

### III. A PLETHORA OF RELATED PRINCIPLES

The scriptural principles of church fellowship are clear, and I doubt if any in our midst would disagree with the truths I presented in Parts I and II of this thesis. The doctrine of fellowship does not exist in a vacuum, however. There is an abundance of other doctrines in Scripture -- a plethora of principles we could say. Some of these other doctrines impinge on areas covered by the scriptural principles of church fellowship, and sometimes the rigid application of one doctrine would result in actions which are in conflict with another doctrine. That cannot be right for God does not contradict himself.

If we are going to be faithful to God's Word, therefore, we cannot view any issue from the perspective of one scriptural teaching only. For example, in Matthew 5:16 Jesus says: let men see your good works. Then in the same sermon in chapter 6:1 he says: do your acts of charity in secret, not to be seen by men. An attempt to apply rigidly -- legalistically -- both verses would result in a hopeless conflict. A close look, however, at the passages shows that they actually complement each other. Jesus says: do your good works in order to glorify God (chapter 5). Therefore do not do them with the motive of drawing attention and glory to yourself (chapter 6).

In a similar way with regard to every doctrine of Scripture we must weigh all that God says in his Word and then apply the truths in a way that is consistent with them all. In other words, when considering our dealings with others inside and outside the church, we cannot view everything as a church fellowship issue only. We must consider a plethora of related principles, which complement the scriptural principles of fellowship.

## A. Cooperation in Externals

Christians are to be cooperative, caring, helpful people. Such qualities are fruits of faith and also ways to let our light shine in a sin-darkened world. Consider some of the Bible's directives to us:

Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people.... (Ga 6:9-10)

We pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way; bearing fruit in every good work.... (Col 1:10)

Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. (1 Tm 6:18)

Do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased. (He 13:16)

Live such good lives among the pagans, that though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us. Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every authority instituted among men: whether to the king, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men. (1 Pe 2:12-15)

The message of such passages is clear. Christians are to be ready at all times to do good for others -- believers and unbelievers -- no matter who they may be. As part of this Christians -- individually and corporately -- will be involved in worthwhile endeavors with others.

The scriptural principles of fellowship do not forbid cooperation in externals. In fact, Scripture encourages such cooperation in all that is good and serves for the welfare of others. In such endeavors we can cooperate even with Buddhists or atheists. For in and of themselves such cooperative ventures do not require or imply a joint confession of faith.<sup>39</sup> Unfortunately, however, pastors and church leaders often seek to inject an ecumenical aspect. Scripture requires us to

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39 The LCMS' "Preamble: A Statement of Inter-Lutheran Relationships" misses the point and suggests that cooperation in externals is some kind of middle ground between no fellowship and full fellowship -- a sort of partial fellowship. A mid-point on Bohlmann's continuum? "Churches seeking to establish altar and pulpit fellowship whether or not they are associated in a council may choose to cooperate and work together in certain areas (cooperatio in externis). However, such cooperation and joint work does not properly include the joint worship and activity in Word and sacraments (communio in sacris) associated with church bodies which have altar and pulpit fellowship with each other." My question is: Can't we cooperate with anyone?

be on guard, therefore, that a legitimate matter of external cooperation not be taken or promoted as an evidence that confessional fellowship exists. A church softball league, for example, can properly include Catholics, Methodists and Lutherans of all shapes and stripes as long as it is just a softball league. In such a case that is no different than the church playing in a city league which includes Joe's Tavern and Barney's Bowling Alley. Such a church league would be improper, however, if it insisted on beginning each game with a joint prayer or if it stated, even in dust-covered bylaws on a shelf somewhere, that it existed as "an expression of our essential unity as Christians."<sup>40</sup> I was caught in a similar predicament at an anti-abortion rally on the Capitol steps in Lansing. The politicians spoke of the need to get out the vote to stop abortion-funding (which was good), and then the ministers all joined hands on the steps for a prayer chain (which was not good).

Perhaps cooperation in externals should be preached more often from our pulpits and taught more clearly in our classrooms. The bitterness that often exists in families, engendered by mixed marriages and differences in religious belief, is certainly not God-pleasing. It seems totally contradictory to Jesus' words which encourage us to love even our enemies and do good to them. It is pertinent too that Paul instructed those who are married to remain faithful to a heathen spouse, with the hope that the unbeliever would "be won over without talk by the behavior of their wives, when they see the purity and reverence of their lives" (1 Pe 3:1-2; cf. also 1 Cor 7:12-14). All

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<sup>40</sup> The league may be billed "for Christian fellowship." Even that does not necessarily make it improper. Rather the definition of fellowship must be investigated. If the league means the word in the sense of church fellowship, we cannot participate. If the league means to say friendship or socializing, that is completely proper.

of us could profit from self-examination asking: Is my behavior a tool to win over the lost?

### B. Preach the Gospel to Every Creature

God does not want his children to lock the mystery of their faith in their hearts and to walk alone as solitary pilgrims in the world until God takes them to their heavenly home. Christ gives these instructions: "What I tell you in the dark, speak in the daylight; what is whispered in your ear, proclaim from the housetops" (Mt 10:27). Christians should confess their faith openly so that all hear. Jesus said it again: "You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven" (Mt 5:14-16).

As an encouragement and an aid for such open confession of our faith, God brings us together with other Christians in congregations and church bodies. United with fellow-believers we bring the Gospel to others. From the very beginning of the history of the Christian church we find that the preaching of the gospel in all the world was the church's business. Of the church in Antioch, for example, we read: "While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.' So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off" (Ac 13:2-3).

The mission mandate God has given his church is presented especially in two places, Matthew and Mark. The one emphasizes the "what;" the other emphasizes the "why" and the "how." "Go into all

the world and preach the good news to all creation" (Mk 16:15) -- that is the what. "Make disciples of all nations" (Mt 28:19) -- that is the why. "Baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" -- that is the how.

The Lord's mandate for us starts where we are and then reaches out. "You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Ac 1:8). Applied in simplest terms to us today, Jesus is saying: You are my witnesses in your hometown through your personal lives and through the work of your congregation. You are my witnesses in your own country through support of a strong home mission program. You are my witnesses to the ends of the earth through an ever-increasing world mission outreach.

Look at Paul for a moment. He is a man who you might say literally went to the ends of the earth proclaiming the gospel, but at the same time he did not overlook the individual who was within reach of his voice at the moment. When you are in jail, convert your jailor as Paul did at Philippi. When you are in court, try to convert your judge as Paul did in Caesarea before Festus and King Agrippa. "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander" (1 Pe 3:15-16).

Scripture leaves no doubt of the importance of the mission mandate. In Romans chapter 5 and Second Corinthians chapter 5 the

Holy Spirit tells us that our Savior redeemed all mankind. If he redeemed them all, then certainly we want to do all we can to tell them all. Jesus of Nazareth is the only Savior. "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved" (Ac 4:12). If there is no other Savior, then we certainly want all men to know about him.

God our Savior "wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth" (1 Tm 2:4). He has said: "It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth" (Is 49:6). Since this is our heavenly Father's will, we certainly want to do all we can to help "bring salvation to the ends of the earth."

The mission mandate is a burden of love we carry. Love for God makes us earnestly desire to enlarge his kingdom and increase his glory in our world. Love for our fellow-men makes us earnestly desire to bring God's salvation and all his other blessings into their lives.

The mission mandate complements the doctrine of church fellowship in several ways. For one thing through our sharing the gospel we are drawing others into the unity of the Holy Christian Church. Through the gospel which we proclaim people receive forgiveness for their sins and become fellow-citizens with the saints and members of God's household. Through our outreach efforts we are instruments in God's plan "to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ" (Eph 1:10).

There may appear to be a tension and even a conflict between our

zeal for reaching the lost and our concern for sound fellowship practices. That is not the case, however, for these complement one another. Jesus' mission mandate said: "teaching them to observe ALL things whatsoever I have commanded you." A true concern for the lost demands that we teach them all that is true and nothing that is false. Moreover, if the Lord blesses our efforts to reach the lost, a true concern for such new believers demands that we draw them into a fellowship where their "baby" faith will be built up by faithful teachers and not torn down by false prophets.

A true scriptural unity is an aid in carrying out our mission mandate in yet another way. Such unity is a powerful testimony to those outside. In his high-priestly prayer Jesus prays for his church "that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us SO THAT THE WORLD MAY BELIEVE that you have sent me" (Jn 17:21). In the Acts of the Apostles we are told how this worked. "All the believers were one in heart and mind..... With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all" (4:32-33). "And all the believers used to meet together in Solomon's Colonnade. No one else dared to join them, even though they were highly regarded by the people. Nevertheless, more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number" (5:12-14). A true unity is evidence that God is at work among us and a strong invitation to outsiders to come and join in the blessings.

### C. Become All Things to All Men to Win Some

Another in the plethora of related principles we must consider as we seek to carry out our mission mandate and sound fellowship

practices is what Paul says in First Corinthians 9:

Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings. (vv 19-23)

Upon arrival in a new city Paul usually proceeded directly to the local synagogue. In Philippi, however, he met with a group of women on the river bank. At Athens he became a soap-box orator to the philosophers in the Acropolis. It made no difference to him whether his pulpit was in a formal church setting, an informal private home, a lecture hall in a school, a market place or on the open road. He preached in prison, aboard ship, from the steps of army barracks and in a royal palace. Paul was not held prisoner by a set procedure which had to be applied rigidly to every situation. Rather Paul showed great flexibility and willingly bent himself in his desire "to win as many as possible."

Paul was ready to forego many of his personal rights for the sake of the gospel (1 Cor 9:3-18). In fact he voluntarily gave up the enjoyment of his freedom to become a slave to everyone. We put up with anything rather than hinder the gospel of Christ, he said. "I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some." The context of these verses makes it clear Paul is speaking of personal rights and privileges which he was willing to sacrifice. Specifically he lists his right to bring along a wife on his travels and to receive pay so he would not have to hold an "outside job."

Nothing in Paul's words imply that he was willing to compromise



God's truth in any way. He does not mean that he will take liberties with God's Word, adapting it to what men may be willing and ready to hear. Nor is Paul going to disregard Jesus' words: "Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs. If you do, they may trample them under their feet, and then turn and tear you to pieces" (Mt 7:6). In his practice Paul followed Jesus who could dine with Pharisees and with publicans and come into contact with harlots without receiving a stain or leaving a false impression.

Paul would not distort God's truth. It is equally clear that he would make every effort to find a way to preach that truth. He would not limit himself to one established method of operation. He would not quit if one attempt was rebuffed. Paul's flexibility might be misunderstood by some observers as was Jesus who reported: "The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and "sinners"' (Mt 10:19). Paul was willing to risk being misunderstood. He bluntly put it this way:

So then, men ought to regard us as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the secret things of God. Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful. I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me. (1 Cor 4:1-4)

As we consider the implication of Paul's willingness to "become all things to all men" for our study of church fellowship, two thoughts come to mind. First, our zeal to reach the lost does not justify false doctrine or practice. Second, our zeal to reach the lost calls forth a creative flexibility which could be misunderstood by some.

#### D. He That Is Not Against Me Is For Me

A puzzling remark of Jesus to his disciples lays before us another principle we must consider. "Whoever is not against us is for us," Jesus said (Mk 9:40).

Scripture makes it clear there can be no neutrality when it comes to one's attitude toward Christ. "He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me, scatters" (Lk 11:23, also Mt 12:30). Divided loyalty is not possible either: "No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other" (Lk 16:13). You have to be on one side or the other, either a believer in Jesus or not a believer.

Then comes along that puzzling remark in Mark 9 regarding the man who was driving out demons in Jesus' name, but was not a member of Jesus' band of disciples. We read the details of that situation.

"Teacher," said John, "We saw a man driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us."

"Do not stop him," Jesus said. "No one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me, for whoever is not against us is for us. I tell you the truth, anyone who gives you a cup of water in my name because you belong to Christ will certainly not lose his reward." (v. 38-41)

At the very least Christian love should have led the disciples to give that man the benefit of the doubt unless there was some specific evidence to the contrary. The fact that the man drove out demons in Jesus' name proved he was a believer, Jesus says. The effectiveness of Jesus' ministry had thus shown itself in an unusual way.

The disciples had tried to stop this man. They gave as their reason that he was not following Jesus, that is, was not among the regular followers and acknowledged disciples of Jesus. John and the others were concerned about Jesus and imagined that only those

formally attached to the company of disciples had a right -- or sanction -- to use Jesus' name in doing mighty works.

Jesus takes quite a different tack. He asks for patience on the part of his zealous disciples and for time for the faith of the man to develop. They were not dealing with a man who is determined to remain apart from the band of Jesus' followers, but rather with a man whose knowledge is still limited and whose faith is yet young. Jesus seems to imply that both this man's knowledge and his faith will grow. Moreover, Jesus continued, anyone who does an act of kindness in Jesus' name, even something as little as supplying a cool drink to one of Jesus' followers, will receive his reward.

It certainly would be helpful if we had the omniscience Jesus did to know whether a person is a true believer or not. But even without omniscience we can learn from this puzzling verse of Jesus. It teaches that we will not seek to prevent others from preaching and proclaiming Christ, even if they are not part of our confessional fellowship. We must leave the final judgment to Christ himself. Moreover, we take joy in the fact that God's Word does not return empty. This complements our understanding of church fellowship by compelling us to respect the Christian efforts of others beyond our fellowship -- or at least to concede that they also may be doing Kingdom work in the Holy Christian Church.

#### E. Don't Ask; Just Eat

Another of the principles that has some bearing on our practice of church fellowship is Paul's "Don't ask; just eat" principle.

"Everything is permissible" -- but not everything is beneficial.  
 "Everything is permissible" -- but not everything is constructive. Nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others.

Eat anything sold in the meat market without raising questions of conscience, for, "The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it."

If some unbeliever invites you to a meal and you want to go, eat whatever is put before you without raising questions of conscience. But if anyone says to you, "This has been offered in sacrifice," then do not eat it, both for the sake of the man who told you and for conscience' sake -- the other man's conscience, I mean, not yours. For why should my freedom be judged by another's conscience. If I take part in the meal with thankfulness, why am I denounced because of something I thank God for?

So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. (1 Cor 10:23-31)

In matters of adiaphora, matters neither commanded nor forbidden by God's Word, a Christian is free to act as he chooses. However, while everything is permissible, it is not necessarily beneficial or constructive. So even in areas of adiaphora, a Christian will forego some of his freedoms for the good of others.

Paul applies this principle to the adiaphoron of eating meat which was offered as a sacrifice to idols and then sold in the public markets for use by the general public. If some unbeliever invites you to a meal and serves a nice meat dish, "don't ask; just eat." Paul is saying there is no good in raising issues of conscience over the meal. On the other hand, if someone makes an issue of the fact this meat had been a sacrifice to idols, then abstain from eating. The person who raised the issue must be troubled by it and uncomfortable with eating such meat. For his sake and lest you needlessly trouble his conscience, don't eat. On the basis of Paul's response, we can read between the lines that the person who objected is honestly concerned. If Paul judged the objector to be raising the point simply for argument or to embarrass the host or to put Paul in a pickle, then Paul would have carried on and enjoyed the meal. That is what Jesus did when challenged by those who objected to his healing on the Sabbath (Mt 12:1-14).

For the sake of the troubled conscience, Paul would abstain from eating the meat. He is not content to let it rest at that, however. He makes the point that the other person has no right to judge Paul. "For why should my freedom be judged by another's conscience? If I take part in the meal with thankfulness, why am I denounced because of something I thank God for?" In fact, at times Paul would feel compelled to continue in a challenged action as a testimony against the other's attempt to limit his freedom.

Even though Paul can insist on his freedom to eat that meat and even though the other person's sensitive or misguided conscience has no right to restrict Paul, still there is an overriding concern. What will result in the glory of God? Paul wants to do everything with that in mind. Therefore, he says, "I try to please everybody in every way. For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved" (1 Co 10:33).

The "Don't ask; just eat" principle complements our practice of church fellowship. Certain activities fall into the area of adiaphora. In freedom we may do them. In the same freedom others may choose not to do them. Neither one is wrong in his decision. Moreover, certain activities may raise questions of conscience. For the sake of the unbeliever or those weak in faith and understanding, we should avoid bringing up such questions. When the question of conscience is raised, then we should be ready to forego our freedom for the sake of the one troubled in this area. The stronger must be willing to yield to the weaker rather than demand that the weak one acquiesce.

## F. Different Treatment For Teachers and Victims

It is significant to note another principle we can draw from Scripture: The teachers and their victims are not treated identically. In fact, in Romans 16 Paul's heart goes out especially to the immature believers ("naive people") who are deceived by the smooth talk and flattery of the false teachers.

We can see the difference in the way the false teachers and their victims are treated in Galatians. The Galatians were troubled by Judaizers who taught that in order to enjoy the salvation won by Christ, believers still needed to submit to circumcision and observe the Mosaic festivals. The very heart of the gospel was at stake. Therefore Paul used very strong language against the deceivers. The Galatians, however, even though they were believing this erroneous doctrine, are repeatedly called "brothers" in the course of the epistle. The people have been led into false belief, but Paul goes after the teachers while continuing to regard the victims as fellow Christians. Note that contrast as we read an extended section.

To the churches in Galatia:... I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel--which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!...

I want you to know, brothers.... You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you?... Brothers, let me take an example from everyday life.... You are all the sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus....

Those people are zealous to win you over, but for no good.... My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you, how I wish I could be with you now and change my tone, because I am perplexed about you!...

The one who is throwing you into confusion will pay the penalty, whoever he may be. Brothers....As for your agitators, I wish they would go the whole way and emasculate themselves! (1:2-11; 3:1-26; 4:17-20; 5:10-12)

A similar situation existed in the Colossian congregation, and Paul used the same approach. In fact, he starts right out calling them "the holy and faithful brothers in Christ at Colosse," even though his letter will be spent combatting evil in their midst.

In the case of both the Galatian and the Colossian congregations Paul dedicated entire epistles to their doctrinal problems. Instead of isolating the doctrine in question and blasting it out of the water and instead of bluntly stating that the congregation was outside of the Holy Christian Church because of the falsehood it has swallowed, Paul first built up those weak brethren. He went to great length to reinstruct them in the truth and get their faith squarely set on the solid foundation once again. Then he showed them how their error conflicted with the truth and why it was destructive to their salvation.

When we consider the fact that Paul treated the teachers differently than their victims, we have something else to consider in our practice of church fellowship. Obviously this principle does not mean that regard for the weak overrides other scriptural principles. It does not mean, for example, that we can commune members, but not leaders, of a heterodox church. This principle does suggest, however, that we should recognize a distinction between the leaders and the unwitting laymen who follow. There is a difference in the way we should treat a committed member of another church denomination and an unchurched individual who comes desiring baptism or a wedding. There is a distinction to be made between an active, knowledgeable member of a heterodox church and someone who is Catholic or Baptist in name only. For that matter, given what we know about the paucity of doctrinal instruction in a church body like the ELCA, it does not seem fair or charitable to assume a member of that denomination has

really made its confession his own. And we know there are conservative LCMS members who truly believe as we do inspite of the shenanigans of their leaders. A concern for the "naive people" misled by false leaders must influence how we deal with specific cases.

### G. Don't Give Offense

Don't give offense; that is, don't cause another to stumble. This is another principle with obvious implications for our practice of church fellowship. Pieper defines "to give offense" this way: "to teach or to do something by which we lead another not to believe or to believe error or to lead a wicked life and thus cause him, as far as we are involved, to perish eternally."

The Greek phrase for "to cause offense" is σκάνδαλον ποιῆν. The literal meaning of σκάνδαλον is trap. Even more specifically it is the trigger which sets off the trap. And so the phrase literally means "to be the trigger that causes another to become entrapped." In everyday English this idea is communicated by the words: "causing another to stumble and fall." Of course, the Bible is referring to stumbling into sin or false belief and in turn falling from grace.

Scripture teaches that offense can be given by doing evil. Both the teaching of false doctrine and the living of a wicked life can cause another to stumble. But Scripture goes further and shows that also the inconsiderate use of permissible things can cause another to stumble. In other words, even a totally correct action can be wrong if it is carried out in a way that causes a weak Christian to sin. In a matter of adiaphoron, for example, a Christian may be well within his rights as a Christian and yet his actions may trouble another who is weak in his understanding or faith. Likewise a legalistic application



of scriptural truth (Mt 18:15-17 for example) can contribute to one's spiritual downfall.

Jesus sets the tone for any consideration of offense.

But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea. Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to sin! Such things must come, but woe to the man through whom they come! If your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the fire of hell. (Mt 18:6-9; see also Mk 9:42-48 and Lk 17:1-3)

Jesus uses strong words for emphasis. Whoever offends one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for that person to be drowned in the sea. As if that weren't strong enough, Jesus goes on to say: "Chop off whatever causes you to sin -- hand, foot, eye, whatever."

The little ones who believe refers first of all to those who are little children, small in size and young in age (Mt 18:2), but it is certainly not limited to children. Jesus' concern embraces also those who are "little" because they are immature in their understanding or babes in their faith. Paul makes that clear as he builds on what Jesus said:

Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way....

Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification. Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All food is clean, but it is wrong for a man to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble. It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother to fall....

We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. Each of us should please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. For even Christ did not please himself.... (Ro 14:13-15:3)

If you continue on a course that causes your brother distress, you are not acting in love. If you insist on practicing your liberty even if it causes another to fall, you are not following Jesus' example.

Be careful, however, that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak. For if anyone with a weak conscience sees you who have this knowledge eating in an idol's temple, won't he be emboldened to eat what has been sacrificed to idols? So this weak brother, for whom Christ died is destroyed by your knowledge. When you sin against your brothers in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause him to fall. (1 Cor 8:9-13)

If what I do causes a weak Christian to do what troubles his conscience, then I will abstain. If what I eat causes another to sin, I will never eat that food again. I may rightly understand that wine is a gift of God "that gladdens the heart of man" (Ps 104:15), for example, but woe to me if I insist on my martini at a meeting of recovering alcoholics.

Paul makes it clear what our goal and motivation is to be:

So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God -- even as I try to please everybody in every way. For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved. Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ. (1 Cor 10:31-11:1)

John agrees:

Whoever loves his brother lives in the light, and there is nothing in him to make him stumble. (1 Jo 2:10)

The Christian is to be truly concerned about the well-being of others and seek to do what results in the good of many so that they may be saved.

We can see how Paul applied this principle in a real-life situation. "Paul wanted to take him (Timothy) along on the journey, so he circumcised him because of the Jews who lived in that area, for they all knew that his father was a Greek" (Ac 16:3). Before they set out on their missionary journey Paul had Timothy circumcised. Notice his reason "because of the Jews who lived in that area." I take this to refer to unbelieving Jews, those who had not been converted to faith in Jesus. In a sense Paul was yielding to the misunderstanding and false teaching of the Jews that circumcision was necessary. Yet Paul chose to yield in this case so that he and Timothy would have access

to Jewish groups and not find doors slammed in their faces before they even started to preach.

Later Paul would refuse to have Titus circumcised:

Yet not even Titus, who was with me, was compelled to be circumcised, even though he was a Greek. This matter arose because some false brothers had infiltrated our ranks to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus and to make us slaves. We did not give into them for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might remain with you. (Ga 2:3-5)

Paul did not give in to the false brothers who wrongly insisted that Titus must be circumcised. To yield under those circumstances would be a compromise of God's truth. When a false teacher would restrict our freedom, Colossians 2:16 applies: "Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day."

If the Bible had said: "It is morally wrong to be circumcised," then Paul would not have had Timothy circumcised. If the Bible had said: "You must be circumcised," then Paul would have circumcised Titus. The Holy Scriptures teach, however, that circumcision is unnecessary -- not that it is wrong. Paul is dealing in an area of Christian liberty, therefore. He is dealing with something Christians have the freedom to do or not to do. Then "the general rule to be observed is this: We must waive the use of our Christian liberty unless the truth of the gospel is at stake."<sup>41</sup>

We should note that all offense cannot be avoided. Those who are spiritually blind and wicked will stumble at God's truth. Christ Crucified becomes "a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall" to self-righteous Jews (Ro 9:30-33), and to the Greeks seeking after wisdom he is foolishness (1 Cor 1:22-23). Both Jews and Greeks insisted on, and persisted in, their false notion of the

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<sup>41</sup> Pieper, op cit, I, P 562.

way of salvation over against Christ's way of saving men. Modern men are offended at Christ because he expects them to give up their Ego theology and to submit to Scriptures as the infallible Word of God and because he demands they give up their self-righteousness and trust in him alone. To the end of time unbelievers will continue to take such offense at Christ and his church. Even believers can become offended at Christ and fall away when tribulation or persecution come because of God's Word (see Mt 11:6; 13:21; 24:10-11).

Notice also that, when Scripture speaks of offense, it is always the strong who cause the weak to stumble -- not vice versa. Those who by the grace of God are strong in their faith or their understanding cannot claim to be offended by the weak. Nor can the strong insist that the weak submit lest the strong stumble. It is the strong who must forego certain freedoms and rights for the sake of the weak. That is part of the "much" demanded of those who have been entrusted with much.

As we apply scriptural teachings regarding offense to our practice of church fellowship, we see a two-sided application. We can cause another to stumble when we pretend there is a confessional unity when that is not the case. This can cause a weak Christian to fall victim to the errors of a false prophet or a heterodox church and lose his faith. On the other hand, we can also cause the weak to fall when we close the door to them by refusing the guidance and assistance they seek to grow stronger. For that matter offense can come also when we close the door to fellowship for valid and scriptural reasons, but those reasons are not understood by the one excluded.

Pieper makes another thought-provoking application. "It (i.e. schism in protestantism) constitutes a constant offense to the unbelieving world."<sup>42</sup> There is an urgency to our assignment to "make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace." The divisions that separate the visible church, including the factions in our Lutheran Church, are offenses too. The blame rests primarily with those who cause the divisions by their failure to uphold the truth. The fact remains, however, that such factions can cause the unbeliever to become more hardened in his rejection of all churches. Such factions also can cause weak Christians to be lost when they get caught in the crossfire of warring church bodies and do not know where to run for cover.

#### H. Do Not Proselytize

The scriptural prohibition of proselytizing or sheep stealing is another of the plethora of related principles that complements the doctrine of church fellowship. Our charge as Christians is to preach the gospel to all creation. In our zeal to carry out this assignment is it possible to aim our efforts at someone who according to God's Word is off limits to us? Proselytizing or sheep stealing are labels for improper attempts to win people for our congregation or church body.

In the Bible the term proselyte refers to a convert from heathendom to Judaism. There was nothing wrong with seeking to gain such proselytes. In fact, in Old Testament times that was the only way to salvation. "To proselytize" in its basic meaning is an ethically neutral term which can be defined as "to convert or to attempt to convert from one religion, belief, opinion or party to another." In our usage, however, proselytizing is used in a more restricted way

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<sup>42</sup> Pieper, *op. cit.* III, p 143.

and refers to activity that is improper. Proselytizing refers to the activity of converting or attempting to convert someone from a heterodox Christian church to an orthodox Christian church. Or simply proselytizing is "visiting members of a Christian congregation of another denomination with the intention of persuading them to leave that congregation and denomination."<sup>43</sup> As the last sentence shows, proselytizing focuses on one's motivation or intention as he deals with Christians who have a different confession.

The scriptural principle involved is this. The Holy Spirit places the shepherd over the sheep. Consider Paul's instructions to the Ephesian elders: "Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood" (Ac 20:28). This truth is repeated in First Peter which says: "Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care" (5:2). Ministers of the gospel are called by God himself into specific fields of labor. The shepherd is not called to shepherd the whole flock of Christ but only that portion over which the Holy Spirit has made him shepherd. In most cases that means the Holy Spirit calls the pastor to shepherd a specific congregation with a clearly defined flock, the members of that congregation. In some instances the Holy Spirit might call someone to a wider responsibility. Paul, for example, was "to preach the gospel to the gentiles." But even in such cases there are guidelines and limitations regarding what constitutes one's flock.

The Holy Spirit places the shepherd over the sheep through the call of Christians. As we discussed earlier in this thesis, Christians are found wherever the marks of the church are present. For wherever the gospel is being preached and the sacraments are being administered,

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43 Ed Lindemann, "Sheep-Stealing: What Is It and When Does It Occur?" p 2.

there God makes believers through those means of grace. Believers have been given the right to call pastors and teachers to serve them. Therefore, whenever Christians gather in a group where the marks of the church are present, that is a church, and its call to someone to serve it as shepherd is a valid divine call. To those who are members of that congregation, Hebrews 13:17 applies: "Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you." Those members are bound by God's Word to obey and yield to those that the Holy Spirit has placed over them.

In Philippians Paul applies that truth even to shepherds who served with totally wrong motivation. Paul rejoiced that even through such unworthy pastors the gospel was being proclaimed and the sacraments administered.

It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry.... The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains. But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice. (1:15-18)

Proselytizing occurs when we interfere in the call of another shepherd, even if that shepherd is heterodox or unworthy. We have no right to attempt to steal his sheep from him. The Synodical Conference back in 1872 put it this way:

It (our Lutheran church) recognizes the church rights of the existing congregations in spite of their heterodoxy.

(Sects) have true believers among them and in this respect are therefore a church.... As a church, however, an association tyrannized by false teachers has no fewer rights than we. When they therefore call a preacher, he has the true office just as well as a preacher of the pure Word, and therefore we dare not interfere in the office of any Methodist, nor with that of a Roman priest.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Carl Lawrenz, "A Definitive Study of Proselytizing," p 6.

It does not follow, however, that we who have been entrusted with God's truth have no responsibilities toward those Christians who are deprived of the full truth of God's Word. All Christians have responsibility to witness to the truth. Individual Christians in the course of their everyday lives have endless contacts with heterodox Christians as neighbors and friends, at work and on the way to work, in leisure time at the pool or on the golf course. Conversations invariably turn to subjects which have religious implications. These are opportunities to confess our faith and give testimony to scriptural truth. Certainly we should seize them.

As a church we also have numerous ways to give general, public testimony. There are those opportunities afforded by our public worship services, when guests and visitors choose to come to us. Consider how many outsiders have opportunity to hear God's truth at baptisms, confirmations, weddings and funerals. We have opportunities to witness to the truth by placing Meditations or The Northwestern Lutheran in public reading rooms at hospitals or nursing homes. We can give public testimony through the media by broadcasting services on radio or TV or by placing ads with doctrinal content in newspapers.

We will also be ready always to give our testimony when asked. First Peter 3:15 requires that. Should a member of a heterodox church ask us: "What are the differences between my church and yours?" we must tell him. If such a member senses he is not getting a true answer in his church for something that is troubling him and seeks our help in finding the scriptural answer, we must share what the Bible says. And doesn't it follow that if such a member desires Christian education for his children in a Lutheran elementary school, something not offered



by his church, there are ways to grant that request without becoming guilty of proselytizing? Such actions become proselytizing when our motivation is to instill in such people a dissatisfaction with their church so they join ours.

It should be obvious also that our scruples regarding proselytizing extend only to other Christian churches and denominations. Unitarians, Christian Scientists, Mormons, Jehovah Witnesses, Jews stand outside the Christian family. The calls they issue to pastors are not valid calls of the Holy Spirit because the Holy Spirit does not call one to teach heathenism and antichristian doctrine. Such heathen, that is non-Christian, individuals are prime prospects for our mission efforts.

One final question needs to be answered: When does a church cease to be Christian? The answer is simple: when the marks of the church cease to be present. This general answer is simple on paper. To determine if a specific church or denomination is Christian requires us to make a judgment, however, and orthodox Christians may differ in their judgment. Indeed Martin Luther and even our confessions seem to be a bit unclear on whether the Roman Catholic Church is still Christian. In the Large Catechism, one of our confessional writings, Luther says:

For where he (God) does not cause it (the gospel) to be preached and made alive in the heart, so that it is understood, it is lost, as was the case under the Papacy, where faith was entirely put under the bench, and no one recognized Christ as his Lord or the Holy Ghost as his Sanctifier, that is, no one believed that Christ is our Lord in the sense that he acquired this treasure for us, without our works and merit, and made us acceptable to the Father. What then was lacking? This, that the Holy Ghost was not there to reveal it and cause it to be preached, but men and evil spirits were there, who taught us to obtain grace and be saved by our works. Therefore it is not a Christian church either; for where Christ is not preached, there is no Holy Ghost who creates, calls and gathers the Christian church, without which no one can come to Christ the Lord. (Underlining mine.)<sup>45</sup>

In other writings Luther says the opposite:

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45 Large Catechism, Concordia Triglotta, p 689.

So today we still call the Church of Rome holy and all its sees holy, even though they have been undermined and their ministers are ungodly. For God "rules in the midst of his foes" (Ps 110:2)...Although the city of Rome is worse than Sodom and Gomorrah, nevertheless there remain in it baptism, the Sacrament, the voice and text of the Gospel, the Sacred Scriptures, the name of Christ, and the name of God. Whoever has these, has them; whoever does not have them, has no excuse, for the treasure is still there. Therefore the Church of Rome is holy because it has the holy name of God, the Gospel, baptism, etc. (Underlining mine.) <sup>46</sup>

Are all the churches which have been considered Christian for many years still Christian? Writing in 1933, Pastor Theodore Graebner decried the inroads modernism had made in the church. He writes:

We have today a grown-up generation in the Protestant churches which from the days of its youth has no acquaintance with the doctrine of Christianity. The unbelieving generation is now in control of the Sunday schools and other teaching agencies of the sectarian bodies.... Until fifteen or twenty years ago we would say that adult persons who professed membership in the Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian churches were members of a Christian body and could be presumed to have received and accepted Christian instruction. But the unquieting thought forces itself upon us --if proselytizing means to steal the sheep of some other shepherd, how about our attitude toward sheep whose shepherd we know to be a wolf? <sup>47</sup>

Closer to home, can anyone who has read Braaten and Jenson's Christian Dogmatics, the predominant textbook of the ELCA, say with full certainty that the ELCA is still Christian?

There is reason to wonder whether some of the traditional Christian denominations remain Christian. Certainly much of what they teach isn't. But we can take comfort from the fact that the Word and the sacraments are still to be found there, and God still produces faith through those means. These days more than ever before we need to trust God's ability to work through the means of grace and his power to make them effective.

The scriptural prohibition of proselytizing complements the doctrine of church fellowship in one point especially. Even under the strictest application of anti-proselytizing ethics, we have the right -- and the responsibility -- to share the truth with all who come to us and ask. Remember that Jesus even went into the synagogues on invitation and taught there; Paul did too. When someone comes to us and asks, shouldn't we be just as ready to share the gospel?

## I. Application of Scriptural Principles May Vary

Christians may be in total agreement on doctrinal principles and yet their judgments may differ substantially on how the principles apply to a given situation. Moreover, each may be convinced that his application is the right one. This can be true especially when there are several related truths to be weighed in drawing one's conclusion.

Paul gave us a good illustration of that:

One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. He who regards one day as special, does so to the Lord. He who eats meat, eats to the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who abstains, does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God. (Ro 14:5-6)

In Paul's illustration two Christians can be doing totally opposite things and yet both can be equally doing it "to the Lord." Both desire to serve the Lord and show their gratitude to him. One serves the Lord by setting aside a special day each week to worship God, and he shows gratitude by eating the meat which God has provided. The other serves God by recognizing each day as a gift of God and an opportunity to worship him. The second shows his love for God by abstaining from meats, perhaps because of the connection some meats had to the pagan temple or perhaps because he did not want to be a party to the death of any of God's creatures.

Each of those Christians should be convinced in his own mind, Paul says, of what he is doing and why. No one should approach the practice of his faith with a nonchalant, anything-goes attitude. With study and prayer each Christian must wrestle with the question: "What would God have me to do?" Paul then adds this application: "So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God" (v. 12). We must recognize that fellow-Christians have grappled with the issues also and God may have led them to different applications. While we ask our

Christian brothers to be charitable to us when we have made difficult decisions, we also show the same charity toward them.

In the latter years of the Vietnam War I served a congregation that was made up almost entirely of Navy families. The people in that congregation were very familiar with Romans 13 and their God-given duty to respect and obey the governing authorities. They were also familiar with "We must obey God rather than men" (Ac 5:29). Most of those Navy men dutifully and faithfully climbed onboard their ships and deployed six months at a time, sometimes to war in the waters off Vietnam. They did not want to go to war; they would much rather have stayed home; they went because their conscience said they must. They were convinced the right application of Romans 13 and Acts 5:29 to their situation was to obey God by obeying their government. I encouraged them in that resolve. Moreover, we prayed in our church services for our men and their ships in battle.

At the same time this was going on, another of our congregation members sat in the brig. He knew and accepted the same Romans 13 and Acts 5:29. He had come to the conclusion that it was morally wrong and against God's will for him to go to Vietnam. He was convinced that the war was sinful and that he would have to obey God rather than men. He was ready to bear the consequences in jail rather than fight. I did not agree with his view, but I could not say he was not a Christian, nor for that matter could I say his judgment was wrong. I served him Holy Communion and prayed with him just as I did with the others. He was just as much a member in good standing in God's church and what he was doing was just as much "to the Lord."

The fact that Christians can agree in doctrine and differ in their judgment of the proper application is illustrated by our synod's history in the turbulent years of 1955 to 1961. In 1955 the delegates

at the Saginaw convention adopted the preamble, stating that the Missouri Synod "has brought about a break in relations." The vote was unanimous, for there was total agreement in our midst on the doctrines at issue between us and Missouri. Then the delegates voted by a 94-47 vote to hold in abeyance for one year the entire resolution, including the judgment made in the preamble. There was not unanimity in our midst regarding the proper application. One faction was convinced our synod was acting too slowly. Some of that conviction felt our slowness was evidence of doctrinal weakness, and they left us to form the CLC. Others from that group remained in our synod and worked for the day when the synod took the action they felt was needed. During this time another faction felt we were acting too hastily. Some in this second faction became convinced our haste was evidence of unscriptural beliefs, and they left us to join up with Missouri. Others remained in our synod and in time came to realize the correctness of the actions that were taken.

After impasse was declared in 1960, our synod met in 1961. Once again there was clear agreement in doctrine as we condemned Missouri's position. Our synod then voted to terminate fellowship with Missouri. That crucial vote, even at this late date, still was not unanimous. It was reported as a 124 to 49 vote. Undoubtedly some who were in the minority subsequently left our synod. Many others remained, even though they did not favor the specific timing or the exact wording or the course of action or something supported by an affirmative vote. These were turbulent times in our synod, yet our people recognized that all Christians will not arrive at the same conclusions at the same time. They recognized that some may even feel that a different course would be better and more in keeping with the scriptural principles.

Such differences in application, in and of themselves, do not destroy fellowship. Fellowship may be destroyed within a church body, however, by how we handle such differences or by how we judge those who differ with us.

The final part of this thesis will discuss practical applications of the doctrine of church fellowship. There we will see that the principle that Christians can agree on doctrine and yet differ on specific applications will be an important complement to the Scripture's teaching about fellowship.