

#### IV. PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS OF THE SCRIPTURAL PRINCIPLES

There is a right place to begin our discussion of practical applications of the scriptural principles of church fellowship and the plethora of related principles. We rightly begin by praising God for the unity in our Wisconsin Synod. It is the Holy Spirit who calls, gathers, enlightens and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth and keep it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith. He has made his power felt in our midst! I am certain the doctrines and principles established in Parts Two and Three of this thesis would be unanimously accepted in our church body. We are united in doctrine. We are united in practice too. None of our pastors participate in the military chaplaincy program. None of our congregations invite LCMS or ELCA pastors into their pulpits. None of our pastors participate in ecumenical prayer services or attend Holy Communion with Episcopalians, the Reformed or Roman Catholics.

By the grace of God we of the WELS along with our brethren in the ELCS are united in our desire to practice fellowship properly and consistently in every detail and situation. We are united in realizing the importance of uniformity in our midst, and we sincerely desire to achieve it. Because we want the fullest possible oneness, we concern ourselves also with the "fine points" and the "judgment calls" that need to be made in everyday life. The fact that we debate even the minutest details is cause to praise God! It shows that he has made us truly care about his Word in all its truth and purity.

In a spirit of praise to God and with gratitude in our hearts to him, turn with me to a discussion of the practical application of the scriptural principles.

## A. In Our Personal Lives

One of the sensitive points in our application of church fellowship principles has been personal prayer. Can I pray with my sick mother who is a member of the Missouri Synod? Dare we have a prayer before dinner when my Roman Catholic uncle is a guest? This issue is not just a Wisconsin Synod quandary either. As a young lad, long before I knew anything about prayer fellowship, I visited a distant relative. One of the guests that day was another relative who was a Roman Catholic monk. When the time came for the dinner prayer, he was noticeably absent. After the prayer he rejoined the group. Our host explained that he always excused himself from the prayer.

We have demonstrated earlier that joint prayer is a form of church fellowship and therefore a demonstration of oneness in faith. We have also seen that joint prayer where oneness in confession is lacking makes our confession unclear and can mislead someone into thinking we agree with his false beliefs.

In the pamphlet *Timely Topics*, authorized by the WELS Commission on Doctrinal Matters back in the 1960's, Professor Armin Schuetze wrote an article entitled: "May We Pray At Table With People Not of the Wisconsin Synod?" Professor Schuetze pointed out, first of all, that there are instances of praying in the presence of someone else.

There is no reason for a Christian to abandon prayer and family devotion when others of another faith are present with him at his table. It is his home, and he will proceed with prayer and devotion as he does when no guests are present. Nor is the Christian called upon first to make an announcement to those of another faith that they, of course, are excluded from his fellowship at that time.... Paul did not hesitate to pray in the presence of the heathen on board ship. It was a good testimony, and so will our prayer and devotion be.

There may also be instances when you attend a dinner, a banquet at which people of many faiths are present. Sometimes committees that arrange such gatherings, through misguided piety, will invite the Roman Catholic priest or some Protestant pastor to speak a table prayer. Scripture does not absolutely forbid your presence at worship in which you yourself cannot

join. Elisha did not tell Naaman that he was sinning by being present at his king's side in the temple of the idol of Syria, Rimmon (cf. 2 Kings 5:18-19).<sup>50</sup>

The article then goes on to spell out the basic principles of fellowship and to show that "membership in a church body is an act of confession.... To disregard this public confession would only create offense and confusion. Whoever is a member of a persistently erring church body needs to be avoided in all joint expressions of faith."

#### What About Private Personal Relationships to Others?

But now such a person from an erring church body is with you in your home, or you are in his home. From your private contact with him you know that he confesses trust in Christ as his Savior from sin, that he confesses himself to the Scriptures. It is apparent that his membership in the false church body is the result of a still weak faith which does not fully understand the seriousness of the errors, or it is clear that he actually does not share the errors at all. In this case you have more to go by than the confession of his church membership; there is also his own personal confession before you. And since now in your private personal relationship to him public offense and confusion is not involved, you may well ask yourself: Is this perhaps one of those of whom the Word of God tells you: "Him that is weak in the faith receive ye, but not to doubtful disputations" (Ro 14:1)? Is this a smoking flax that you are not to quench? Thus, in your private relations where public offense is not involved, you may on the basis of a man's confession recognize him as a brother in Christ with whom you may then also join in prayer, and that includes table prayer.

#### Not a Set of Rules, but Guiding Principles

We see then that Scripture does not give an absolute yes or an absolute no as the answer to our question. And it does not set up a detailed set of rules that tells you exactly what you must do under every circumstance. But it does give the principles that are to guide you; it does say that you are to take note of the confession of those who come to you and want to be acknowledged as fellow Christians. If that confession shows them to be persistent errorists, you are to avoid joint expressions of faith with them. If that confession shows them to be brethren, in some cases still weak brethren (and in private relations a personal confession may reveal him to be that in spite of doubtful church connections), you may engage in joint expressions of faith for your mutual encouragement.<sup>51</sup>

Notice that Professor Schuetze and the WELS Commission do not attempt to legislate the right action in every situation. They don't give a set of rules that must be applied in legalistic fashion. They simply state the principles. Christians will not promiscuously pray with others in a way that denies the truths of God's Word. Christians will do all they can to give a clear confession while at the same time seeking to build up fellow Christians in the true faith. Christians will have to decide what is the right course in any given situation.

50 Armin Schuetze, Timely Topics, p. 5.

51 Schuetze, op cit, p 6-7.

As individual Christians in our one-on-one dealings with others, we have perhaps the simplest situation to apply scriptural fellowship principles. In our one-on-one dealings we can make our confession clearly known to the other person, and we can come to know his confession. The danger of offense or confusion is, therefore, minimized. The message behind our action can be explained. Our willingness to join in prayer can be understood as evidence that we recognize that person as a fellow Christian. Our refusal to pray jointly can be explained as our testimony against his persisting in error.

One's own home offers a similar situation. Table prayers or bedtime prayers with the family are an important part of homelife. In a mixed marriage setting should children four or five years old be asked to choose which prayer fellowship they want to join, that of the mother or that of the father? A WELS Lutheran parent in such a home may conclude it is better to give his or her testimony at appropriate times while also seeing to it that the children are taught the God-pleasing habit of family prayer at meals and bedtime. The scriptural principle of "Train up a child..." will take precedence in his or her mind over a rigid application of prayer fellowship principles.

The following general truths seem evident regarding prayer in our personal lives. We will set an example by our faithful and unashamed use of prayer. As God gives opportunity, therefore, we will pray for everyone and in the presence of anyone. We will lead prayer where we judge it to be appropriate, and not be troubled if someone voluntarily chooses to join us. Where we find a common faith, we will use joint prayer to strengthen that faith and encourage one another in it.

## B. In Our Congregations

One-on-one situations are the simplest for applying the scriptural principles of fellowship. Things become more complicated after that because more people are involved. When our activities are in a public realm, we must also be concerned about others who see or hear what we are doing. They may not understand all that lies behind our action, and they can easily jump to conclusions on the basis of appearances without bothering to get all the facts. We need to be concerned, therefore, that we do not mislead and upset others by actions which give the wrong impression. On the other hand, we also need to be concerned that we are not diverted from doing what is best for God's Kingdom by a fear that someone may not understand. The scriptural practice of church fellowship in our congregations calls for us to steer a careful course between those two concerns.

The scriptural practice of fellowship in our congregations calls for us to ask: Where do you draw the line? What activities are God-pleasing for the purpose of spreading the Gospel and saving the lost? What activities are not God-pleasing because they compromise God's truth and cause people to stumble into error? The LCMS seems to have found for itself a convenient line. It says: where the means of grace are involved. By drawing this line the Missouri Synod outlaws intercommunion as well as pastors from outside its fellowship preaching in formal worship services wearing vestments. This line allows clergymen to participate in rallies and commemorative observances without vestments and in all sorts of prayer activities because prayer

is not a means of grace. The Missouri Synod line is convenient; unfortunately it allows many activities which Scripture will not permit. This line also makes some unscriptural distinctions, such as whether the clergy wear vestments or not.

Our WELS "unit concept" approach correctly states that prayer and all other activities which demonstrate a common faith are included under church fellowship. So where do we draw the line? In the remainder of this thesis we will explore a number of situations in everyday congregational and synodical life. Often the illustrations will be personal, and the conclusions probably not as definitive as any of us would like. But I hope what follows will adequately reflect the difficulties and challenges of carrying out the unit concept in the day-to-day judgment calls of congregational life. We will see that practical applications are not always easy and must be made after much prayer and with careful consideration for the souls entrusted to our care.

### The Worship Service

So if the whole church comes together and everyone speaks in tongues, and some who do not understand or some unbelievers come in, will they not say that you are out of your mind? But if an unbeliever or someone who does not understand comes in while everybody is prophesying, he will be convinced by all that he is a sinner and will be judged by all, and the secrets of his heart will be laid bare. So he will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, "God is really among you!" (1 Cor 14:23-25).

Paul assumes that unbelievers will be present in the worship service. In fact, Paul states that one desired outcome of the service is that the unbelievers "be convinced by all that he is a sinner and... fall down and worship God, exclaiming 'God is really among you!'" Scriptural principles of fellowship are clearly misunderstood and misapplied if

anyone understands them to mean that outsiders are not to be received and welcomed into our worship.

In the New Testament the apostles preached to everyone who would listen. They could not be silent about what they had heard and seen. They proclaimed the gospel both "publicly and from house to house" (Ac 20:20). They rejoiced when the heathen chose to join in worship with them. In the same way, to the best of my knowledge, all WELS churches allow visitors to enter their sanctuary and worship there. In fact, we expend considerable effort to find the unchurched and invite them in. Many of our churches greet their guests with words like "We extend a cordial welcome to all guests and visitors in the service this morning, and we invite you to worship with us."

Christians are to preach the gospel to every creature. Our primary tool for doing that week in, week out in our congregations is the public worship service. There each week carefully selected sections of Scripture are read and a well-thought-out lesson from God's Word is taught through the sermon. There the gospel is preached also through the hymns that are sung and to a considerable extent also in the contents of the prayers. The person who attends our services for a period of time will hear "the whole counsel of God" proclaimed. Even more important every week he will hear the gospel preached. We must not water down our preaching to please the visitor. Anathema to anyone who changes the message to satisfy the outsider. Praise God for every opportunity to proclaim his truth to anyone who does not know it or believe it.

We lead the worship services in our congregation. We determine the content. We lead the prayers. We assure that this content is true

to Scripture. We decide who will conduct the services and that that person meets the biblical qualifications. It is our service and our public confession to anyone who hears. As the Word is preached, the Holy Spirit works. He moves hearts -- also those who are present as guests and visitors. We invite them to participate in worship with us with the prayer in our hearts that God will work (or strengthen) saving faith in their hearts and cause them to understand and accept his Word in all its truth and purity. When those outsiders voluntarily choose to join us in praise or prayer, we are not troubled about some possible affront to church fellowship. We rejoice that God is at work and using us as his tools.

The unbeliever in our service realizes that his participation means recognition of what is being taught. I think of two men who come to our services frequently. They have made no bones about the fact that they are agnostics. Their wives are faithful members, however, and they come along. The one man sits quietly through the service. He doesn't distract or make a scene, but he does not worship either. He doesn't sing, he doesn't pray, he doesn't confess. He knows that participation is an act of confessing Jesus, and he is not about to do that. The other man is even more clear in showing that he knows what participation in worship means, for he usually sneaks off to the lounge to read Reader's Digest. I pray that their frequent exposure to God's Word will melt the hardness of both these hearts. I long for the first time I see them sing a hymn or move their lips in prayer. That will be evidence that the Holy Spirit is at work in them.

There is a difference between worshipping and praising God as fellow-believers and worship and praise done by the unbeliever in our



midst. That unbeliever is in the worship and rightly so to give him opportunity to hear the Word. He is not really a part of that worship, however, because as yet he is outside our confessional fellowship and worse outside our spiritual fellowship. If we are concerned about communicating a wrong message to such a person, I suspect there is greater danger of communicating: "You are not wanted by Christ and the Christians" than there is of communicating: "Your false belief and our true belief are really the same thing."

We invite others to come and hear that gospel message. Our invitation is aimed at the unchurched and the unbeliever, but we do not turn anyone away. When a member of another church responds to our church's general invitation to worship, he often comes because he recognizes a spiritual need that is not being met in his heterodox congregation. Often he is seeking God's truth and wants us to give an answer to the questions he is asking us. He may not ask in so many words, but he is in worship because he is seeking answers to questions that trouble him.

The guest who is a member of another church body recognizes that there are differences between our church and his. On the one hand, he may feel awkward in worship because our ways are strange and some of our doctrines alien to him. On the other hand, he may feel comfortable in worshipping because he regards us as fellow Christians in the Holy Christian Church. In either case he does not think we are the same as his Roman Catholic church or Baptist church or Methodist church. If he says: "We are all worshipping the same God and going to the same place," he is right, provided he is a believer

from a Christian denomination. On the other hand, neither that visitor nor the host congregation means his participation as an expression of confessional fellowship. Both know that confessional differences exist. I'm sure members of other churches who visit our services would be shocked and taken aback if we told them: "We think your singing of that hymn was an admission on your part that our Lutheran Church is the one true and orthodox church and that your \_\_\_\_\_ (fill in the blank) church is false because it teaches differently."

When the biblical teaching forbids church fellowship with false prophets and erring churches, that does not mean that orthodox churches isolate themselves from men. They can indeed not practice church fellowship on any other foundation than that of the apostles and prophets, where the cornerstone is Christ (Eph 2:20). But because they build church fellowship and worship services on this foundation, they invite all men to come and listen to the Word of truth and so to unite on the proper basis with the congregations that are loyal to Christ in their services.... 52

### Baptism

"Go...make disciples of all nations, baptizing them," Jesus commands. Baptism is a means of grace intended for all people as a means to call them to faith and make them disciples. "Baptism saves us," Scripture says (1 Pe 3:21). Baptism is a means through which God brings one into fellowship with the Holy Christian Church. "By one Spirit we were baptized into one body and were all given the one Spirit to drink" (1 Cor 12:13), Paul wrote.

The practice of the apostles shows that adults are to be instructed in preparation for baptism. It was only after a lengthy sermon had had its effect that those who gladly received the Word were baptized on Pentecost (Ac 2:14-41). Likewise, the Ethiopian eunuch (Ac 8:35-37), Cornelius (Ac 10:34-48) and the jailor at Philippi (Ac 16:30-33) were instructed in God's truth first. The other saving means of grace, the gospel in Word, was applied first. Baptism came at their request and was evidence the Holy Spirit had worked successfully in their heart.

How much instruction is necessary before baptism? Scripture does not give a direct, detailed answer. A cursory reading of the examples from Acts may give the impression that the instruction was very brief, since baptism occurred on the same day as the instruction. However, in almost all cases (the jailer may be an exception) the apostles were addressing such who knew and believed the Old Testament with its Messianic promises and needed only further instruction to identify Jesus as the fulfillment. An examination of Peter's Pentecost sermon, for example, removes any thought that the apostles proceeded in a superficial manner, particularly when we remember that the account of Acts is no doubt only a summary of what was said. It should also be noted that in the postapostolic age, when an increasing number of converts had little if any previous knowledge of Scripture, a catechumenate of up to two or three years often preceded baptism.

Generally the same basic understanding of Christian doctrine is advisable for adult baptism as for adult confirmation.... Through baptism or confirmation the individual becomes a member of the congregation. One should not baptize anyone into a faith he does not adequately know. One should not receive anyone into membership who does not know the confession of the congregation. To delay baptism until the way of salvation and basic Christian doctrine has been learned is not to despise this gift of God. To rush into baptism without adequate preparation could result in casting "pearls before swine" (Mt 7:6). The faith that is worked and nourished by the gospel in which the adult receives instruction already lays hold of eternal life. On the other hand, when terminal illness restricts the time available for instruction, the pastor may arrange this instruction in such a way that the adult may receive baptism very soon as an added comfort in the face of death and eternity. 53

There are lots of carefully chosen conditional words and phrases in the above paragraphs: "Scripture does not give a direct, detailed answer....In almost all cases (the jailor may be an exception)....Up to two or three years often preceded baptism....Generally the same basic understanding of Christian doctrine is advisable for adult.... should... could.... On the other hand...the pastor may arrange his instruction in such a way that the adult may receive baptism very soon." These paragraphs are worded carefully because Scripture has not given us a set of baptism rules.

Some in our synod equate adult baptism with confirmation. In fact, a couple years ago-- for only one year I think -- the annual statistical report to the synod codified that assumption. For the instructions said that communicate membership additions to the congregation were the total of adult baptisms, confirmations, transfers and reaffirmations of faith. For some of us that did not work, for we had adults baptized who were not received as communicants.

When a person comes forward and says: "I want to be baptized," he does not do that in total ignorance. Like the people in Acts, the person who requests baptism at least is somewhat familiar with the Bible. He has probably heard numerous sermons over a lifetime. Moreover, Christians have witnessed to him of baptism and its importance. When someone comes to me with such a request, I ask that he come to the office and discuss it. This gives opportunity to see what understanding lies behind the person's request. I make a point of presenting law and gospel and also of explaining the meaning and purpose of baptism. I stress that baptism will not work like magic, but rather that study of God's Word and growth in understanding it must follow. I invite that person to our adult instruction class and emphasize that by his baptism in our congregation he is asking me to follow through with him until he reaches spiritual maturity and communicant membership. If the person continues in his desire for baptism, I baptize him with the confidence that I have done as the apostles, namely preached the gospel carefully and baptized those who responded to it.

In the case of children the same principles apply. Baptism is a power of God to produce faith in that child's heart. What right do we have to deny that power to any child? When parents who are not members of our congregation request baptism for their children, we discuss the importance of their children being trained up in God's Word. We say that by requesting baptism in our congregation they are asking us to assume a sense of responsibility for the spiritual well-being of their children. Therefore, we will follow up through cradle roll mailings and encouragement to bring the children to worship and at appropriate age to Sunday school and confirmation instruction. In private baptisms

I also take five or ten minutes to explain baptism to all who are there and to reemphasize the above points. The Shepherd Under Christ approaches the baptism of children in the same way:

Baptism as a "washing of regeneration" is a means of grace and brings immediate blessing. It is not administered in the hope that sometime in the future the gospel as it is taught to the child will work faith. Hence the pastor should not categorically refuse to baptize a child if the parents do not promise that the child will in the future receive biblical instruction. Since this question arises primarily with unchurched parents, the pastor should point out that through baptism their child becomes a member of the church, and the church recognizes its responsibility for teaching and will expect to carry this out even though parents are not ready to make any promises. Should the parents upon hearing the church's claim withdraw their request for the child's baptism, the responsibility remains entirely theirs.

When a child is baptized, its name should immediately be entered on the cradle roll of the congregation. This should help to maintain regular contact with the child and its parents as the church consciously follows through on its responsibility toward a baptized member.<sup>54</sup>

The Shepherd Under Christ goes on to train our pastors regarding baptismal customs. "Whatever in the baptismal ceremony goes beyond the essentials of Christ's institution falls into the category of adiaphora. This does not mean that these additions may not be useful and beneficial, but that they are not necessary for a valid baptism."<sup>55</sup>

One such adiaphoron is the custom of sponsors and witnesses. Sponsors are a time-honored custom. Sponsors are to bear witness publicly in the child's stead at the ceremony, to pray for the child, remind him of his baptism, and aid if necessary that the child be brought up in the true knowledge and fear of God according to the teachings of the Lutheran Church. Such responsibilities are ones we have assigned to sponsors. Scripture says nothing of sponsors and hence does not describe their duties.

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<sup>54</sup> Schuetze, op cit, p 73. <sup>55</sup> Ibid, p 74.

The role the church has assigned to sponsors limits the choice of persons to those who can in good conscience be expected to assume the role and perform its responsibilities. This excludes not only unbelievers, but all who belong to heretical churches, and limits the choice to those who are in confessional agreement with the church that administers the baptism. While the custom of having sponsors is an adiaphoron, the choice of the persons, in view of the role they are to serve, is not. The Word of God, e.g. Romans 16:17 and 2 Corinthians 6:14, must find application in the choice of those who are to assume spiritual, Christian responsibilities for the church's members.<sup>56</sup>

When unsuitable persons are desired for sponsors, The Shepherd Under Christ suggests that we tactfully suggest they serve as witnesses.

The pastor does well to avoid a serious confrontation with members on a custom that in itself is an adiaphoron. To gain an objective hearing on the fellowship question involved in the choice of persons is often difficult at a time when practical difficulties and emotional factors can becloud objective judgment.<sup>57</sup>

Our church has assigned certain spiritual responsibilities to sponsors and therefore makes a fellowship issue out of them. Many parents, however, especially if new converts to our church or unchurched mission prospects, do not view sponsors in terms of their spiritual significance. For many sponsors or godparents are merely those given the honor of holding the baby at the baptism. Other parents may truly feel that in their situation a conscientious Christian of another denomination, perhaps a close relative or friend, can best fulfil the responsibilities of a sponsor. Such parents may argue that, as a fellow-member of the Holy Christian Church, such a Christian can pray for the child, he can be a Christian influence on the child, and he can even cooperate with the parents' request that the child be brought up in the Lutheran Church.

Because the understanding of our church regarding sponsors differs from that of many of our members and because sponsors themselves are an adiaphoron, we would do well to consider carefully this comment in Shepherd:

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid, p 76.    <sup>57</sup> Ibid, p 77.

The question is in place whether the custom of having sponsors is more of a tradition than a practical necessity and whether changes can be made that will be in keeping with the needs and circumstances of the present. A pastor and congregation should, however, remember that their brotherly relationship with sister congregations may make it inadvisable simply to make major changes in this custom independently, lest there be a proliferation of baptismal rites that could become confusing.<sup>58</sup>

Perhaps our liturgical forms should be revised to fit equally well whether a sponsor or a witness is bringing the baby forward. In one congregation the entire assembly recites the Apostles Creed in answer to the faith question to the one being baptized. Perhaps our liturgy should drop the idea of sponsors altogether and emphasize the responsibility of the parents and that of all fellow-Christians, sponsors or witnesses included, toward the child.

### The Lord's Supper

The God-pleasing course with regard to the Lord's Supper is easily ascertained from Scripture. The Lord's Supper is a means of grace to sustain and strengthen faith. It is a means to assure Christians repeatedly that their sins are forgiven. It presupposes saving faith in the heart of the recipient.

Scripture also makes it clear that there are confessional requirements for receiving the Lord's Supper. Jesus gave his supper to his disciples alone in the upper room and said: "Do this in remembrance of me." Thereby Jesus showed that the Lord's Supper is for those who follow him and know about him and what he has done. Moreover, Paul writes, "A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup." A person must have sufficient understanding of God's truth to be able to look into his heart and assure that he comes in a worthy manner. Moreover, the Scripture continues, "Whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord....For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself" (1 Cor 11:27-29). There are serious consequences for one who comes without faith. Finally, Paul writes, "we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf" (1 Cor 10:17). Those who partake of the Lord's Supper thereby express that they are one body in Christ. There is no question about it; we must draw the line at Close Communion. Only those who have shown faith, understanding and oneness should join us at the Lord's table in our church. Such faith, understanding, and oneness is shown by one's confession, and part of that confession is the visible church one joins.

Scripture will not permit us to accept the position of Missouri's Atlantic District which stated: "The most important prerequisite for fellowship at the altar identified by the congregations surveyed is belief in the Real Presence rather than agreement in doctrine and all its articles." 59

Close Communion is not under attack in our midst. Individual pastors and congregations in our fellowship may differ in matters of adiaphora, however, such as the means of announcing for communion or the use of common versus individual cups. We may differ also in our judgment regarding individual cases. For example, should we readmit a person who desires to return to communion after falling away into unchurched status, or should we require that person to be reinstructed and reconfirmed? I myself might act differently at different times and under different circumstances. Similar differences in practice occur among us with regard to confirmed ELCA or LCMS Lutherans who

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59 "Fellowship Report," CN, Vol. 27, #24, June 12, 1989, p 7.



desire to become communicant members in our congregation. In questions of judgment such as these we must strive for as much uniformity from congregation to congregation as possible since our practices have an effect on other congregations of our church body. On the other hand, we must also show Christian charity and respect for the judgment and practices a particular congregation feels are best in its situation.

### Weddings

Whom may our pastors marry in our churches? I would answer: any member of our congregation and any unchurched couple who comes to us and desires a Lutheran service. At Emanuel First in Lansing we have a standard two-session approach for each couple who desires a marriage. In session one we go through the service line by line, explaining the scriptural truths behind each sentence and also discussing Lutheran wedding customs and practices. We do this -- in the case of an unchurched couple usually before the ceremony is confirmed -- so the couple can see exactly what our service consists of and what our principles require. In the second session we go through an informal study of the main sections of the Bible which deal with marriage and what it takes to have a good one. If the couple agrees that they want such a ceremony and such a marriage and if it is clear that we are not stealing sheep of another pastor, we are happy to have the service. The wedding service with its sermon will give us a good opportunity to preach the gospel to many who otherwise may not be hearing it. Our involvement in this important day in the life of those two unchurched

individuals will lay the groundwork for us to follow up with invitations to worship, Bible study, and then as their family comes along to baptism, Sunday school, Lutheran elementary school and so forth. Such couples will be considered mission prospects and will receive visits in their home from pastor and evangelists alike.

The willingness of a pastor to serve those who are mission prospects is supported by The Shepherd Under Christ:

While the pastor has the legal right to perform the ceremony for any man and woman for whose marriage the state has issued a license, as pastor he should remember that the church has not called him to serve the public in solemnizing marriages, but the members of the church, who desire the Lord's blessing on their union. Hence, in general at least one of the parties to the marriage will be one of his members. Most often the bride's pastor is the officiant. Good order requires that the pastor solemnize a marriage for those who are not his own members only with the knowledge and consent of their called pastor. The pastor may, of course, serve those who as mission prospects call upon him for spiritual service.<sup>60</sup>

### Funerals

The funeral service is a different situation altogether. The Christian funeral shares the comfort and trust we have because the deceased was a believer in Jesus Christ. Our comfort is empty and the service hypocritical and untruthful when the person to be buried was an unbeliever. Ordinarily it goes as an automatic that pastors of our fellowship will bury those who at the time of their death were members of the congregation. We cannot look into the heart of the one who has died, but we can look to the confession he made publicly at his confirmation and repeated each time he confessed the creed in church. Often we will also have had opportunity to bring the comfort of God's Word to his bedside and to hear a personal confession of faith come from his lips. These give us the basis to speak in great confidence and with full assurance regarding his eternal fate.

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<sup>60</sup> Schuetze, op cit, p 64.

As a general rule we have reason for confidence regarding a church-member. We don't have such a reason regarding a non-member. Therefore The Shepherd Under Christ can summarize good burial practice in the following two statements: "We grant Christian burial to members of our congregation unless there is a compelling reason not to do so. We shall not grant Christian burial to those who are not members of our congregation unless there is a compelling reason to do so." <sup>61</sup>

What would be a compelling reason for not burying a member? Let me suggest one possibility. An active member dies -- one who had attended church nearly every week. The obituary printed in the newspaper states that he was a longtime member of the Eagles. A phone call to the lodge confirms that he was an active member there and that his dues were all paid up. The pastor concludes that the man certainly had ample opportunity to know our church's position against lodge membership. Moreover, the pastor feels that the danger of offense is very real because others in the congregation had made decisions recently regarding lodges, some had left the congregation to join, others had decided not to join when scriptural reasons were shown them. In a situation such as this the pastor certainly may feel there is "a compelling reason" not to bury a member.

What would be a compelling reason for burying a non-member? The Shepherd Under Christ discusses that for us:

If a pastor is asked to minister to an unchurched person during his last illness and has heard a confession of faith in the Savior from him, he will be ready to officiate at the funeral if he is asked to do so, and use the opportunity to extol the grace of the Lord and our Christian hope in death. The same principle will apply in the case of one to whom the pastor has been ministering, let us say in an adult class, but who dies before he is formally received into membership in the congregation. There could also be the case of a forgotten old person who because of physical or mental disability could not maintain contact himself, whose name was

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61 Ibid, p 302.

allowed to disappear from the church roster, and whose family showed no concern about spiritual ministrations for him until he died, but then come to the current pastor of the congregation and ask him to officiate at the funeral. If investigation establishes the fact that during the period of his competence the deceased had been a faithful Christian, the pastor may consent to serve.<sup>62</sup>

Difficult decisions come when the pastor is called upon to bury someone who does not fall into the clear instances just cited. A general rule of thumb that could be offered is this: the person in some way must have been under the spiritual care of the pastor or congregation. A pastor, for example, may decide to bury an individual upon the assurance of family members that the deceased regularly listened to the Sunday broadcast of the congregation's worship service.

There are going to be no-win situations. These usually involve the request by a member to bury a deceased relative or friend. Often there is no valid reason for the pastor to officiate, and "no" is the correct answer. Frequently, however, the member will be devastated by the pastor's refusal and in some cases end up leaving the congregation. While a pastor is convinced that he did the proper thing, he may also feel that his actions caused a weak fellow Christian to stumble and fall away from the Lord. He will find himself agonizing over how better to handle such a situation next time.

There is a possibility to be considered in a situation where the pastor felt he could not offer a Christian funeral. The cliché states: "The service is for the living, not the dead," and that is true. Sometimes the survivors are members of our congregation, but the deceased was not a church member anywhere. There may be no solid evidence he was a believer. The pastor could offer to hold a service for the family to assure them of God's comfort and help at this time of loss. Such a service could be publicly announced and people be

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid, p 298.

invited to attend to receive encouragement from God's Word and to stand by the family at their time of need. The pastor may feel that the dead body should not be present nor many of the customary features of a formal funeral service. However, such a service could be offered to the family in lieu of a formal funeral. A scripturally correct service could be developed, entitled something like "Service for the Family of One Who Did Not Die as a Professing Christian." The service could also include a strong call to repentance to all in attendance, so there will be no doubt when their death comes. Certain details would have to be worked out. For one thing, if such a service were used, it would have to be clearly announced that the deceased died without church membership, lest offense of a different kind be given. If such a service were developed, however, we could comfort our members with God's Word at a time they really need it and avoid the bitter feelings that inevitably follow a refusal to bury a loved one.

### Organists and Soloists

Our next topic is an example of the "fine points" we debate in our midst precisely because we are concerned about the God-pleasing doctrine and practice of church fellowship. Just who may serve as an organist or soloist in one of our services? A perusal of WELS writings on this question leaves no doubt where the line is drawn in our literature. Only those who are of our confessional fellowship may serve as organists or soloists.

Church fellowship is every activity which is an expression of a common faith. Is hiring an organist always an expression of a common faith? A new mission congregation, for instance, may not have an

accompanist in its midst. The congregation may conclude that, since the pastor determines the content of the service and selects the hymns, Christian freedom permits hiring someone with the necessary musical training and ability to provide the needed accompaniment. A person may have musical training on organ and view an accompanist's job as opportunity to use his talents for a God-pleasing purpose and make some spending money besides. If he is an Episcopalian, I doubt if he regards his accompanist's job as a confession on his part that he and we believe the same. The congregation has made it clear in its hiring of him that they don't intend his service to be a declaration of oneness with the Episcopal Church, and the hiree does not regard it that way either. The congregation undoubtedly longs for the day it has its own organist, but can we brand as absolutely wrong the decision to hire someone in the meanwhile?

A 1968 article in The Northwestern Lutheran allowed one exception to the general rule:

But the question remains: Is that really all we expect of an organist? Is that his role, one that is similar to others who are hired to render a mechanical, manual service?

In very rare cases this may be true. It could possibly happen in a funeral home that an organist is hired to play the music you designate. Mechanically he carries out his duties, the way a record that is placed on the turntable does. He even is not visible to the audience so that his person in no way is associated with the service rendered. Under such rare conditions it may not matter much who manipulates the instrument.<sup>63</sup>

Church organists (and soloists) traditionally are also unseen and unknown, seated out-of-sight in the balcony or in the back corner of the church. By careful design their person is not of importance either.

Our usual application of church fellowship principles draws the line at WELS/ELS. No one outside our confessional fellowship can serve

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<sup>63</sup> Schuetze, "Who May Serve As Organist?" The Northwestern Lutheran, Nov. 24, 1968, p 386.

as an organist. But is that the only permissible place to draw the line? For a congregation to hire someone after carefully defining that it is hiring that person's musical skills and not his spiritual leadership does not seem sinful. Certainly, at the least, there are permissible exceptions to the general rule.

While much of the reasoning used to permit organists is applicable to soloists, it is hard to justify use of a soloist from outside our fellowship. For it is difficult to separate the person from the skill being employed. The soloist is using his or her voice to lead the congregation in worship. Through the song the soloist is preaching God's Word, praising God or praying to Him.

### Scouts

I need take no time or space decrying the errors of scouting. In our fellowship we know the errors there and have taken a clear stand against them. We expend considerable time, effort and money to offer our children a Pioneer program as a positive alternative. But what about a member who does not see our stand? Perhaps he has come to us from another church body where scouting was part of the congregational program. Perhaps he was a scout as a child. Perhaps he lives some distance from the church, and a scout troop meets just down the street from his house in the public school. Perhaps his brother or sister is a Cub Scout leader. What should we do if we learn that this member has his children in scouting?

The mere fact that we had to learn about this family's involvement is a good sign. The person has not been standing up and trumpeting

his opposition to our church's stand. He has not been bringing his children to church in their uniforms. In the Voters Assembly he has not moved that we close down Pioneers and start a scout troop. In other words he is not making propaganda for scouting.

We must begin with the assumption that the members of this family are weak brethren. After all, they have accepted our confession of faith and acknowledged it as their own via their confirmation or membership application. They are not making a show of their denial of this point in our practice and are not trying to promote their deviant position.

In his desire that the entire congregation "stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel" (Php 1:27), a Christian pastor will approach such a family and offer them instruction from God's Word. Perhaps a carefully chosen tract or a printed Bible study could be handed to them. The pastor will attempt to guide them to grow in their understanding and then urge them to put into practice. The pastor may also ask them to consider the harm being done to their children by exposure to the antichristian god of scouting. He may ask them to think also about the potential harm to fellow church members who know our church's stand and see this family violate it.

What if the person says he doesn't see our point, what if he says that he gets the point but feels in his situation scouting offers the lesser of two evils for his children (i.e. scouting or no youth program), what if he pleads for time to wean his children away, what if he says he will let his children finish out their years in the program, what do we do? Do we push on with Matthew 18 or Romans 16? Does the



scriptural command to pursue the unity of confession in our midst require that? It depends, doesn't it? Go back and look at the difference between a weak brother and a persistent errorist. The weak brother has trouble understanding. He has the sincere desire to do what is God-pleasing, but he is not sure just what that is. The persistent errorist, on the other hand, remains convinced, even after patient admonition, that his is the scriptural position. He isn't content to let his error rest either, but makes propaganda for it. The case of our member whose children still remain in scouting gives us a good opportunity to apply the principles of fellowship. The application requires that a judgment be made. Is he a weak brother? Then bear with him patiently and seek to build up his faith and understanding so in time it produces fruit. Is he a persistent errorist? When you have had to make that judgment, then "avoid him" must follow.

A practical point is this: The best solution to a scout problem is to offer a good, solid alternative. Where a congregation offers a quality Pioneer program, the lure of scouting will be diminished. As we approach a member who has been or is involved in scouting, we can point out that our Pioneer program could use his experience and skills. If he becomes involved in Pioneers, I am confident he will soon see why this is better for his children and for all the youth of our church.

### C. In Our Synod

As we strive for Christian unity to the fullest possible degree, we look outside our congregation to others who share our confession. We join with them in an organization that spans the 50 states and reaches out to countries throughout the world. In certain ways situations are different in different locations, and certainly there are a wide variety of ideas and concerns when you start talking of more than 1,000 churches and nearly half a million people. How can such a group be one? Can there be differences among us and still be unity in doctrine and practice? The Augsburg Confession gives a concise answer: "Nor is it necessary that human traditions, that is, rites or ceremonies, instituted by men, should be everywhere alike."<sup>64</sup> While uniformity in matters of adiaphora can be very desirable, differences in matters of scriptural doctrine and practice are what must concern us.

To move from place to place and to find the same hymnbook in use in the church services, to have the children use the same Catechism, to be greeted with familiar hymns and a familiar order of church service, is certainly helpful and desirable, but God has not demanded such uniformity for conscience' sake; neither must we. Ceremonies, church customs, like sponsors at Baptisms, midweek Lenten services, and many more arrangements may well serve the congregation in bringing children and adults to their Savior and keeping them with Him. Yet we must remember, God has not commanded them; therefore we dare not refuse to enter into fellowship with anyone because he has not accepted all of our church customs as we practice them.<sup>65</sup>

We look at a few practical issues involving the doctrine of fellowship in our synod.

### Synodical Resolutions

In 1961 the synod voted 124 to 49 to suspend fellowship relations with Missouri. The majority prevailed. Now what about the minority?

<sup>64</sup> Augsburg Confession, Concordia Triglotta, p 47.

<sup>65</sup> Arnold Grumm, "Church Fellowship," The Abiding Word, II, p 528.

Were they bound by that resolution? Were individual congregations throughout the synod who disagreed also bound? The issue was a real one, and Professor Schuetze addressed it as one of his Timely Topics.

Professor Schuetze points out that God brings us together into large bodies to carry out work that we cannot do adequately as separate congregations. What unites us is "our common faith in the Savior and His Word, a common love for Him, and flowing out of that, also a deep love for one another."<sup>66</sup> Since God wants all things done decently and in order, we agree upon orderly procedures to follow in our joint work.

#### What We Have Agreed on Regarding the Making of Decisions

We have also agreed on how decisions on the work we do jointly are to be made. This is done through a representative group made up of delegates from our congregations, our pastors and our male teachers. That is our Synod convention. Before such a convention meets, reports are prepared by all committees. These are published and then discussed at delegate conferences. Also our synod publications present convention previews. In this way the business that will come before the convention may be known by all. Any individual or group may also submit a memorial to the Synod in which he may express himself as to the decision he desires the Synod to make or not to make. However, we have agreed that the voters at the convention are to make the final decisions. Whatever resolutions they in convention pass we recognize as being passed for all of us....

Thus also in the Synod, the common faith we have, the love we have for one another as brethren in Christ, will move us to join in carrying out the resolutions that have been passed in a convention in the orderly manner that we have agreed upon.<sup>67</sup>

A synod is a voluntary organization, in that no one forces us to join it and no one compels us to remain a part of it. When we become a part of a synod, however, we voluntarily agree to accept its constitution and abide by its decisions. As in all things the one exception is "we must obey God rather than men." If we truly believe that a synodical resolution violates God's Word, then we must refuse

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<sup>66</sup> Schuetze, Timely Topics, p 9. <sup>67</sup> Ibid, p 10.

to obey it and, if our testimony goes unheeded by the synod, we must withdraw from that body which in our judgment has become guilty of persistent error.

Professor Schuetze spells out steps for us to follow if we are troubled by a decision.

If I am in disagreement with a brother, I need to discuss that disagreement with him. If a congregation is in disagreement with any action the Synod takes, and that is all the more true of an action which the Synod says it must take in applying the Word of God, then they shall need to discuss this with their brethren. They should ask themselves: Did my brethren who acted at the convention have information that I have not received, that I perhaps did not take note of, which led them to the decision they made? Our Synod has recognized that there may be those who seek such added information. For that reason several years ago it established a Study Committee, which is willing to discuss these matters with any individual or congregation. Arrangements to meet with this committee may be made through the District president. Only if a congregation, after having received full information, is convinced that the action of the Synod is sinful, may it declare its refusal to follow the resolution. 68

Professor Schuetze's summary gives sage advice for us all:

Is the Synod resolution binding upon all? We sum up as follows: On the one hand we shall recognize that the delegates who vote at a synod meeting are making decisions for all of us. If, however, my conscience is troubled by a resolution that is passed, I will consult with my brethren. Before condemning the action or even deciding to disregard it, I will want to hear from them the reason that led them to their action. I will seek that information with an open mind, recognizing that they may have gained insights both at the convention and in their various contacts that I may not as yet have. But particularly when a resolution intends to be an application of a word of Scripture, care must be taken not to reject it without careful study and investigation. Only when I am convinced that it is sinful, may it be rejected by me. 69

### The Northwestern Lutheran

Some articles in The Northwestern Lutheran deal with doctrine and with clear application of doctrine. Such articles are authoritative expositions of scriptural truth and binding on the members of our synod. Other articles state opinion or touch on areas of judgment or adiaphora. Such articles need not bind the consciences of our members. The conscientious writer, as well as the careful reader, needs to recognize into which of the above two categories each article fits.

68 Ibid, p 11. 69 Ibid.

## Hosting Outsiders

The typical constitution of a Wisconsin Synod congregation says: "All hymnals and text books for instruction in Christian doctrine used in this congregation must conform to Article II of this constitution." What are the implications of that provision for inviting someone from outside our confessional fellowship to speak to our members? What are our responsibilities toward other congregations of our synod who may hear about such a program and wonder what such a speaker is doing in our church?

Scripture makes it clear that we cannot have church fellowship with those who are not one in confession with us. We cannot invite them to preach in our services or to preach God's Word to us in any format. Nor can we allow them to lead in prayer. Emanuel's constitution is precisely and very well written when it spells out exactly what it means: "text books for instruction in Christian doctrine must conform to Article II."

There are individuals that have expertise in non-theological areas, however, which concern Christians as they try to live their Christian life. There are experts in subjects such as drug abuse, alcoholism, life issues, and creation versus evolution. Such individuals can have things of value to share with us. Certainly congregations can invite such speakers to address appropriate groups.

There should be certain groundrules or understandings, however. Perhaps the following will be helpful by way of illustration. It sets forth the groundrules on which Emanuel Lutheran Church invited the Institute for Creation Research to present a series of lectures in our church.

We must strongly emphasize these points which we ask you to understand about us and keep in mind during your presentations.

We are inviting you to supply just what your promotional brochure states: "speakers are highly qualified educators, scientists, and researchers. They can provide, at both a lay and technical level, material needed to defend the Genesis account of origins and show the scientific integrity of the Bible." We are not inviting you as preachers or theologians to conduct theological indoctrination or lead us in worship or prayer.

We believe that church fellowship, which includes all expressions of a common faith including altar, pulpit and prayer fellowship, must be on the basis of complete oneness in confession (I Cor 1:10). We are not in confessional oneness with the ICR and therefore not in church fellowship. We recognize the oneness we have with one another as believers in Jesus Christ and members of the Holy Christian Church, and therefore --outside of fellowship -- can and do cooperate in external matters. Your... seminar is an example of such cooperation in externals.<sup>70</sup>

#### D. Beyond Our Synod

Together as a synod we also have dealings with others outside our synodical fellowship. We enjoy and cherish, for example, the bond of confessional unity we have with the ELS. It is a special blessing to receive counsel from brothers who view issues from a different vantage point and background. It is a great help when we can assist one another in our particular needs, as ELS' help to us through the Bethany Program in past years and as our supplying pastors in their recent shortage.

International fellowships can be a source of blessing too. Our confessional fellowship with Christians like The Lutheran Confessional Church (Scandinavia) is to be treasured. Such international ties help us lift our eyes beyond purely parochial (national) concerns. They provide avenues for us to carry out our commission to preach the gospel to the world. And they afford us opportunities to grow in our understanding as international brethren bring insights gained in a totally different setting.

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<sup>70</sup> Letter to ICR from Lansing Committee, dated April 26, 1989.

### Triangular Ties

Our ties with church bodies of likeminded Christians is often complicated, however. For such church bodies in turn have ties, formal and informal, with other groups. Sometimes a church in fellowship with us has fellowship also with a church body not in fellowship with us. Through our ties to the one church body, we are linked to the other. This is called a triangular fellowship. Following the 1961 break with Missouri, we found ourselves in numerous triangular fellowships, especially in Europe. In the years since 1961 we have tried to resolve all such triangular fellowships. The WELS/ELS stand has been consistent. Fellowship can be on the basis of confessional unity only. Therefore, a church body cannot be in fellowship with church bodies whose confession conflicts with its own.

An example of a triangular fellowship is the WELS/ELS tie to the free churches of Germany. The Evangelical Lutheran Free Church (ELFK) in East Germany is made up of the East German part of the Evangelical Lutheran (Saxon) Free Church as well as the remainder of our synod's Polish mission behind the Iron Curtain. The ELFK is in confessional fellowship with us and repeatedly has shown the resolve to remain true to the confessional position that unites us. But until last fall the ELFK also had ties to the Independent Evangelical Lutheran Church (SELK), the united free churches of West Germany. SELK is in fellowship with the Missouri Synod and not in fellowship with the WELS and ELS.

Our WELS and ELS bore with this confused triangular situation for nearly 30 years. How could we do that? The answer is two part. First of all, for most of those years communication and travel to East Germany was limited. It was impossible, therefore, for the East Germans to learn fully about the differences between Missouri, SELK and us. It was impossible for us to ascertain where they stood on the issues. Scripture makes it clear that you do not cut off a weak brother. You will do all you can to admonish and strengthen him. The second reason our church continued to bear with the ELFK was that this church was doing something about the situation. The ELFK testified against the doctrinal errors in SELK and said that, if these issues were not resolved, it would be unable to continue in fellowship. Certainly the Lord expected us to stand by this church as it struggled to uphold a confessional position in total harmony with our own.

Our CICR has proposed a new synodical conference. It has been endorsed by the conventions of both the Wisconsin Synod and the ELS. One key provision of such a new synodical conference is that all triangular fellowships be eliminated by a church body before it can be admitted into membership in the conference.

#### Other Christians

"The object and purpose of the synod shall be to extend and conserve the true doctrine and practice of the Evangelical Lutheran Church."<sup>71</sup> So states the WELS constitution. It is our stated and continuing purpose to extend and conserve true Lutheranism. To carry out our purpose we must reach out to others; that's how you extend the

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<sup>71</sup> Constitution and Bylaws, p 9.



church. Our dealings with other church bodies are delegated to the CICR. The CICR's task according to the constitution is to "represent the synod in doctrinal discussions with other church bodies who are, or are not, in fellowship with the synod in order to 'extend and conserve the true doctrine and practice of the Evangelical Lutheran Church.'" <sup>72</sup> In other words when dealing with other church bodies we agree to work through our CICR as the only formal means for such contacts.

Our constitution as well as Scripture forbids individuals or small groups of our synod to practice selective fellowship. A blatant example of selective fellowship is given in the "Fellowship Report" of Missouri's Atlantic District:

Congregations do not view Synod as the one who decides the policy of local congregations. When the Synod attempts to impose a narrower understanding of fellowship than its member congregations accept, it loses its credibility and ability to influence. The congregations then have no alternative but to practice fellowship on their own as they find a common faith in the Gospel and Sacraments under the Lord's guidance....

Although the Synod has disputed the claim that selective fellowship is an option, that view is not shared by congregations of the Atlantic District. It appears from the survey that Atlantic District parishes feel that they have not only the right, but the obligation to decide these issues on their own. 73

This report says it is every man and every congregation for itself. This selective fellowship approach is obviously in violation of the unity which God desires in his church. It also violates God's "let all things be done decently and in order." Moreover, it is an affront to our brothers and sisters in the synod to disregard the procedures we have agreed upon and presume that we know better than all the rest.

We have agreed that we will make our formal contacts with church bodies through our CICR. This places a responsibility on the CICR. The commission is not to be in just a defensive position. It has the

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72 Ibid, p 19. 73 "Fellowship Report," CN, Vol 27, #24, June 12, 1989, p 7.

charge to take the offensive also. It is charged with extending evangelical Lutheranism. This includes a responsibility to reach out to other bodies searching for God's truth. Such efforts to reach out to other church bodies obviously will begin outside of fellowship. God willing, in some cases fellowship will result. Even if it doesn't, hasn't God's Kingdom been well served whenever the truth has been studied and is better understood?

In Christian News Pastor Gregory Jackson wrote:

Missouri and ELS pastors should get to know one another and share one another's periodicals. ELS pastors should invite Missouri pastors to conferences. ELS laity can say to their neighbors, "My group is small, but we are united in the faith and mission minded. If your group won't restore its own confession of faith, try ours. We have a similar history. We were once partners in the Synodical Conference."

WELS pastors have a unique opportunity to discuss the blessings of orthodoxy with other Lutheran pastors. Others cannot imagine how calm our seminary is, how quiet our meetings are, just as we take those things for granted. However, WELS pastors need to realize that Lutheranism exists outside of our synod. We often neglect our sincere friends in other bodies and puzzle them with this enigma: "If you were a real Lutheran, you would join us. But you should stay and fix up your own denominaton."

Missouri pastors and laity will not flood into ELS and WELS. That era is over. Some hope for an independent group moving out of Missouri and into fellowship with the ELS and WELS. Missouri conservatives will not take much property with them, few churches and no seminaries or colleges. Hence, few people will be willing to go.

Therefore, we must pray for all those who are steadfast and cling to the Word of God alone, not respecting synodical lines, but joining forces where we can to strengthen the proclamation of the Word. Never before has the Church been so rich in material wealth and so weak in doctrine. God has allowed us to squander the wealth of the Scriptures so that we will come to our senses and treasure once again the Word of Life.

In every church in every circuit, people should let their leaders know, "The spirit of the Synodical Conference is still alive. We are not under the Lutheran Confessions or over them, but joint witnesses with them in the truth of the Scriptures. Yes, we remember Walther, Hoenecke, Luther, and we will triumph with them, if not on earth, at least in heaven." <sup>74</sup>

There must be pastors and congregations out there that are truly searching for God's truth. We have a God-given responsibility to find proper ways to reach out and offer help to those who may be seeking it?

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<sup>74</sup> Gregory Jackson, "A Challenge for Wisconsin, the ELS, and Missouri," CN, Summer, 1989.

### To The Lost

The ultimate goal for all we do is to save the lost. The church growth movement attempts to accomplish this noble end by ignoring doctrine and scriptural fellowship practices. "Do what works. Find out what people want and give it to them." Sincere concern for the lost, however, compels us to solid doctrine and sound fellowship practices. We must make certain that once we, by the grace of God, reach the lost we have something worthwhile to give, namely God's Word in truth and purity. And if God permits us to win a lost soul, we must be certain that, by the grace of God, false doctrine and practice in our midst will not cause him to stumble and fall away once again.

On the other hand, a God-pleasing concern for reaching the lost compels us also to make certain that we are not letting manmade interpretations or judgments put impediments in our path. A legalistic, exclusive misapplication of fellowship principles certainly can slam the door, trapping us inside our churches and locking out the lost.

## CONCLUSION

As we seek to achieve the fullest possible unity and harmony, we battle two extremes. On the one hand, there is the temptation to adopt a spirit of doctrinal indifference. This shows in a laxness or unwillingness to apply all scriptural principles correctly and consistently. "Don't worry about the details as long as we have basic agreement on the big things." Such is the attitude of the ecumenical movement and of the unionism of our day. ELCA Lutherans, for example, can merge three church bodies with doctrinal differences simply by declaring that these differences are not divisive to fellowship. For that matter they can declare the same thing regarding Lutherans and Catholics except for that sticky issue of the primacy of the Pope. Kurt Marquart saw another aspect of doctrinal indifference in what he called the privatization of religion. He writes:

The popular model [is] of a "privatized" religion, in which the individual is supreme, and the church is perceived basically as an emotional "support group," to be joined, used, left and exchanged for another, according to the felt needs of the sovereign, autonomous individual consumer.<sup>75</sup>

Clearly God's Word does not teach a unity at the expense of doctrine. In fact, any such unity is a sham, a sad and empty shell of what Christian fellowship is meant to be.

The other extreme in seeking to achieve the fullest possible unity is to adopt a spirit of legalism. Legalism is a propensity to place emphasis on the law rather than rightly dividing law and gospel. Legalism tends to resolve differences by rules, resolutions and intimidation rather than by gospel motivation. Legalism is the attitude

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<sup>75</sup> Kurt Marquart, "'Levels of Fellowship': A Response," Concordia Theological Quarterly, January, 1989, p 258.

of "get rid of anyone who doesn't toe the party line." God tells the pastor: "Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage --with great patience and careful instruction" (2 Tm 4:2). We are to apply the truth of God's Word unsparingly and without compromise, but let the application be tempered with mercy.

Pastor Karl Krauss discusses legalism in an essay, Misfits in the Ministry:

The legalistic spirit and attitude is always arrogant and domineering and ruthless; the evangelical spirit and attitude is one of humbleness and meekness....

A kindly manner and a friendly mien will always accomplish more than vehemence and violence. One can be firm and still be friendly. We are to help, not to hurt; to win, not to wither. We are not to knock a person down-- he is already down -- but to lift him up. A pastor is not to be a "striker." As stated earlier, the purpose of reproof is not merely to hit and hurt, but to help and heal. Even the Law can be applied in an evangelical spirit and manner. <sup>76</sup>

Doctrinal indifference on one hand and legalistic interpretation and judgments on the other can destroy unity. Thank God that there is a third way to approach differences among us and to build the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace. It is the scriptural way. It shows in an evangelical spirit. Such a spirit finds its motivation in the gospel and its guidance in the Holy Spirit. It seeks in love to lead others to that same motivation and guidance. The evangelical person realizes that he too is only a poor, sinful mortal, just as much in need of God's grace as anyone else. He seeks to manifest Christlike kindness, concern and consideration toward others in dealings with them. The evangelical spirit is patient. Patience means allowing adequate time for the needed growth in understanding to take place. How much patience is appropriate depends to a great extent on the reaction of the other person. We can bear much longer with a person who has honest difficulties understanding

<sup>76</sup> Karl Krauss, "Misfits in the Ministry," p 6.

certain points than with one who obviously has a closed mind and desires no instruction. The evangelical spirit is not indifferent to doctrine. Where Scripture calls for a practice or belief, the evangelical person has no choice but to be firm, even if he will show patience in carrying out the necessary instruction or admonition. In all things one with the evangelical spirit is motivated by love and his actions a picture of love -- love for God which is reflected in love for his neighbor. The Shepherd Under Christ gives us a goal to shoot for: "Let the pastor follow scriptural fellowship practices, without ignoring his neighbors in the world. Let him show warmth and love toward people, without condoning their sin."<sup>77</sup>

Within our confessional fellowship there are indeed some gray areas in which judgments differ. A mass of legalistic rules and regulations inflexibly enforced is not the solution. There are many situations that involve judgment calls based on all the facts at one's disposal, and we had better hesitate to second-guess one another. Rather if we are determined to be an Evangelical Lutheran Church, let's begin by endeavoring to be evangelical Lutherans ourselves. We will do well, therefore, to exercise a high degree of mutual understanding and forbearance toward one another, to put the best construction on everything, and to refrain from loveless and uninformed criticism of one another. Evangelical Lutherans will seek to be living embodiments of Paul's words:

Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. (Col 3:12-14)

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77 Schuetze, Shepherd, p 229.

To sum it up: If true unity, with all its blessings, is to be maintained among us at all times, we must watch ourselves, see that we do not ever let pride rule our hearts. We must strive to become ever more firmly rooted in the Word, use the means of grace diligently, grow in grace and love and walk in the Spirit, admonish one another in love, and be ready to receive such admonition with a willing heart. <sup>78</sup>

Above all, we need to pray without ceasing that the Holy Spirit enable us to maintain the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.

Therefore, we pray for our synod and all those in fellowship with us:

Grant us unity of spirit. Help us all to accept and obey each and every part of your Word. Preserve us in the liberty wherewith Christ made us free, and let us not permit ourselves to be bound by human opinion, conclusions or prejudices.... Make us eager and able to preach the gospel to every creature. <sup>79</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Grumm, op cit, p 537.    <sup>79</sup> Arthur Clement, Prayers for The Worship Service, p 137.

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