

COMMUNICATING FELLOWSHIP: AN EVALUATION

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ABSTRACT

Church fellowship is a doctrine that is significant to the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutherans Synod (WELS). It is significant because all doctrine is important; however, church fellowship can also be difficult to communicate. Understanding church fellowship requires knowing what fellowship is, what fellowship isn't, and a knowledge of doctrine as a whole. More importantly, church fellowship is understood through faith, which can make communication difficult. This thesis seeks to evaluate how church fellowship is communicated in the WELS. This thesis will provide a biblical evaluation of fellowship, explore the history of church fellowship, and finally, offer an evaluation of official statements on church fellowship in the WELS.

INTRODUCTION

“I hear what you are saying, but it just doesn’t make sense to me.” You have probably heard these words before in some context or another. Hopefully, these words lead to a fruitful conversation and an undertraining between two people. For me, I had just spent the better part of an hour trying my best to explain church fellowship to a prospective member. But these words did not lead anywhere. I had already said everything that I had prepared. Was I communicating in an effective way?

This is a paper on church fellowship. More specifically, it will evaluate how church fellowship is officially communicated in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS). Church fellowship is an important doctrine. It is biblical; it has a long history both in the Christian church and in the Lutheran church. However, even though it is important, church fellowship has caused many issues in the church. This is especially true in the WELS. “Church fellowship has been a front-burner issue within the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod in every generation.”¹ Because of its importance to the Lutheran church and because of the nature of the doctrine, there is no shortage of literature on the subject. Eric Schroeder puts it this way, “many inkwells, fountain pens, printer ribbons, printer cartridges, and toner supplies have been dried up in the production of books, papers and theses on the subject.”² This is another paper in a long line of papers on this subject. Despite all this, the WELS has not changed its position on

1. Eric D. Schroeder, “The Guiding Principles for the Doctrine of Fellowship” (WLS Essay File, 2009), 1.

2. Eric D. Schroeder, “The Guiding Principles for the Doctrine of Fellowship,” 1.

church fellowship. This means that new literature doesn't add to the doctrine; rather, it seeks to clarify and solidify old truths.

In order to evaluate the communication of church fellowship, this paper will first provide an understanding of church fellowship. This paper will investigate where church fellowship is found in the Bible. This is where all doctrine should be rooted. Then there will be a description of how the WELS defines church fellowship. This is an important step in understanding how church fellowship is officially communicated. This definition is the basis for what the WELS confesses and believes about church fellowship. Next, there is an overview of the history of church fellowship in the church. The history of any doctrine greatly affects the way it is communicated. Communication will inevitably reflect the history and misunderstandings that trail behind it. This leads to an evaluation of how church fellowship is communicated. This paper will evaluate how church fellowship is communicated in both the Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod (LCMS) and the WELS. These two church bodies have very similar teachings about church fellowship. This comparison is valuable because there are only subtle differences, which highlight the issues in doctrine and communication the best. Finally, there will be an evaluation of how the WELS officially communicates fellowship. The WELS communicates church fellowship, clearly, concisely, and genuinely, but there may be ways to improve.

CHURCH FELLOWSHIP IN GOD’S WORD

“Church fellowship” is not a term that is used in the Bible. However, the principles for church fellowship are found clearly in Scripture. The term “fellowship” is found in the Bible; it describes a close relationship. Believers have fellowship with God; believers also have fellowship with other believers. It describes a state of being, a certain kind of “oneness.” Fellowship also describes an action. It is something that believers do together with other believers. In Acts, Luke describes the early Christian church doing various activities together united by faith (2:42 NIV). Fellowship is both a state of being, and it is something the early Christian church did together. “Activity” is the usual connotation for the term “fellowship” today.

English translations of the Bible are often trying to capture the Greek *κοινωνία* with the word “fellowship.” The English Lexicon of the New Testament suggests this definition for *κοινωνία*, “close association involving mutual interests and sharing, *association, communion, fellowship, close relationship.*”³ *κοινωνία* seems to function in the same way that “fellowship” does in English. It can be both a state of being and an action. However, understanding exactly what fellowship means requires context. The Bible provides this context for the doctrine of fellowship. This “fellowship” is described many times in the Bible when referring to the early church. In order to distinguish this specific kind of fellowship from a more general concept of fellowship, the word “church” is added. “Church fellowship” is used to describe fellowship in the context of the Christian church.

3. W. Arndt, F. W. Danker, and W. Bauer, *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature* (3rd ed) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 552.

Fellowship is Union with God

First, fellowship is with God. “See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are” (1 John 3:1). Through faith, believers are made to be God’s children; through faith, believers are part of God’s family. With that comes many different blessings. Believers are reconciled to God. Sin creates a separation between God and all humankind, but through God’s Son, Jesus, believers have been reconciled to God. Believers are also at peace with God. Through faith, the hostility that comes with sin is gone. Finally, believers are given a new life. The guilt that comes with sin has been removed. All these blessings come through faith. This is why God is able to call believers his children. This relationship can also be called a “fellowship” with God.

Because of this fellowship, it can also be said that believers have a union with God. “Faith in Christ Jesus unites us with our heavenly Father and with every other believer in a close, spiritual fellowship.”⁴ Fellowship means that believers are made to be at one with God through his Son. This is not to say that all believers are God or a god, but rather, in an amazing way, they are joined together with God. In addition, Jesus says that he lives in each and every believer’s heart. This is what is called the “mystic union.” Daniel Deutschlander explains it this way, “God is also present in a believer’s heart (1 Cor. 3:16). This is the *mystical* union. Yet no believer can ever be called God.”⁵ Through faith, believers have union with God. This union is fellowship.

4. Wilbert R. Gawrisch, “Romans 16:17,18 and Its Application to Individual Fellowship” in *Essays on Church Fellowship*, ed. Curtis Jahn (Milwaukee: Northwestern 2000), 244.

5. Daniel M. Deutschlander, *Grace Abounds: The Splendor of Christian Doctrine* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2015), 241.

Fellowship with God also assumes certain things. When someone believes they have fellowship with God, they are also confessing something. First, they confess to believe his saving message. The message that creates faith is that God sent his Son to live and die in our place and to forgive our sins. Second, they confess to believe God's Word is true. If they didn't, there would be no faith and no fellowship. Finally, they are also confessing that they do not believe in a different message. That would not be unity but rather division. Taken a little out of context, Jesus did say, "No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other" (Matt. 6:24). Fellowship with God is not necessarily "church fellowship;" however, the same principles that are found in fellowship with God are found in church fellowship.

Even though believers have fellowship with God, it is important to note that this fellowship is with sinful people. In an amazing way, a holy and almighty God has fellowship with sinful and broken people. For this reason, we do not have complete unity with God. This union will never be perfect on this side of heaven.

Fellowship is Union with Believers

Fellowship in the Bible is also used to describe fellowship between believers. "Christians also have fellowship with others in the visible church as they join in activities by which they express their common faith."⁶ In the same way that believers have a fellowship with God, they have a fellowship with each other. The Bible uses the picture of a body to describe this fellowship. In 1 Corinthians 12, the apostle Paul describes the church as a body, functioning as one unit. He again

6. Lyle W. Lange, Lyle. *God so loved the World: A Study of Christian Doctrine*. (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2005), 553.

uses this picture in his letter to the Ephesians, “Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called” (Eph. 4:3-6). Paul urges Christians to keep their unity: the unity that comes with faith, the unity that makes the church a body. A body is deeply united, and the Bible uses a picture of a body to describe church fellowship.

Just like fellowship with God, unity and fellowship between believers also assumes certain things. Having fellowship with believers means that they are confessing something. First, a believer is confessing that they believe in the same Savior. Second, they confess that they are “on the same page” or of the same understanding as other believers. Otherwise, there would be no unity. Finally, they are confessing that there is no division between them. In other words, declaring fellowship and unity means that there is actual unity and not division. After all, “the unity of the church is the presupposition of church fellowship.”⁷

In the same way that union with God is tainted with sin, fellowship between human beings is tainted by sin. This side of heaven it will always be imperfect. It is impossible to be absolutely “of like mind” with those around us. This does not mean that believers should abandon union and fellowship. It is possible to be “of like mind” with others in terms of doctrine. Because only God can read hearts, fellowship between humans is determined by confession. Deutschlander explains, “the determining factor for joining and supporting a visible church is not invisible faith but the *visible confession of faith*.”⁸ The only thing a human can assume about another’s faith is based on their confession. “Since we cannot probe the hearts, and since it is

7. Werner Elert, Werner. *Eucharist and Church Fellowship in the First Four Centuries*, Trans. N. E. Nagel (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1966), 49.

8. Deutschlander, *Grace Abounds*, 459.

impossible for us to look into them except by means of the confession, we take every confession, whether agreeing with our own or not, as genuine, as correctly reflecting the faith of the heart.”⁹ Because of sin, fellowship among believers is based on confession.

Fellowship is Action

Fellowship is unity both between a believer and God and between a believer and other believers. But fellowship is not just a state of existence, it is also an action. “Fellowship is *expressed* in the visible church as believers join together in outward activities that are connected to the mission and life of the church.”¹⁰ Here is how Luke describes fellowship in Acts, “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer” (2:42). Luke is describing the early Christian church. In this list, fellowship was considered an action. In a broad sense, this passage uses fellowship to describe any sort of shared *activity*. However, this fellowship also specifically involves God and other believers, which makes it church fellowship. More importantly, it seems like the other activities listed in this passage could also be described as fellowship.

In the early church, believers would also extend the “right hand of fellowship” (Gal. 2:9) in order to officially declare that the work of the church was being done. In 2 Corinthians 8, Paul describes fellowship as the sharing of monetary gifts. In 1 Corinthians 12, when Paul is describing the body and the unity of Christians, he is not just rejoicing in a state of existence, he is describing how believers in the church are put into action. Church fellowship is used to

9. John P. Meyer, “Prayer Fellowship” in *Essays on Church Fellowship*, ed. Curtis Jahn (Milwaukee: Northwestern 2000), 147.

10. Mark G. Schroeder, “Walking together with Jesus: Church fellowship and its implications for confessional Lutherans” (WLS Essay File, 2011), 14.

describe many different activities. The WELS statement on fellowship lists many possible activities; “pulpit fellowship; altar fellowship; prayer fellowship; fellowship in worship; fellowship in church work, in missions, in Christian education, and in Christian charity.”¹¹ This is not an exhaustive list, but it does illustrate that church fellowship can include many different things.

Not only does fellowship among believers include many actions, but it is also a great blessing. Deutschlander describes these blessings well, “It is in the fellowship of believers, in the visible church, that we share our faith for mutual encouragement and strengthening along life’s way. It is in union with the visible church that we carry out the many aspects and facets of Christ’s commission to preach the gospel and make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:18-20).”¹² Through fellowship, God gave all believers a support system. Believers have fellowship so that there will always be mutual encouragement and strengthening. God also gives his church amplified work efforts through fellowship. A group of people can accomplish far greater and bigger things than any one individual. Paul would not have completed all of his journeys if it were not for the support of churches. Fellowship is an action that brings blessing.

Fellowship is Avoiding

Fellowship is an action, but there are times when fellowship is “avoiding.” Paul explains in his letter to the Romans, “I urge you, brothers and sisters, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them” (Rom. 16:17). The apostle Paul is warning the church in Rome about people who

11. Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod. “What We Believe: Church Fellowship”

12. Deutschlander, *Grace abounds*, 459.

teach anything contrary to God’s Word. Wilbert Gawrisch, in his essay on this passage, says, “Shun them definitely, turn away from them completely and finally. Do not toy with their errors.”¹³ To add, Deutschlander says, “If they deny any other doctrine clearly taught by the Word of God, we will warn against the error and do nothing to support them in error.”¹⁴ Paul does not make any distinction between a small obstacle and a big obstacle. The teachings of God are all important. In fact, Paul dealt with false teachers who were using subtle and, by some standards, “small” obstacles. Paul tells the church to keep away from them, in other words, do not have fellowship with them. A difference in belief means that there is no unity. If someone was teaching contrary to the message of the gospel, Paul has this warning, “keep away from them.” Paul is giving a stern warning here to not practice fellowship. “We must separate ourselves from everyone who clings to false teaching in spite of warnings and admonition.”¹⁵

This “avoiding” is a natural result of the unity expressed in fellowship. A difference of belief means that there should be no fellowship. “We will not want to do anything that might give the impression that denials of God’s Word don’t matter to God or to us. We will not worship with them nor will we join or support the organization or church that holds to any false doctrine.”¹⁶ We will not support false teachings. In fact, “those who support false teachers are accomplices of an evil act just as much as the individual who dries the getaway car for a bank robber or the person who hides a fleeing murderer.”¹⁷ It does not make sense for a believer to

13. Gawrisch, “Romans 16:17-18 and Its Application”, 253.

14. Deutschlander, *Grace Abounds*, 460.

15. John Brug, *Church Fellowship: Working Together for the Truth*, People's Bible Teachings (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1996), 34.

16. Deutschlander, *Grace Abounds*, 461.

17. Brug, *Church Fellowship*, 46-47.

support a false belief. What is more, avoiding false doctrine is an act of love. “It is not only love for Christ and his Word that compels us to avoid all false worship and joint church work with those who teach false doctrine. It is also an attitude of love to those who innocently may be in error.”¹⁸ After all, “to withhold the truth from someone is never love”¹⁹ “Avoiding” someone can clearly proclaim that a teaching is false doctrine. Deutschlander explains this proclamation, “While refusing to worship or do church work with those who teach false doctrine, we at the same time want to make a positive confession to the truth of God’s Word, whether the false teachers and their adherents will receive it or not.”²⁰

18. Deutschlander, *Grace Abounds*, 461.

19. Brug, *Church Fellowship*, 28.

20. Deutschlander, *Grace Abounds*, 465.

DEFINING CHURCH FELLOWSHIP

The Biblical concept of “fellowship,” is rather simple. It is a state of being in union with God and with other believers; fellowship is also action between believers. Because fellowship is a union which is made visible through action, it also involves avoiding. Biblical fellowship is not just any joint activity, but it focuses on a special fellowship between believers. This fellowship is called “church fellowship.” The WELS has this definition of church fellowship; “Church fellowship is every joint expression, manifestation, and demonstration of the common faith in which Christians on the basis of their confession find themselves to be united with one another.”²¹ This is a good and concise definition.

First, church fellowship is “every join expression, manifestation and demonstration.” Church fellowship is action. This is how the Bible describes fellowship. It assumes that more than one person is involved; it is “joint.” This could refer to individual believers who are engaging in fellowship, and it can also refer to two church bodies who are engaging in fellowship. The word “every” is also very important. There is history attached to this word, but for now, this means that fellowship includes all actions of faith.

According to this definition, church fellowship also assumes a “common faith.” That is what fellowship activity expresses, manifests, and demonstrates: a common faith. These activities are all about expressing faith. This serves to narrow the scope of church fellowship. Church fellowship can and should only be applied to those things which express faith. This also serves to emphasize the unity that fellowship brings. This faith must be common between believers engaged in fellowship.

21. Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, “What We Believe: Church Fellowship”

Finally, fellowship must assume unity. Those in fellowship must be “united with each other.” This is part of biblical fellowship. Fellowship always implies unity. This unity is part of the concept of fellowship. Why would you want to join together with someone you do not agree with? Unity allows this fellowship to continue.

Fellowship Action is a Unit

“The term *unit concept* of fellowship indicates that the various activities through which we express church fellowship must be dealt with as a unit.”²² The WELS holds to a unit concept of fellowship. All actions of church fellowship are a unit. This is why the WELS definition includes the word “every.” Church fellowship, as a doctrine defined by the WELS, is any and every activity that expresses faith. This doesn’t seem to be a very broad definition; however, the WELS statement offers this, “We may classify these joint expressions of faith in various ways according to the particular realm of activity in which they occur, e.g., pulpit fellowship; altar fellowship; prayer fellowship; fellowship in worship; fellowship in church work, in missions, in Christian education, and in Christian charity.”²³ These activities are all based on biblical and practical fellowship circumstances. They all express the faith and the mission of those engaging in them. In this way, all of these actions are the same. “In the New Testaments all expressions of fellowship are treated as a unit.”²⁴ “Expressions of faith” include anything from preaching to prayer. Joint expressions of faith are anything done publicly which profess faith.

22. Lange, *God so Loved the World*, 554.

23. Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, “What We Believe: Church Fellowship”

24. Brug, *Church Fellowship*, 45.

Church fellowship is a unit. Fellowship in the Bible is communicated as a unit. Worshiping God is communicated as a unit. That is to say, different acts of professing faith do not receive a different level of fellowship or unity. Expressions of faith are not divided and categorized. The WELS statement on church fellowship puts it like this, “Yet insofar as they are joint expressions of faith, they are all essentially one and the same thing and are all properly covered by a common designation, namely, church fellowship.”²⁵ Church Fellowship is a unit.

Doctrine is a unit

The same “unit concept” is also applied to the doctrine of a church body. “All doctrines of Scripture must be dealt with as an indivisible unit when we are trying to determine with whom we may practice fellowship.”²⁶ To have unity, all doctrine must be the same between two church bodies because doctrine is a unit. The basis for fellowship is faith, and that faith must be defined and understood by doctrine. The WELS statement on church fellowship does just that, “A Christian confession of faith is in principle always a confession to the entire Word of God. The denial, adulteration, or suppression of any word of God does not stem from faith but from unbelief.”²⁷

Faith and doctrine are presented as a unit in the Bible. “Concern for doctrinal unity as the basis for the practice of church fellowship is not an incidental matter for the writers of the New Testament, but runs through all their work.”²⁸ Faith includes the entire word of God. In the same

25. Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, “What We Believe: Church Fellowship”

26. Lange, *God so Loved the World*, 554.

27. Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, “What We Believe: Church Fellowship”

28. Brug, *Church Fellowship*, 31.

way, there are not different levels of God's Word that are more important or less important. There is simply God's Word. Jesus talks this way before he ascends into heaven. He says to teach "them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:20). Doctrine is based on the entirety of that word. "Scripture makes no exceptions on doctrines."²⁹

There have been categories given to different doctrines of the Bible. The most prominent is that of fundamental and non-fundamental, or those that deal with salvation or those that are secondary to the plan of salvation. These "categories" need to be properly understood and can be useful for study. However, in the discussion of church fellowship, it is not a question of salvific importance, but rather a question of belief in God's Word. C. F. W. Walther explains this in his thesis on church fellowship,

No man has the privilege, and to no man may the privilege be granted, to believe and to teach otherwise than God has revealed in His Word, no matter whether it pertains to primary or secondary fundamental articles of faith, to fundamental or nonfundamental doctrines, to matters of faith or of practice, to historical items or other matters subject to the light of reason, to important or seemingly unimportant matters.³⁰

Even though some distinctions are made, God's Word is always treated as a unit. God does not allow his people to pick and choose what they want to believe. Doctrine is a unit.

29. Brug, *Church Fellowship*, 38.

30. Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod "What We Believe: Church Fellowship"

THE HISTORY OF CHURCH FELLOWSHIP IN THE WELS

Church fellowship, as a doctrine and in practice, is not a recent or new concept. It has been practiced since the beginning of the church. This means that there have also been issues surrounding it since the beginning of the church. The Apostle Paul was already thinking about it as he wrote letters to the very first churches. This history is important to know in order to understand the principles of church fellowship. It is also important because it has shaped the official communication of fellowship today. An example of this is the Nicene Creed. The wording of the second article of the Nicene Creed almost gives a brief history of the Christological conflicts that preceded it. Understanding the history behind these false teachings gives a deep appreciation for the words of the Nicene Creed. In the same way, how church fellowship is officially communicated today, especially in the WELS, reflects the history and misunderstandings that trail behind it.

Fellowship in the Early Church

Church Fellowship has been practiced in the Church since the New Testament. The Apostle Paul set forth the Godly principles for church fellowship in his letters. He was the one who compared the church to a body. Paul described the blessings that this fellowship could bring. He is also the one who warned about the dangers of fellowship where there is no unity (Rom. 16:17). Paul's words were based on Jesus' teaching. Jesus also described this fellowship when he prayed for all believers, "My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (John 17:20-21).

Church fellowship wasn't just taught, but was also practiced by the early church. Elert explains this in his book, *The Eucharist and Church Fellowship in the First Four Centuries*, "In the course of the second century the church drew firm and indeed narrow lines as the boundaries of church fellowship."³¹ The early church was so concerned with church fellowship that they even drew narrow lines. This indicates that for the early church all doctrine was important. Elert goes on to say that "where church fellowship is broken by heterodoxy, it can only be restored by the achievement of doctrinal unity."³²

The early church was forced to make decisions about church fellowship. "If the unity of the church involves being at one and church fellowship presupposes such unity, then the question of church fellowship arises whenever Christians are not at one, and this question of church fellowship then calls for a practical decision."³³ Church fellowship is either action or avoiding. From early on, the Christian church has not only been teaching about church fellowship but also making practical decisions about church fellowship. Finally, in the early church, fellowship was based on confession. "The *koinonia* of every congregation was a fellowship of faith, and, since the mouth must confess what the heart believes, it was a confessional fellowship."³⁴ Church fellowship is not a recent doctrine.

31. Elert, *Eucharist and Church Fellowship*, 52.

32. Elert, *Eucharist and Church Fellowship*, 143.

33. Elert, *Eucharist and Church Fellowship*, 49.

34. Elert, *Eucharist and Church Fellowship*, 72.

Fellowship During the Reformation

Church fellowship continued to be practiced up to the time of the Reformation (1500's). The reformation is an important time in history when investigating how church fellowship is communicated today. The Lutheran reformers shaped and continued the conversation about doctrine in the Lutheran church today. The reformers understood *and* practiced fellowship. Article 7 of the Augsburg confessions says this, "For this is enough for the true unity of the Christian church that there the gospel is preached harmoniously according to a pure understanding and the sacraments are administered in conformity with the divine Word" (AC VII: 2).³⁵ This article is careful to say that practice and customs should not divide churches.

However, it seemed obvious that the gospel in word and sacrament was important to church fellowship. It says that the gospel should be "preached harmoniously according to a pure understanding." This "harmony" includes all of God's Word. "Therefore, since the church cannot tolerate anti-scriptural teachings, it also cannot limit the meaning of the 'pure teaching of the gospel' to only those things said in the confessions. It must include everything that Scripture teaches."³⁶ Article 7 is expressing the need for unity in doctrine. Roland Ziegler explains that this view is supported by Franz Pieper, "A fourth understanding of AC VII is that the consensus necessary for a unity of the church consists in everything that the Scriptures teach. Such a position was proposed by Franz Pieper."³⁷

35. Augsburg Confession, Article Seven in Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 42.

36. Ziegler, "Doctrinal Unity and Church Fellowship" (Concordia Theological Quarterly, 2014), 71.

37. Ziegler, "Doctrinal Unity and Church Fellowship", 65.

Church fellowship was also very important to Martin Luther. “It is clear that Luther believed that agreement in all doctrines is necessary for church fellowship.”³⁸ Luther understood that church fellowship assumed true unity. He knew that all doctrine was important, and this doctrine affected church fellowship. “Luther was concerned for church fellowship, but it had to be based on doctrinal unanimity. The whole Christian doctrine had been clearly revealed in Scripture.”³⁹ It could be said that Luther had the same “unit concept” that the WELS does today. However, at the time, there was not a need to explain church fellowship in such terms. Only recent discussion has brought the term “unit concept.”

Fellowship in the WELS

The doctrine of church fellowship has been understood and practiced as Lutheranism came to America. Church fellowship has also had a long history in the Wisconsin Synod; however, when it was formed, the Wisconsin Synod did not have a correct understanding of fellowship. “The Wisconsin Synod tolerated a rather lax fellowship practice during its early days.” But that soon changed. “When John Bading became president in 1860, and Adolph Hoenecke emerged as its theological leader, the Wisconsin Synod broke its ties with the unionistic mission societies and embraced a sound, confessional Lutheranism.”⁴⁰

When the Wisconsin Synod became a more confessional synod, it subscribed to the Lutheran Confessions which correctly taught church fellowship. In fact, “the Missouri Synod did not recognize the Wisconsin Synod as an orthodox synod with whom they could join in

38. Brug, *Church Fellowship*, 63-64.

39. John M. Drickamer, “Church Fellowship in Luther’s Confessions of 1528 and 1544” (*Concordia Journal*, 1978), 5.

40. Brug, *Church Fellowship*, 69.

fellowship until 1868, after the Wisconsin Synod had developed a sound doctrinal position and practice concerning church fellowship.”⁴¹ Since this time, the Wisconsin Synod has been careful to have doctrinal unity before declaring church fellowship. They have not joined with other church bodies that are willing to compromise on God’s Word which includes having “loose” fellowship practices.

Historically, the LCMS and the WELS had doctrinal unity. And so, “for nearly a century, from 1868 until 1961, the Wisconsin Synod and the Missouri Synod were in church fellowship.”⁴² This fellowship was based on Walther’s theses on church fellowship. It brought the activity and blessing that God intends with fellowship.

Walther’s theses clearly reflect a biblical understanding of fellowship. He maintains that the Word of God is a unit. “No man has the privilege, and to no man may the privilege be granted, to believe and to teach otherwise than God has revealed in His Word.”⁴³ Full church fellowship between two church bodies can only exist where there is complete agreement in doctrine. Because the Missouri Synod and the Wisconsin Synod both found themselves to be in doctrinal unity with each other, they joined into fellowship. This meant that they joined in altar fellowship, pulpit fellowship, prayer fellowship, and any other fellowship activity. They enjoyed all the blessings that God has given in church fellowship.

41. Brug, *Church Fellowship*, 69.

42. Brug, *Church Fellowship*, 68.

43. Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, “What We Believe: Church Fellowship”

Fellowship with the LCMS is Broken

In 1944, things changed between these two synods. “The 1944 Missouri Synod convention... resolved that joint prayer at intersynodical conferences does not violate the earlier resolution against joint prayer, provided that such a prayer does not imply denial of truth or support of error.”⁴⁴ This was an official and lasting resolution that made a distinction between joint prayer and prayer fellowship, which is not a biblical understanding of church fellowship. Even before that resolution, the actions of the LCMS indicated that there was a misunderstanding of church fellowship. The LCMS was engaging in talks about fellowship with the ALC who held to many false doctrines. “WELS urged the LCMS to suspend fellowship discussions with the ALC since there was no genuine agreement between the Missouri Synod and the ALC. Nevertheless, the Missouri Synod continued to seek agreement with the ALC.”⁴⁵ These actions showed in a public way what the resolution in the 1944 conference had officially confirmed.

A statement was also released by prominent leaders in the Missouri Synod in 1945 that contained troubling statements. John Brug explains what happened, “‘A Statement,’ a protest document signed by 44 prominent Missourians in 1945, was an endorsement of the Brux-ALC fellowship principles and gave additional evidence of the change underway in Missouri. In insisted that ‘fellowship is possible without complete agreement in details of doctrine and practice.’”⁴⁶ These statements were not official, but they were widely accepted. What troubled the WELS was that the statement contained false doctrine. “It rose to that prominence because it appeared to WELS and ELS that the LCMS had begun to make a new distinction between some

44. Brug, *Church Fellowship*, 73.

45. Brug, *Church Fellowship*, 71-72.

46. Brug, *Church Fellowship*, 73-74.

activities that required full doctrinal agreement (altar and pulpit fellowship) and those that did not (such as joint prayer in some settings).”⁴⁷ This distinction would go against the unit concept of church fellowship. These statements were not officially accepted; however, they did spark much debate between the Missouri Synod and the Wisconsin Synod.

“By the 1950s WELS had become concerned about other practices of the LCMS that raised doubts about its fellowship principles.”⁴⁸ In addition to “A Statement,” the WELS was concerned with how fellowship was practiced in the LCMS. There were concerns about the military chaplaincy, the scouts, and practicing open communion. All of these issues concern how fellowship is practiced. “The Wisconsin Synod broke fellowship with Missouri in 1961.”⁴⁹ Brug goes on to explain that this break took place because the LCMS had adopted a theology of fellowship that allowed joint prayer where there was no unity of doctrine. The Wisconsin Synod decided to officially address this issue. It became clear that the Missouri Synod was not practicing nor teaching the same thing about fellowship as the Wisconsin Synod. Where there is not unity of belief, there cannot be church fellowship.

The Missouri Synod changed their doctrine. Either they had changed their doctrine concerning prayer or their doctrine concerning church fellowship. It seems more probable that this was a change of church fellowship because of the other issues concerning fellowship. The Missouri Synod had rejected the concept that all expressions of faith are worship or considered fellowship. The Missouri Synod clearly allowed for prayer fellowship between people who knew that they were not united in faith. “They made a distinction between ‘joint prayer’ and ‘prayer

47. Schroeder, *Walking Together with Jesus*, 36.

48. Brug, *Church Fellowship*, 75.

49. Brug, *Church Fellowship*, 76.

fellowship.’ They said that ‘joint prayer’ with others required less agreement in doctrine than did ‘prayer fellowship.’”⁵⁰ Prayer is presented in the Bible as an act of worship to God. However, the Missouri Synod saw prayer in two different way. They saw joint prayer and prayer fellowship. Joint prayer was said to be just a simple joining of Christians in a similar activity. Suddenly, all prayer was not included in practicing church fellowship for the Missouri Synod.

It is possible to explain this change by saying that joint prayer should never have been thought of as a fellowship activity. However, this confession is in itself a change of doctrine. A change of doctrine put the Missouri Synod and the Wisconsin Synod outside of unity with each other. The Missouri Synod had changed their doctrine of church fellowship. If prayer fellowship was allowed with any professing Christian, regardless of confession, then the Missouri Synod had a different view of church fellowship. The unit concept of fellowship had been broken.

However, it is important to note that the Wisconsin Synod and the Missouri Synod did not break their fellowship with each other until 1961. This was several years after “A Statement” of the 44 had come out. There was much consideration and patience that went into making the decision to break fellowship. The Wisconsin Synod as a whole needed time to observe and learn what was actually happening in the Missouri Synod. The Missouri Synod needed time to consider this apparent change and decide if it is what the church body as a whole believed. In the end, it was clear that the Wisconsin Synod and the Missouri Synod no longer believed the same thing about church fellowship.

50. Lange, *God so Loved the World*, 562.

COMMUNICATION OF CHURCH FELLOWSHIP AND EVALUATION

Based on biblical doctrine and the history of issues surrounding church fellowship, the WELS has this official statement on church fellowship. “Church fellowship is every joint expression, manifestation, and demonstration of the common faith in which Christians on the basis of their confession find themselves to be united with one another.”⁵¹ The WELS statement on church fellowship seeks to explain this definition and address the issues that surround church fellowship on the basis of the Bible. But is this communication clear?

The LCMS, likewise, has a statement about church fellowship. In order to clarify belief and doctrine, both synods have also written many essays and papers about church fellowship. This is done in order to make official communication of this doctrine clearer. In order to evaluate the official communication of church fellowship both forms of communication should be compared. This highlights differences, and achieves a greater depth of understanding. Most other church bodies have drastically different views on fellowship; investigating small distinctions gives a deeper understanding of core issues. Official communication provides a view of how church fellowship is understood within each church body.

Communicating Church Fellowship: LCMS

The LCMS currently communicates fellowship as they did in 1950’s, during the split with the WELS. The LCMS still allows for any member, pastor, or convention to join in “joint prayer” with any other Christian. This difference in fellowship also leads to a difference in how the LCMS views cooperation in externals. On the other hand, the LCMS has a relatively conservative view of church fellowship. An introduction booklet to the LCMS says this, “We as

51. Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, “What We Believe: Church Fellowship”

LCMS Lutherans teach that the way to external unity in the Church is by confronting differences in doctrine and resolving these differences, not by ignoring them or agreeing to disagree.”⁵²

Doctrinal unity is still very important in the LCMS. The LCMS points to the Lutheran confessions.

The subject of pulpit and altar fellowship is not discussed *expressis verbis* in the Lutheran Confessions. However, the basis for pulpit and altar fellowship, as it has been understood in the Lutheran Church where it was loyal to its confessions, is set forth in Augustana, Art. VII: And to the unity of the church it is enough to agree concerning the doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the sacraments.⁵³

Historical and biblical views on church fellowship are important in the LCMS and help to guide understanding.

While doctrinal unity is important to the LCMS, they have a different way of understanding how it is practiced. A report from the CTCR says this,

A study of the history of the Christian church shows that the church has sought to do this, both in the intimate circle of the local congregation and beyond, in what has commonly been called church fellowship, or *communicatio in sacris*, terms somewhat more inclusive than the expression “pulpit and altar fellowship.” Pulpit and altar fellowship are, however, among the outstanding manifestations of church fellowship.⁵⁴

This is a good introduction to church fellowship; however, it intentionally leaves out prayer fellowship. “This fellowship practice of the LCMS has been called levels of fellowship or degrees of fellowship”⁵⁵ It is as if different actions of church fellowship can require different degrees of doctrinal unity. But Gawrisch still says this about church fellowship in the LCMS,

52. “An Introduction to the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod” (Concordia: St. Louis, 2009), 14.

53. Commission on Theology and Church Relations of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, “Theology of Fellowship,” The Lutheran Church Missouri Synod (1967), 25. The Commission on Theology and Church Relation of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod will be shortened to “the CTCR.”

54. CTCR, “Theology of Fellowship” 14.

55. Brug, *Church Fellowship*, 83.

“the assumption that prayer fellowship could be practiced only between those who were fully agreed. Joint prayer, on the other hand, was supposedly possible between those working toward such an agreement.”⁵⁶ This is distinctly different than church fellowship in the WELS.

Prayer Fellowship: LCMS

The LCMS shifted how they talk about fellowship because of the split with the WELS. First, the LCMS is concerned about prayer. The LCMS is willing to say, “We understand and accept that Lutheran pastors may not under any circumstances participate in joint prayer or worship together with clergy of non-Christian religions.”⁵⁷ It is understood in the LCMS that a Christian should not pray with a non-Christian. If there is no common faith, there is not union. The LCMS also says this, “Prayer is always in some sense ‘an expression of worship’”⁵⁸ The LCMS understands and is concerned about prayer. When talking about church fellowship in the context of missions, Klaus Schulz says that, “prayer is God talk, addressing the triune God and thus demands a context where such God talk is possible. By implication, joint prayers taking place beyond such a context would have to be dismissed. Unfortunately, this view is easily abandoned for the sake of making prayer an evangelistic tool to witness one’s faith to others.”⁵⁹

However, it is also clear that prayer is not always considered an act of church fellowship in the LCMS. “Unlike preaching and the sacraments, prayer is not necessarily an official act of

56. Gawrisch, “Romans 16:17,18 and Its Application,” 241.

57. Commission of Theology and Church Relations of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, “Guidelines for Participation in Civic Events” (The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, 2004), 14.

58. CTCR, “Guidelines for Participating in Civic Events,” 20.

59. Klaus Detlev Schulz, “Fellowship Issues and Missions” (Concordia Theological Quarterly, 2006), 178.

the church as such, but is something which individuals may do in private.”⁶⁰ This makes a clear distinction between the sacraments and prayer. There is a difference between these two things, just as there is a difference between preaching and the sacraments. However, this distinction is used to exclude all prayer as expressions of worship.

The LCMS sees some prayer more “secular” in nature by saying that “a prayer opening or closing a civic event does not necessarily make such an event a worship service.”⁶¹ It can then be said that, “pastors are free to participate, and perhaps to pray or offer a message at these overwhelmingly secular events.”⁶² The “Guidelines for Participating in Secular Events” by the CTCR explains that if certain conditions were met a pastor could pray at an event where multiple prayers were offered. Even though the conditions make it hard to conceive of such an event, it is still presented as a possibility.⁶³ Finally, beyond secular and semi-secular events, the LCMS also encourages joint prayer during pre-fellowship discussions even if there is no unity. “Our Synod should understand that, in the case of doctrinal discussions carried on with a view to achieving doctrinal unity, Christians not only may but should join in fervent prayer that God would guide and bless the discussions.”⁶⁴

The LCMS uses historical examples to defend this position on prayer. First, they take examples from the Bible. “Christian Prayer is offered also outside the context of the fellowship

60. Kurt E. Marquardt, *The Church and Her Fellowship, Ministry, and Governance*, Confessional Lutheran Dogmatics vol. IX, Ed. Robert D. Preus (Fort Wayne, Indiana: The International Foundation for Lutheran Confessional Research, 1990), 47.

61. CTCR, “Guidelines for Participating in Civic Events,” 17.

62. CTCR, “Guidelines for Participating in Civic Events,” 17.

63. CTCR, “Guidelines for Participating in Civic Events,” 19.

64. CTCR, “Theology of Fellowship,” 43.

of believers. Christ and Stephen prayed for their persecutors, and Jesus prayed publicly at the tomb of Lazarus.”⁶⁵ This public prayer is not the same as joint prayer, but it presents a unique situation concerning prayer. The LCMS also uses examples from the time of the reformation. “At the colloquy of Regensburg in 1601 neither Lutherans nor Roman Catholics appear to have considered it improper to open the colloquy and the individual sessions of the colloquy with prayer.”⁶⁶ And again, “From these cases it appears that the Lutherans, during the period of orthodoxy, did not refuse, as a matter of principle, to pray with Reformed and even Roman Catholics. They did refuse when they themselves were treated as heretics.”⁶⁷ These examples are used to support the LCMS current view on prayer fellowship, even though they are only concerning one situation in which fellowship was applied.

The LCMS belief concerning prayer fellowship and the doctrine of church fellowship has found its way into official communication. “Altar fellowship then *is* church fellowship. And of course, presupposes and includes baptismal and pulpit fellowship.”⁶⁸ This is supposed to describe the basis of church fellowship in the LCMS, but that is all the further it goes. In other statements the LCMS defends doctrinal unity, but it again stops short in terms of fellowship activity. “Fellowship demands a confessional agreement in all articles of the faith as the church preaches (teaches) the gospel and administers the sacraments, which is pulpit and altar fellowship.”⁶⁹ It seems that altar and pulpit fellowship is a full definition of fellowship in the LCMS. This is because other forms of “fellowship” can be viewed on a more case by case basis.

65. CTCR, “Guidelines for Participating in Civic Events,” 10.

66. CTCR, “Theology of Fellowship,” 26.

67. CTCR, “Theology of Fellowship,” 26.

68. Marquardt, *The Church and Her Fellowship*, 43.

69. Schulz, “Fellowship Issues and Missions,” 179.

Although the LCMS is very concerned about church fellowship and has very few exceptions, it still wants to let these exceptions stand as doctrine. “The term ‘levels of fellowship’ was coined to describe a gray terrain located somewhere between full fellowship in doctrine and practice on one hand and no fellowship on the other.”⁷⁰ In the LCMS there is a “level” beneath altar and pulpit fellowship where issues other than doctrinal unity need to be considered. Church fellowship can be “messy.” And so, the LCMS finds it easier not to maintain a “unit concept.” In the LCMS the “unit concept” seemed “to make impossible even the joint prayer for the Holy Spirit’s aid by Lutherans of different synods when they meet to seek to overcome their differences. It was also thought to brand participation in prayer at mixed gatherings, civic and patriotic, as sinful unionism.”⁷¹ The LCMS finds that altar and pulpit fellowship is the best way to communicate this view. The term “altar and pulpit fellowship” is a continuing confession against the unit concept of fellowship. This subtle difference leads to a lax view on other areas of fellowship. These are not just practical matters, but they are a deviation of biblical church fellowship principles.

Cooperation in Externals: LCMS

The LCMS tries to explain other situations by talking about cooperation in externals. “Cooperative efforts with another church ought to be engaged in with a clear understanding that agreement in the purpose of the particular organization *does not imply agreement in all areas of doctrine and practice.*”⁷² The focus is on the implications. There are many things that are

70. Schroeder, “Walking Together with Jesus,” 37.

71. CTCR, “Theology of Fellowship,” 41.

72. Commission on Theology and Church Relations of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, “Principles for Cooperation in Externals with Theological Integrity (2010 Res. 3-03)” (2010), 7.

implied or assumed when it comes to church fellowship. However, does an agreement between two churches nullify what is otherwise assumed?

Mark Schroeder, talking about cooperation in externals in the WELS, says,

Any activity, carried out by the church, which is directly connected to the mission of the church and which in some way assumes the use of the Means of Grace, cannot truly be external. Cooperation in those activities, even though they may not directly involve worship, prayer, or administration of the Sacraments, is actually a *communio in sacris*, a fellowship in holy things.⁷³

The WELS and the LCMS have different views on “cooperation in externals.” These two different definitions can come to very similar conclusions about most situations; however, the LCMS still views some joint work between churches as not implying unity. The WELS views all church work which is carried out for the mission of the church as church fellowship. It is a unit.

Evaluation: LCMS

On a certain level, the LCMS is able to communicate their fellowship principles clearly and concisely. In the LCMS, full doctrinal agreement is necessary for altar and pulpit fellowship. This makes reasonable sense. As stated before, fellowship and professed unity assumes a common faith and actual unity of belief. It makes sense, even in the secular world, that someone of a different faith would not preach in a Christian church. It makes sense that someone who does not believe in Jesus should not be allowed to the sacrament of the altar.

However, how the LCMS officially communicates other church fellowship issues can be confusing and at times inconsistent. The LCMS is concerned about prayer and about activities between churches that lead to unionism. The LCMS also believes in full doctrinal unity for such activities and would classify them as issues of church fellowship. However, at the same time, the

73. Schroeder, “Walking Together with Jesus,” 39.

LCMS allows for some joint prayer, and some church activities which are agreed to not profess unity. These things are a different “level” of church fellowship.

This leads to another strength, and weakness, in the LCMS official communication; their concern. Most statements about church fellowship in the LCMS are not a “free pass” to join in any sort of activity with any sort of confession. After wading through many caveats and explanations, it appears as there are very few practical situations where, according to the LCMS, church fellowship can be practiced. Therefore, many applications might look the same as applying the unit concept. However, this concern also leads to confusion because the applications are not always clear. Some possibilities for joining in activity are all but explained away. In other words, this definition gives the impression that many fellowship activities are allowed, when in fact, they are not. This concern also does not undo the LCMS change of doctrine.

Communicating Church Fellowship: WELS

The WELS has maintained their position on fellowship, which is referred to as the “unit concept” for church fellowship. During the split with the Missouri Synod, the WELS did not change their position on church fellowship. Fellowship is a unit; doctrine is a unit. There is to be no fellowship where there is no doctrinal unity; there should be fellowship where there is. Numerous papers and essays that come from the WELS about church fellowship all say the same thing. They reflect the biblical principles of church fellowship. They are even written in a very similar way: they go first to the Bible, then define the biblical principles, then draw on the history of church fellowship, and finally give application.

The WELS communicates church fellowship most through application. The biblical explanation of the principles remains the same. These principles are very important because “we cannot make sound applications without a clear understanding of the principles.”⁷⁴ Simply put, the principles are “to patiently admonish the weak and to promptly separate from those who cling to error.”⁷⁵ This paper has not spent much time dealing with the “weak.” The “weak,” here, are people who are united in faith but because of a weakness of faith profess some kind of false belief. Such a person should be admonished and corrected so that fellowship can continue.⁷⁶ To put it a little bit differently, our principles are “that we manifest our Christian fellowship until confession of the truth and rejection of error require us to separate.”⁷⁷ The two principles are to act or to avoid.

Only after these principles have been established can applications be made. Overall, many WELS authors seek to distinguish between principles and applications. Application and exception do not determine doctrine; the Bible does. Brug makes a clear distinction in his book on church fellowship with a very noticeable double line. He goes on to say, “do not allow difficult cases to establish or modify the principles.”⁷⁸

This way of communicating assumes that there will be exceptions, or exceptional cases. “A loving application of the principles may allow or even require action that is *exceptional* to the

74. Brug, *Church Fellowship*, 107.

75. Brug, *Church Fellowship*, 108.

76. This is reflected in the WELS waiting patiently to break fellowship with the Missouri Synod.

77. “Prayer Fellowship” published by the WELS Conference of Presidents, in *Essays on Church Fellowship*, ed. Curtis Jahn (Milwaukee: Northwestern 2000), 393.

78. Brug, *Church Fellowship*, 107.

norm.”⁷⁹ The principles are black and white. But every believer will recognize that quite often there are circumstances that are hard to figure out. There are even other scriptural principles that will come into play. “We must remember that there are hard cases (cases of casuistry) in which it is difficult to determine which scriptural principle applies.”⁸⁰ Applying principles should never lead to a ditch a legalism, where everything must be black and white.⁸¹

Many WELS authors also admit that these applications will be different in different situations. “There will be many circumstances in which we will have to exercise our Christian judgement, and sometimes Christian brethren may differ in their judgement.”⁸² This is an important concept especially when considering how fellowship is communicated. The WELS operates with one set of principles and seeks to apply them as best they can. Brug gives this example, a WELS pastor who visits a LCMS member “in the hospital at her daughter’s request could commune her since her immediate spiritual needs would be the paramount concern.”⁸³ He then follows this by explaining that some Lutheran writers never see enough of an emergency to administer the Lord’s Supper to someone who is not in their fellowship. The principles will not change, but extreme and unusual circumstances will lead to different applications.

Finally, Mark Schroeder, in his paper on church fellowship, says this, “I wonder if two God-given principles are ever truly in conflict with or opposed to one another.”⁸⁴ It is not as if

79. Schroeder, “Walking Together with Jesus,” 44-45.

80. Brug, *Church Fellowship*, 107.

81. This point is taken from the paper “License vs. Legalism” by Joel D. Otto.

82. Gawrisch, “Romans 16:17,18 and Its Application,” 258.

83. Brug, *Church Fellowship*, 119.

84. Schroeder, “Walking together with Jesus,” 44.

exceptional cases will present a choice between two principles: one will be followed, and one will be broken. Instead, God's principles work together. Following one principle does not necessarily mean breaking another.

Prayer Fellowship: WELS

The LCMS and the WELS differ in their descriptions and communication of prayer fellowship. As with church fellowship in general, the WELS has written much about prayer fellowship. WELS writers will have different application of church fellowship and still be guided by the same principles. When it comes to prayer fellowship, does the WELS communicate clearly, or does it confuse?

The WELS is consistent in communicating prayer fellowship.

Prayer fellowship is an expression of faith. Prayer fellowship presupposes a common faith; in other words, it presupposes church fellowship, established by a common confession of a common faith. Where the practice of the latter (church fellowship) is impossible for a lack of a common faith, there also joint prayer will be impossible because there is no common approach to God; or if indulged in spite of the continuing disunity, it becomes a sham, simulating a harmony which does not exist.⁸⁵

As with every action concerning church fellowship, prayer is a unit. Prayer is always an act of fellowship; therefore, prayer requires doctrinal unity.

The WELS usually refers to prayer in this context as prayer fellowship, but WELS authors have used the term joint prayer. The LCMS makes a distinction between these two terms that also involves a difference in practice. The WELS only uses these terms to admit a difference in setting, but not a difference in practice. "There is no middle ground. If true prayer is always an act of worship, joint prayer calls for the same unity of doctrine as any other act of worship."⁸⁶

85. Meyer, "Prayer Fellowship," 95-96.

86. Brug, *Church Fellowship*, 49.

When talking about prayer between the LCMS and the ALC, the WELS Conference of Presidents says that they “cannot pray jointly without giving the impression that they are united in faith.”⁸⁷ This same essay even goes so far as to say, “not only is joint worship impossible, but where there is no common confession of faith, there can be no common prayer, for prayer is a vital exercise of our faith.”⁸⁸ Prayer fellowship and joint prayer are both consistently communicated as acts of fellowship in the WELS.

However, as with application of church fellowship, applications of prayer will have specific results. After reading how clear WELS authors are concerning prayer, it could be said that the WELS will only pray with the WELS. This unit concept “has often been seen to deny that there may be times when a loving application of the fellowship principles not only does not forbid joint prayer but actually calls for it.”⁸⁹ However, in applying church fellowship, there are other things to consider. There could be a weak believer, someone who is struggling with some part of God’s word. “In cases like these, there is nothing to prevent joint prayer; rather, joint prayer would be indicated as highly God-pleasing.”⁹⁰ Finally, there may be emergency situations. “There may be more occasions where prayer together with other Lutheran Christians or even with Christians of other denominations is indicated-in the hospital, for example, at the scene of an accident, or on the battlefield.”⁹¹ These specific circumstances are not the time for figuring out confession and fellowship. Sometimes, prayer also requires an evaluation of private

87. “Prayer Fellowship,” published by the WELS Conference of Presidents, 391.

88. “Prayer Fellowship,” published by the WELS Conference of Presidents, 388.

89. Schroeder, “Walking Together with Jesus,” 44.

90. Meyer, “Prayer Fellowship,” 119.

91. “Prayer Fellowship,” published by the WELS Conference of Presidents, 393.

confession. There is consistency in belief over prayer in the WELS. However, there are situations that illustrate a difference between application. These examples will not break the principles that guide them. One special circumstance is also not used in considering other special circumstances.

Private Confession: WELS

Church fellowship governs the whole life of a Christian. It is not just something that happens at church. Church fellowship is part of a Christian's everyday life as they interact with individual people. "It is the public confession of their church that governs our public fellowship relationships with our family or friends."⁹² Even when acting alone, public confession will guide church fellowship. This can also be said of prayer fellowship, "prayer fellowship deals more with church bodies and not so much with individuals, yet the same principles will serve as guidelines."⁹³ The same principles that are found in church fellowship are used to guide individual fellowship.

However, it is possible that a Christian's "private confession to us and their public church membership are in deference and in time would have to be brought into harmony."⁹⁴ A private confession and a public confession can be different for various reasons. These confessions should be brought into a harmony with one another. But "in our private relationships with them, we may also consider their personal confession."⁹⁵ That is to say, when a situation is private and

92. Brug, *Church Fellowship*, 147.

93. Jeff Wegner, "The Unit Concept of Prayer Fellowship or With Whom Can We Pray?" (WLS Essay File, 2010), 4.

94. Wegner, "The Unit concept of Prayer Fellowship," 5.

95. Brug, *Church Fellowship*, 147

if there is a private confession of a common faith, then prayer fellowship could be practiced. Because there is doctrinal unity, there is also fellowship. Because there is privacy, there is not confusion. “Numerous writers in both WELS and ELS have acknowledged that in private settings, where individual beliefs or weakness of faith can be determined, exceptional situations may occur.”⁹⁶

Evaluation: WELS

The WELS, if anything, has become clearer in the official communication of church fellowship. The history of church fellowship in the WELS had led to much being written on the subject. This history has forced the WELS to articulate church fellowship as best as it can. This has led various authors to explore numerous aspects of church fellowship. In this way, considering the extent of writing, the WELS has communicated church fellowship consistently and clearly.

However, the full picture of church fellowship can take a long time to read and understand. Clarity is achieved through the large amount of writing about the subject. And so, in another sense, this communication is also difficult to understand. If someone only has time to read a small amount, church fellowship can be misunderstood. It seems as if communicating church fellowship requires a full discussion.

In the WELS, there also seems to be a different way of communicating the application of church fellowship. What fellowship looks like in application is just a little bit different to each author. Based on the same biblical principles, different authors have explained specific cases of church fellowship in different ways. In this way, church fellowship might cause confusion. Overall, how the WELS communicates specific application could improve. It does not depart

96. Schroeder, “Walking Together with Jesus,” 44-45.

from biblical principles; however, it is approached in different ways. In other instances, specific examples seem to fall short of addressing every situation, and might make a different situation more confusing.

In my evaluation, simplicity is important when talking about church fellowship. Digging too far into one specific example probably will not give a direct answer to a different example. Fellowship has two main parts, activity and avoiding. The application of these two principles needs to take into account doctrine, confession, and context.

Finally, it seems like the WELS says more about avoiding than it does about joining, at least in applying church fellowship. This is probably because “avoiding” is where most of the issues are. However, the conclusion to many applications seems to be, if they are not of a common faith then avoiding is necessary. This can be seen in Brug’s principles. “To patiently admonish the weak and to promptly separate from those who cling to error.”⁹⁷ The distinction is between a weak believer and one who clings to error. This represents biblical principles, but it does not give a full picture of the “action” of fellowship. This “action” includes weak believers and “strong” believers. There are two sides to fellowship. Can more be done to highlight the other side: the action?

97. Brug, *Church Fellowship*, 108.

SUGGESTIONS

First, I will offer suggestions about the communication of church fellowship. Church fellowship is most often communicated through application and suggestion. This can also be the most difficult part to communicate. What seems wise and applicable today, can be unwise and not very helpful tomorrow. So, I will not give many specific examples even though that is what I usually desire most. Specific applications can create even more questions and are sometimes too specific to be helpful. On the other hand, I am also not offering principles. In an excellent way, John Brug identifies the biblical principles of church fellowship in chapter 11 of his book entitled *Church Fellowship*.⁹⁸ I will simply give suggestion.

The first suggestion is concerning the presentation of church fellowship. My suggestion is to intentionally present a balanced approach. Fellowship is “action” and “avoiding;” it should be presented as such. My evaluation is that the conversation tends to center on avoiding. There are many reasons for this, but it leaves the conversation lopsided. This “lopsidedness” can clearly be seen in this paper, which discusses the issues between the WELS and LCMS at length. This can also be seen in the WELS statement on Church Fellowship.⁹⁹ The entire introduction explains why church fellowship had to be avoided. Again, there are good reasons for this, but for anyone outside looking in, this might not give a balanced presentation. The theses on fellowship themselves do give a balanced approach of both action and avoiding.

As far as how a pastor or a church presents church fellowship, I have heard many balanced explanations from pastors and congregations. Due to lack of experience, I will not offer a suggestion. Rather, my second suggestion is concerning individual questions about fellowship.

98. Brug, *Church Fellowship*, 105-110.

99. Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, “What We Believe: Church Fellowship.”

My suggestion here is to focus on the “action” of church fellowship. This is the blessing of church fellowship. There is also blessing that comes from the protection and clarity that avoiding brings, but the action is our goal and not the avoiding. We want to have fellowship. Most questions might be about avoiding, but there would not be a need for avoiding if there was not also a desire for action. I would suggest a balance. For me, this means a constant evaluation of my desire for the action that comes with church fellowship. Even in a question about avoiding, talk about action and how to get there together.

My final suggestion is more general. It starts with a question that made me interested in church fellowship in the first place; it is a question that I am still asking myself. If church fellowship is action and avoiding, am I being proactive in promoting action? Church fellowship is first activity, and it’s an activity that believers desire because it is a blessing. My suggestion is to be proactive, to take time telling others that we want “action” before a discussion about avoiding. I am not suggesting to pretend there is fellowship where there is none. I am suggesting that communicating church fellowship might become clearer and more genuine if, instead of a defense, we first get to express a desire. Instead of letting “avoiding” prompt a conversation about my confession, I could ask someone about their confession. “Avoiding” in itself is a confession, but confession can also be a proactive conversation about doctrine. There are many stories and applications about avoiding but few about approaching others to correct doctrinal error in order to join in action. Because church fellowship is so important, we should not only be strong in avoiding but also in seeking action.

CONCLUSION

Fellowship touches many areas of ministry. It is something that deals with a church bodies' entire teaching and doctrine. Yet, at the same time, it is very simple. These are the two main principles: action and avoiding. The issues with church fellowship are either a lack of understanding or that the teaching seems unattractive and not ecumenical. The WELS tries to answer both of these issues. It is my opinion that the WELS is very clear in communicating what church fellowship is and in increasing an understanding of the doctrine. It has been shown in this paper that the WELS has maintained a biblical view and practice of church fellowship since 1868. WELS authors maintain incredible consistency on a difficult subject. The consistency is found both in a reflection of principles and in communicating application.

However, it is also my opinion that the conversation in WELS could be more balanced. It seems that many applications and examples revolve around avoiding and not "action." Is it possible at this time for the conversation to be more balanced? It might be hard currently. On the other hand, the emphasis of "avoiding" in the WELS is usually positive. "Those principles always need to be consistently applied in love for God, for his Word, and for people. Different circumstances will determine how that love can best be expressed."¹⁰⁰ Even though the conversation might be one sided, the WELS consistently points out that it is done in love.

Church fellowship, as defined and explained by WELS, is a very genuine conversation. It's biblical and straight forward. Fellowship activity is a unit, just as the state of fellowship is a unit. Doctrine is a unit. There is either fellowship or there is not. There is either action or avoiding. The avoiding is to expose error and bring others close to the truth. The action is for mutual worship, encouragement, physical and spiritual support, and increased mission efforts. In

100. Schroeder, "Walking Together with Jesus," 44.

the WELS, the principles are communicated well, but the conversation is unbalanced. I think Brug said it well, “We too seldom stop to marvel at this blessing and to kneel and thank God for it.”¹⁰¹ What do I need to know about church fellowship? It a blessing from God.

101. Brug, *Church Fellowship*, 161.

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