separate bodies of Christians began to exist side by side with a common heritage and many common beliefs but significant differences in doctrine. What is the God-pleasing attitude toward individuals and churches which we may well recognize as part of the Holy Christian Church, yet at odds with Scripture in some of their teachings? Martin Luther had to come to grips with that question.

A good example of how Luther handled the issue of church fellowship is the Colloquy at Marburg. When Luther and Zwingli met, joint worship and prayer began the first sessions. Luther, Zwingli, and Bucer each took a turn at preaching. Such joint worship was deemed proper because, as they began, they were in fellowship as members of the Roman Catholic Church. There was no "Lutheran" and no "Reformed" church. Luther, Zwingli and the others were Roman Catholic Christians seeking to reform their church. Differences in doctrinal stands and confessions were not yet clear. Initially they could approach one another as brothers seeking to discuss and understand God's Word and then join in a harmonious confession of its doctrines.

The situation changed, however, once Luther had to conclude that they did not agree with one another and were not united in their confession of God's truth. In spite of Zwingli's insistence that their doctrinal differences regarding the Lord's Supper in no way obstructed

fellowship and inspite of considerable political pressure for unity at all costs, Luther and his followers ceased all fellowship activities with Zwingli and his followers. To Nicholas Gerbel in Strassburg Luther wrote on the last day of the colloquy:

As we have forcefully defended our position and the other side has yielded much of theirs and remained stubborn in the one article on the Sacrament of the Altar only, they were dismissed in peace....Charity and peace we owe even to our enemies. They were told, to be sure, that in case they should fail to come to their senses concerning this article they might enjoy our charity, but could not be regarded by us as brethren and members of Christ."¹

Zwingli's clinging to his error on the sacrament made it impossible to regard him as a brother. Notice the contrast that is made by Luther. Even to your enemies you owe charity and peace, but Christian fellowship could not be accorded even though persistent adherence to error in only one article of faith separated them.

Luther expounds on his position in his commentary on Galatians:

We are prepared to preserve peace and love with all men if only they will permit us to keep the doctrine of faith entire and uncorrupted. If they will not promise this, they will demand love from us in vain. Damned be that love which is maintained at the cost of the doctrines of the faith! Before the doctrine all must yield, love, apostles and angels from heaven. Their deceitful way of minimizing this matter shows clearly how highly they regard the majesty of the Word. If they would believe that it is God's Word, they would not play around with it in this way. Instead they would treat it with the greatest respect and believe it without saying anything against it or doubting it. Then they would know that all God's words are only one and only one is all. Then they would know that all of God's teachings are only one and only one is all of them. If a single one is set aside, they will gradually all be lost. They form one single, harmonious whole....

'He that is confusing you will bear his judgment, whoever he may be'(5:10). Here Paul acts as a judge in court and condemns the false prophets....

In a similar way we at present excommunicate and condemn those who maintain that the doctrine of the sacrament of the body and blood of Christ is uncertain and who do violence to the words of Christ at the institution of the Supper. With utmost force we cling to all the articles of the Christian faith. Both large and small (for us not one is small) shall be pure and certain. This is extremely necessary. For the doctrine is our only light. It gives us light and leads us and shows us the way to heaven. If it is made unsteady at any point, the whole must finally begin to rock. Once that happens, love will not be able to bail us out. We can be saved without love and harmony in our relations with the sacramentarians, but it cannot be so without pure doctrine and faith. Otherwise we will gladly maintain love and harmony with those who like ourselves have a Christian view concerning all the articles of Christian doctrine. Yes, so far as we are concerned, we will also gladly live in peace with our enemies. We shall pray for those who out of ignorance ridicule our doctrine, and persecute

1 Hermann Sasse, This Is My Body, p. 273.

us. But we cannot maintain peace with those who knowingly and deliberately and in conflict with their own consciences do violence to one or more articles of Christian doctrine.²

This understanding of church fellowship was included in the Augsburg Confession as the true teaching of Scripture:

To the true unity of the church it is enough to agree concerning the doctrine of the gospel and the administration of the sacraments. Nor is it necessary that human traditions, that is, rites or ceremonies, instituted by men, should be everywhere alike.³

The above statement could be misunderstood as it is by those who maintain that only agreement in the central or basic truths of salvation is necessary for church fellowship. The Formula of Concord, however, leaves no doubt what the confessors mean in this context by the term gospel.

We believe, teach and confess also that no church should condemn another because one has less or more external ceremonies not commanded by God than the other, if otherwise there is agreement among them in the doctrine and all its articles, as also in the right use of the holy sacraments.⁴

In the years that followed the Reformation evidences of this "strict" interpretation of church fellowship continued to be seen. Friedrich Balduin, professor of theology in Wittenberg, for example, wrote in the early 1600's:

We should not confirm errorists in their error, which we do if we take part in their services. For in this way we give them the hope that finally we will come to agreement with them also in the remaining points. They will look upon our participation in their services as a sign that we thereby confess that we have separated from them without cause, since in action we approve of their worship.⁵

A significant incident took place in Thorn, Poland in 1645, which illustrated the orthodox approach to church fellowship. The king of Poland had convened a colloquy, aimed at reconciling the factions in the Christian church. In attendance were 28 Roman Catholic representatives, 24 Reformed and 28 Lutherans. Each group first conducted a worship service by itself, and they then all assembled

2 Seth Erlandsson, Church Fellowship, pp 16-18. 3 Concordia Triglotta, p 47.
4 Ibid, p 831. 5 Erlandsson, op cit, p 19.

for the meeting. At the first session the question of opening and closing prayers at the meetings arose. The Roman Catholics and Reformed favored the idea. The Lutherans, however, declined to practice prayer fellowship with the others. Each day the Lutherans prayed in an adjoining room and then came to the meeting.

An interesting footnote to this colloquy is the fact that in 1908 the Missouri Synod Lutheraner commented:

From this we can see 1. that we are following the same practice as the faithful Lutherans of Poland in the year 1645; 2. that this demand for public prayer with errorists and heretics is a characteristic of the Reformed, but is foreign to the true Lutheran Church. ⁶

For most Lutherans in the land of the Reformation clear and scriptural practice of church fellowship ceased with the coming of the Prussian Union. To celebrate the 300th anniversary of the Reformation in 1817, King Frederick William III announced the union of the Reformed and Lutherans into one evangelical congregation at the court and among the military. In 1821 he ordered that anyone entering the ministry must pledge loyalty to the new Union Church. In 1823 he ordered new pastors to subscribe to the confessions of the united evangelical church "insofar as these confessions were in harmony." Then in 1830 he put the finishing touches on the new church by ordering that the names Reformed and Lutheran no longer be used. He called for a joint communion celebration throughout Prussia to celebrate the 300th anniversary of the Augsburg Confession. In 1832 the army began enforcing the decrees. Most pastors and churches went along with the Union. Those who refused were given the label the "Old Lutherans." They were persecuted and imprisoned at first; but then in 1845 Frederick William IV granted them the legal right to exist.

6 Commission on Doctrinal Matters, Fellowship Then and Now, pp 29-30.

In the United States of the 1800's numerous confessional struggles and fellowship battles were being waged. We will concentrate our attention on a rather brief overview of events in the Wisconsin and Missouri Synods.

In 1841, following the Martin Stephan scandal, the fledgling Missouri Synod agonized over whether it was part of the Holy Christian Church. To help find the scriptural answers, C.F.W. Walther penned the Altenburg Theses. Item VI of these theses is subject to misunderstanding:

Even heterodox companies have God's power. Even among them the goods of the Church may be validly administered, the ministry established, the sacraments administered and the keys of the kingdom of heaven exercised.⁷

Walther is saying that, even if his own church body torn by scandal and error is judged heterodox, still it is part of the church because the Word and sacraments are administered there. Fellowship is not the issue in the Altenburg Theses. The point should be made, however, that the scriptural practice of fellowship never implies that only those with whom we have confessional fellowship are numbered among the saved. We recognize that "the Lord knows those who are his" (2 Tm 2:19) and he has believers also in heterodox churches with whom Scripture forbids orthodox Christians to fellowship.

Between 1856 and 1859 Dr. Walther called a series of free conferences. These conferences opened with joint prayer. How could Dr. Walther and orthodox Lutherans allow such joint prayer when no formal declarations of confessional fellowship existed between the synods represented? The answer is clear when we view what the basis of these free conferences was. S. S. Schmucker of the General Synod

⁷ I have included this paragraph on the Altenburg Theses because Item VI is used by Dr. Samuel Nafzger, Executive Director of LCMS's Commission on Theology and Church Relations, to support his "Levels of Fellowship" proposal. Christian News, 10/26/87, p 20.

had suggested his Definite Platform, better known as the "American Recension (Revision) of the Augsburg Confession." In contrast to this perversion, many in America wanted to stand on the Unaltered Augsburg Confession. It was to such individuals, individuals who subscribed without reservation to the Unaltered Augsburg Confession, that the invitation to the free conferences was extended. The invitation read:

The undersigned ministers of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the United States, with the conviction that the unity and the well-being of our Lutheran Zion will be greatly advanced through the free expression of opinions regarding various interests of our Church in this land by brethren who are united in faith, herewith extend an invitation to all members of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the United States who hold the Unaltered Augsburg Confession to be a true presentation of the teachings of the Word of God to meet with them.⁸

In an age when the doctrinal stances of the various synods in America were very much in flux and unclear, those invited to the free conferences were clear in their confession of and commitment to the U.A.C. There existed a unity among them that called for expression of fellowship. (It is significant that, when another series of free conferences were held between 1903 and 1906, there were no joint prayers. It was clear that doctrinal differences existed and confessional fellowship could not be practiced.)

The General Council was established as a confessional alternative to the unionism of the General Synod. Subscription without reservation to the U.A.C. was to be its hallmark. Surprisingly our Wisconsin Synod was among the synods that worked at organizing this new General Council. I say "surprisingly" because our synod was founded by Lutherans who had gone along with the Prussian Union. In fact, our synod was founded in Milwaukee, even though both Missouri and Buffalo were already there. Missouri and Buffalo were Old Lutherans, and our pastors wanted to stay away from their strict ideas.

⁸ Commission on Doctrinal Matters, op cit, p 8.

The General Council was founded to provide a confessional home for such Lutherans as held to the U.A.C. In spite of its subscription to the U.A.C., however, the General Council from its beginning failed to take a clear and definite stand on lodgery, pulpit fellowship, altar fellowship and chiliasm. On paper the General Council took a scriptural and confessional position but then declared: "Exceptions to the rule belong in the sphere of privilege, not right."⁹ In other words, although practicing altar and pulpit fellowship with the Reformed could not be claimed as a "right," it was allowed as a "privilege" or special favor. Similar exceptions would be permitted with regard to advocates of lodges and millennialism.

The Wisconsin Synod worked to organize the General Council in 1868, but never really joined. Instead, in one of the miraculous transformations of all time, it was drawn into doctrinal agreement and fellowship with Missouri. "Theses on Open Questions" by Dr. Walther in 1868 spelled out the basis on which the Wisconsin and Missouri established fellowship. The understanding on fellowship was clear:

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

THESIS V. The Church militant must indeed aim at and strive for complete unity of faith and doctrine, but it never will attain a higher degree of unity than a fundamental one.

THESIS VI. Even errors in the writings of recognized orthodox teachers of the Church, now deceased, concerning nonfundamental doctrines of the second order, do not brand them as errorists nor deprive them of the honor of orthodoxy.

THESIS VII. No man has the privilege, and to no man may the privilege be granted, to believe and to teach otherwise than God has revealed in His Word, no matter whether it pertain to primary or secondary fundamental articles of faith, to fundamental or nonfundamental doctrines, to matters of faith or of practice, to historical matters or others that are subject to the light of reason, to important or seemingly unimportant matters.

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

⁹ Ibid, p 10.

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

THESIS X. From the fact that the Church militant cannot attain a higher degree of unity than a fundamental one, it does not follow that any error against the Word of God may be granted equal rights in the Church with the truth, nor that it may be tolerated.¹⁰

Two years later Dr. Walther's "Theses on Communion Fellowship With Those Who Believe Differently" spoke even more clearly.

THESIS III. Every man is obligated to recognize the true visible church and, if he has opportunity, to join it.

THESIS IV. Every man is obligated to avoid heterodox churches and in the event that he has belonged to a heterodox church, his obligation is to renounce it and separate himself from it.

THESIS V. True Christians are also found in heterodox fellowships as a result of their lack of knowledge.

THESIS VI. Those who are aware of the partial apostasy of the church fellowship to which they belong and yet continue to remain within that fellowship are not to be considered among the weak but are either lukewarm... or Epicurean religious sceptics who... would ask with Pilate, "What is truth?"¹¹

This strict understanding of church fellowship remained the hallmark of the Synodical Conference from its inception until well into the twentieth century. A few illustrations will suffice.

In 1905 a visiting Missouri Synod pastor remained seated during a devotion at a district meeting of the Ohio Synod. The Kirchenblatt, the newspaper of the Iowa Synod, commented on this incident this way: "It is one of the saddest errors of the Missouri conscience that it considers all joining in prayer as a practice of church fellowship."

Dr. Bente responded in Lehre and Wehre:

The Kirchenblatt of the Iowa Synod makes the whole matter very easy for itself. It simply claims that the prayer fellowship which the Ohio Synod men demanded was not church fellowship, and therefore the Missouri Synod man gave offense. That may be easy to say, but is hardly convincing.¹²

Adolph Hoenecke wrote:

To refrain completely from all prayer fellowship and fellowship in worship with those who are of a different faith, this alone accords with the Word of God.¹³

Dr. Franz Pieper wrote:

Open questions are "only such questions which the Holy Scripture does not answer and thus leaves open." We have embarked on a wrong course, if we first determine how much we believe we can agree on and then decide that these are the points which are generally binding.

10 Theses on Open Questions, from CICR files. 11 Christian News, 10/26/87, p 20. 12 Commission, op cit, p 21-22. 13 Ibid, p 31.

Thereby Christ's words, "Teach them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you," are changed to mean: Teach them to observe that on which we can come to agreement! These unscriptural ideas form the basis for the many attempts which are made to bring about ecclesiastical mergers without unity in Christian doctrine. An example of this we have in the Evangelical Alliance (since 1846) and the Reformierte Kirche, which always shows an inclination to seek union with the Lutheran Church without any demand that the differences in doctrine be removed.¹⁴

Dr. Theodore Engelder wrote:

The passages which prohibit pulpit fellowship and altar fellowship apply with equal force to prayer fellowship. Uniting with errorists in joint worship in general, and common prayer in particular is not avoiding them, Romans 16:17, but recognizing their practices as God-pleasing, II John 10-11....If we cou'd fellowship with the representatives of false teaching in uniting with them in prayer, we could consistently exchange pulpits with them and meet with them at a common altar.¹⁵

Or one more quote from Dr. F. Pieper:

The Holy Scriptures very emphatically and in manifold ways teach that all fellowship with false doctrine is forbidden by God and is harmful to the Church.¹⁶

Such was the position adopted by the 1941 Missouri Synod convention in Ft. Wayne. It declared:

No pulpit, altar, or prayer fellowship has been established between us and the American Lutheran Church, and until such fellowship has been officially declared by the synods concerned, no action is to be taken by any of our pastors or congregations which ignores the fact that we are not yet united.¹⁷

A change from the time-honored position was clearly in the wind, however. Already in 1940 the LCMS had said: "Ordinarily prayer fellowship involves church fellowship."¹⁸ The door was ajar. Then in 1944 came the fateful resolution:

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 of the Ft. Wayne Convention, provided such prayer does not imply denial of truth or support of error. Local conditions will determine the advisability of such prayer. Above all, the conscience of a brother must not be violated nor offense be given.¹⁹

The handwriting was clearly on the wall! Joint prayer does not require complete confessional agreement. Joint prayer can be practiced with the ALC under certain circumstances. There can be joint prayers which are not prayer fellowship. Missouri was changing.

¹⁴ Erlandsson, op cit, p 34. ¹⁵ Commission, op cit, p 20. ¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Irwin Habeck, Entrenched Unionistic Practices, p 22. ¹⁸ Ibid. ¹⁹ Ibid.

"The Statement of the 44," which was presented in 1945 and then withdrawn in 1947, left no doubt where some of Missouri's influential men intended to lead their church.

We affirm our conviction that any two or more Christians may pray together to the Triune God in the name of Jesus Christ if the purpose for which they meet and pray is right according to the Word of God. This obviously includes meetings of groups called for the purpose of discussing doctrinal differences....

We affirm our conviction that in keeping with the historic Lutheran tradition and in harmony with the Synodical resolution adopted in 1938 regarding Church fellowship, such fellowship is possible without complete agreement in details of doctrine and practice which have never been considered divisive in the Lutheran Church. 20

Years of Bible study, theological discussions and patient admonition followed -- years that saw Missouri's opposition to scouting evaporate, Missouri's wavering on the doctrine of the Antichrist, Scharlemann's "The Bible has mistakes in it," repeated assurances by Missouri leadership that "nothing has changed," the pamphlet war, the Joint Committee appointed to study the doctrines in question, the CLC exodus, and two Conferences of Theologians -- until in 1960 it was clear that Missouri and Wisconsin had reached an impasse. The impasse was spelled out in two documents, Missouri's "Theology of Fellowship Part II" and Wisconsin's "Church Fellowship."

Missouri's statement

A decision as to the propriety or impropriety of joint prayer [must be based on] the situation in which such prayer is offered, the character of the prayer, its purpose, and its probable effect on those who unite in prayer. Refusal of prayer may be understood as a harsh rebuff where none is called for.... 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 Christian's readiness to participate in every work that promotes the weal of mankind. 21

Wisconsin's statement

Church fellowship is every joint expression, manifestation, and demonstration of the common faith in which Christians on the basis of their confession find themselves to be united with one another.... We classify these joint expressions of faith in various ways according to the particular realm of activity in which they occur, e.g. pulpit fellowship, altar fellowship, prayer fellowship.... Yet insofar as they are joint expressions of faith they are all essentially one and the same thing, and are all properly covered by a common designation, namely, church fellowship. Church fellowship should therefore be treated as a unit concept, covering every joint expression, manifestation, and demonstration of a common faith.... On the basis of the foregoing, we find it to be an untenable position... to envision

20 Concordian Historical Institute Quarterly, vol 43, #4 (November, 1970), p 151-152. 21 Habeck, op cit, p 22.

fellowship relations (in a congregation, in a church body, in a church federation, in a church agency, in a cooperative church activity) like so many steps of a ladder, each requiring gradually increasing or decreasing measure of unity in doctrine and practice.²²

In the years since the impasse of 1960 much has happened in both Wisconsin and Missouri. Both church bodies have grappled with their stand on church fellowship -- and become increasingly set in their understanding and conviction of what Scripture says.

In the Wisconsin Synod the "unit concept" understanding leads our church to continue to refrain from the military chaplaincy program, from ecumenical gatherings, from baccalaureate services, from scouts, and from interdenominational groups such as the National Council of Churches. The full implications of this unit concept were discussed extensively in our midst, especially in the years immediately following our break with Missouri. Pamphlets like Professor Schuetze's Timely Topics discussed practical questions such as "May We Pray at Table With People Not of the Wisconsin Synod?"

Sad to report, from the perspective of this writer the LCMS has become more open in its unscriptural doctrine and practice of church fellowship. In February, 1983, President Ralph Bohlmann delivered a paper to the LCMS COP proposing that pastors may, in connection with Luther's 500th birthday, join in joint celebrations, concerts, etc., if there is no sermon or sacrament, clergy are not vested, and "the event does not imply that doctrinal unity exists among the sponsors or participants."²³ Valid reasons for such joint celebrations include thanksgiving for the doctrinal heritage of Lutheranism, prayer for greater doctrinal unity and the encouragement of appropriate cooperative efforts in externals. A specious distinction is made between "worship services" which require full fellowship and "convocations"

²² Commission on Inter-Church Relations, Doctrinal Statements of the WELS, p 49-55. ²³ Lutheran Witness, May 2, 1983, p 4.

or "rallies" which do not, even if they include elements of worship. By Bohlmann's definition a worship service is narrowly defined as an occasion when clergy are vested and a sermon or sacrament is included.

In The Lutheran Witness Dr. Nafzger elaborated on the implication of Bohlmann's proposal:

Quite clearly, the agreement which we in the LCMS have with one another not to participate "in the services and sacramental rites of heterodox congregations" is based on Scriptural and Confessional principles. The question before us today is whether the renunciation of all joint worship services with all those in doctrinal disagreement with our church is the only or best way to apply these principles in every situation. Does this practice adequately recognize and give expression to various levels of agreement in the confession of the faith? These are questions which we in the LCMS will be discussing in the coming months. ²⁴

In 1987 Rev. Nafzger presented a study called "Inter-Christian Relationships/Levels of Fellowship" to the Circuit Counselors' Conference. In this paper he maintains that different levels of fellowship exist depending on the amount of doctrinal unity present between church bodies and that different fellowship activities are appropriate to each level. The paper was severely criticized by the Council of Presidents and the faculties of both seminaries and was rejected by his own Commission on Theology and Church Relations.

Rev. Nafzger's idea did not die, however. In January of 1989, President Bohlmann in a video to Missouri's Circuit Counselors spoke of "levels of relationship" and a "continuum." There is a continuum, he maintained, with fellowship as members of the Holy Christian Church on one end (the lesser end?) and full altar/pulpit fellowship on the other. This continuum has levels along the way, he feels, and the amount of fellowship practiced must be appropriate to the amount of agreement that exists. As Bohlmann looks to the future, he says he sees a growing number of contacts between likeminded Lutherans of the LCMS, ELCA and WELS in smaller group settings and activities. The following is a significant exchange from the video.

²⁴ Ibid, 1983, p 208.

Nafzger: When we talk about levels of fellowship, at least when I talk about levels of fellowship, I was addressing that problem of how can we relate to those whom we recognize on the basis of their confession, Billy Graham for example, as a brother in Christ but with whom we disagree in the confession of our faith in Jesus Christ. And we say these differences are important, but we continue to have a relationship with him, even though it's not the kind of relationship that we call altar and pulpit fellowship.

Bohlmann: So what you're really saying with that terminology whether you use "levels of fellowship" or "levels of relationship," which may be a little less ambiguous for a lot of people in the church, is that Christian people today, and this has always been true, exist and live out their Christian life and action in a variety of relationships simultaneously, ranging all the way from a kind of minimal agreement, I suppose, but nonetheless important unity that we have among all of us who believe in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior, ranging all the way from a relatively minimal agreement in this faith, all the way over to the other end of the continuum, where we have full agreement in the whole doctrine of the Gospel as taught in the Scripture, and then establish fellowship and have a strong altar and pulpit fellowship, unity of confession. You're suggesting, as I think I am too, that between one end and the other end of this continuum, the Christian finds himself at various levels and various points where there are agreements, but at some points disagreements, and that we need to be perhaps more precise in identifying what we can do as a result of where we find ourselves in a relationship at any point.

Nafzger: Precisely.²⁵

In his "Letter to Pastors" of June, 1989, Bohlmann makes it absolutely clear where he stands regarding the "unit concept."

We should be clear about two things. One is that the leaders of our Synod, including the CTCR, stand fully committed to the principles of fellowship of The Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod. The other is that the LCMS does not hold to a "unit concept" of fellowship, whether that of the WELS or of individuals within our church body. If "levels of relationship" terminology (used by the Synod in 1981 Resolution 3-03A) is not helpful in making that point, then let's find other terminology.²⁶

Bohlmann clearly knows the WELS "unit concept" position and openly discards it. Of greater surprise, however, is the fact that a LCMS conservative like Professor Kurt Marquart, while attacking Bohlmann's continuum, also attacks the WELS position.

What is wrong with Wisconsin's formulation is not the idea that church fellowship is basically one indivisible "unit"--that is a Confessional, Lutheran commonplace -- but rather the impossibly broad and all-inclusive definition of this "unit" as "covering every joint expression...."

The Europeans faulted the Wisconsin definition basically for its orientation to individual, personal faith, rather than to the objective marks of the church....

With the stress on individual "Christians," rather than on churches, pure doctrine and the pure marks become fuzzy and recede into the background. As a result heresy cannot be seen properly as a revolt against God's revelation and the foundation of the one church, and fellowship with heresy is not seen as bringing in a counter-church against the one church.

It is clear that if we must first riddle about the personal spiritual status of individuals, the application of Romans 16:17 and all parallel

²⁵ CICR transcript. ²⁶ Ralph Bohlmann, "Letter to Pastors," CN, 7/17/89, p 11.

texts becomes problematical if not impossible. But if the categories are objective (churches, church fellowship, orthodoxy, heterodoxy), then the New Testament condemnations of false teaching and false teachers apply directly and with full force.²⁷

Marquart accuses Wisconsin of judging subjectively another's "faith" rather than judging on the basis of "the objective marks of the church." His attack seems to be off-target, however, because the WELS documents clearly state that common faith is determined objectively "on the basis of their common confession." The WELS spells out:

In selecting specific individuals or groups for a joint expression of faith, we can do this only on the basis of their confession. It would be presumptuous on our part to attempt to recognize Christians on the basis of the personal faith in their hearts.²⁸

The WELS would certainly agree with Marquart that another's altar and pulpit fellowships would be one very fair and objective measure of his confession. We should also note that Marquart's critique seems to address a side issue. His view of "unit concept" itself is unclear. He says that unit concept is "a Confessional Lutheran commonplace," but he then seems to reject it anyway.

For whatever the reason President Bohlmann chose the first half of 1989 to make a very public and forceful push for acceptance of "levels of fellowship" in the LCMS. It would be correct to say that he put his prestige and his reelection on the line. To his credit he was honest about where he wants to lead the synod, and he gave the convention the opportunity to reject that course by turning him out of office. The fact that the July convention reelected Bohlmann would seem to prove that the "unit concept" approach to fellowship of the old Synodical Conference is dead among the majority in Missouri. The fact that 48% did not vote for Bohlmann may indicate that "unit concept" is still alive in a substantial minority.

²⁷ Kurt Marquart, "Levels of Fellowship": A Response, CTO, Jan, 1989, p 256-257. ²⁸ Commission, Doctrinal Statements...., p 52.