

The Theology of Church Fellowship¹

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- I. Fellowship with God is His Gift through Faith
 - A. Fellowship with God is Entirely the Result of His Grace
 - 1. He Accomplished the Redemption of the Whole World on the Cross (1-2)
 - 2. He Brings the Treasures of Redemption to Us Through the Means of Grace (3-5)
 - B. He Calls Believers into His One Body, the Church
 - 1. The Church is Created Through the Means of Grace (6)
 - 2. This Unity is a Creation of God (7-8)
- II. The Exercise of Church Fellowship
 - A. The Location of Fellow Christians
 - 1. The Church is Invisible, Yet Believers can be Found Through the Marks of the Church, the Means of Grace (9-10)
 - 2. There is Only One Church Fellowship Which is the Fellowship of the Holy Christian Church (11)
 - B. The Practice of Church Fellowship
 - 1. Christians will Practice Church Fellowship to Grow in the Means of Grace (12)
 - 2. Christians will Practice Church Fellowship to Extend the Fellowship (13)
 - 3. Christians will Practice Church Fellowship by Helping One Another in Need (14)
 - 4. Christians will Practice Church Fellowship by Striving to Maintain that Fellowship (15)
 - C. The Basis for Church Fellowship
 - 1. Christians Exercise Church Fellowship on the Basis of the Pure Marks of the Church (16-17)
 - 2. Church Fellowship is Exercised on the Basis of the Faith Which is Confessed (*fides quae*) and Not by Faith in the Heart (*fides qua*) (18)
 - 3. This is the Doctrine of the Lutheran Confessions (19-20)
 - 4. The Unity Required for Church Fellowship is a Fundamental Unity (21)
 - D. The Defense of Church Fellowship
 - 1. Christians will Defend the Church Fellowship by Making a Regular Use of the Means of Grace (22)
 - 2. Christians will Defend the Church Fellowship by Being on Their Guard Against Error (23)
 - 3. Christians will Defend the Church Fellowship by Admonishing Those in Error (24)

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4. Christians will Defend the Church Fellowship by Instructing the Weak and by Avoiding Those Who Persist in Error
 - a. Those Who will Receive Instruction from the Word Show Themselves to be Weak Brothers (25)
 - b. Those Who Persist in Error Must be Avoided (26-28)
 - c. The Termination of Fellowship is not a Judgment on the Personal Faith of the Errorist (29)

III. The Application of Church Fellowship

A. The Unit Concept of Church Fellowship

1. All Expressions of a Common Faith are One
 - a. Scripture Treats all Expressions of Fellowship as a Unit (30-33)
 - b. The Unit Concept does not Disparage the Means of Grace (34-35)
2. The Unit Concept is not New and Strange Theology
 - a. The Unit Concept in the Ancient Church (36)
 - b. The Unit Concept in the Reformation (37-38)
 - c. The Unit Concept in the Synodical Conference (39-40)
3. Scriptural Principles Remain Changeless but Circumstances Vary (41-43)

B. The Levels of Fellowship Concept of Church Fellowship

1. Fellowship Between Christians is Viewed as a Continuum (44-45)
2. Levels of Fellowship and Cooperation in Externals (46-47)
3. Levels of Fellowship and Church Fellowship
 - a. The Distinction Between Cooperation in Externals and Church Fellowship is Blurred (48)
 - b. There is a Worship that is not Considered to be Worship (48-50)
 - c. There is a Resulting Bi-level Approach to Fellowship (51)
 - d. The Levels of Fellowship Concept cannot be Harmonized with Holy Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions (52-54)

Abbreviations

Lutheran Confessions: (All quotes are from the Tappert Translation unless otherwise indicated)

AC - Augsburg Confession
 Ap - Apology of the Augsburg Confession
 Ep - The Epitome of the Formula of Concord
 FC - Formula of Concord
 LC - Large Catechism
 SA - Smalcald Articles
 SD - Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord

Luther's Works:

LW - American Edition
 St. L. - St. Louis Edition

All Bible References: (All Bible quotations are from the New King James Version unless otherwise indicated)

The Theology of Church Fellowship

I. Fellowship with God is His Gift through Faith

A. Fellowship with God is Entirely the Result of His Grace

1. The doctrine of church fellowship is not a set of dry rules and regulations which hinders the work of the Holy Spirit and makes it almost impossible for Christians to proclaim the Gospel of salvation. The doctrine of church fellowship is rather a living truth from God's Word connected to the very heart of the Gospel, the central article of the faith, that a poor lost sinner is justified by grace for Christ's sake through faith.
2. The entire human race lost its blessed fellowship with God through the fall into sin (Genesis 3:1-15; Romans 5:12). Yet God so loved the world that He gave His most prized possession, His only begotten Son, as the one atoning sacrifice for all sin. On the basis of Christ's holy life and innocent suffering and death, God has justified or declared righteous the whole world and is now reconciled to every sinner, as St. Paul testifies, "God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation" (2 Corinthians 5:19). The bright and glorious Easter morning was the public declaration that the whole world was forgiven in Christ. The empty tomb proclaimed absolution for all humanity (objective justification).
3. This wonderful treasure of forgiveness flows to sinful man through the Gospel in Word and Sacraments and is received alone by faith (subjective justification). Even this faith or trust in Christ's redemption is not something that man does. Rather it is a mere hand created by the Gospel which receives Christ's forgiveness offered to him. This faith is indeed a gift of God as St. Paul indicates, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9). Justification by faith alone then means: that one is declared righteous alone on account of Christ's works of substitution. This treasure of forgiveness, life, and salvation is brought to him personally through the means of grace and is received through faith which is worked by those very means of grace. Our salvation from beginning to end is the work of God.
4. God the Holy Ghost creates, strengthens and preserves faith and new life in the Christian through the life-giving Word and the blessed Sacraments. Since it is through these means that God brings man His grace and makes him partake in that divine grace by faith, the Word and the Sacraments are called the means of grace. The Spirit has chosen to use *vehicles* to convey to us all the treasures of salvation. The Scripture declares that faith comes from hearing the Word (Romans 10:17), that Baptism saves us (1 Peter 3:21), that whenever you forgive sins they are forgiven and whenever you do not forgive sins, they are not forgiven (John 20:23), and that the Lord's Supper gives the forgiveness of sins (Matthew 26:28). The Scripture clearly states that God works through means, as Luther taught:

For He wants to give no one the Spirit or faith outside of the outward Word and sign instituted by Him, as He says in Luke 16:29, "Let them hear Moses and the prophets." Accordingly Paul can call baptism a "washing of regeneration" wherein God "richly pours out the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3:5). And the oral Gospel "is the power of God for salvation to every one who has faith" (Romans 1:16). (LW 40:146)

5. Through the continual offering and giving of remission of sins, life, and salvation in the Word, Holy Absolution, Holy Baptism and the Lord's Supper, the Christian is strengthened, nourished, and comforted throughout this present vale of tears until he reaches the promised Heavenly Canaan above. This faith-life relationship with the Lord is the "vertical" aspect of church fellowship. Without His working through the means of grace the Christian is lost.

B. He Calls Believers into His One Body the Church

6. When an individual becomes a believer and child of God by faith created through the means of grace, he also becomes a member of the Holy Christian Church which is made up of all believers in Christ and only believers. The believer becomes part of the household of God according to St. Paul, "Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God" (Ephesians 2:19). Since this is the case, the Christian never stands alone. Far too many think only of their personal relationship with Christ and fail to recognize that the Bible usually does not consider the Christian individually but rather as a part of the church. 1 Corinthians 12 describes believers as members of the body of which Christ is the head. The individual parts or members relate to the head through the body, the church.
7. The Christians do not establish this unity in the church. It is a creation of God. In Baptism through faith the Spirit unites one with Christ and incorporates him into the body of Christ, the Church (1 Corinthians 12:13). In the Holy Supper Christians become His one body the church by receiving His body in the Sacrament (1 Corinthians 10:17). By creating faith in the heart, through Word and Sacraments, the Holy Spirit draws the individual into the communion or fellowship of saints. The word "fellowship" as it is used in the New Testament (*koinonia*; German *Gemeinschaft*) is not something that the individual does, like joining a volunteer organization. Rather, it is a participation or sharing in common things (LW 37:356). *Church fellowship or confessional fellowship is a participation in sacred things (communio in sacris), that is, the means of grace. This fellowship is created by those very means of grace and includes every joint expression and manifestation of a common faith.* The Lord unites Christians into this fellowship through faith so that they together share in the blessings of salvation. This relationship with others sharing in the treasure of redemption is the "horizontal" aspect of church fellowship (W. Elert, *Eucharist and Church Fellowship*, pp. 4-6).
8. Because God has established the church, the unity of the church as the church itself can never be destroyed (Matthew 16:18). The church may appear outwardly to be rent asunder, but the Lord always preserves its true unity. What comfort there is in Luther's beautiful statement concerning the church in the *Large Catechism*:

I believe that there is on earth a little holy flock or community of pure saints under one head, Christ. It is called together by the Holy Spirit in one faith, mind, and understanding. It possesses a variety of gifts, yet is united in love without sect or schism. (LC II 51, p. 417)

The church's welfare and eternal destiny do not depend on man or on his efforts, but it rests alone in the hands of God. He will never allow His own to be plucked from His hand (John 10:27-28).

II. The Exercise of Church Fellowship

A. The Location of Fellow Christians

9. The church of God is invisible because it is made up of all those and only those who trust in Christ's redemptive work. This trust or faith cannot be seen for no one can look into another's

heart. Since this is the case, the Christian in this life can never know precisely who is a Christian and who is not. This is the reason Christians confess in the *Apostles' Creed*, "I believe ... the holy Christian Church." While the church is invisible, it is nonetheless real. That means that it really exists. The Confessions state, "We are not dreaming about some platonic republic, as has been slanderously alleged, but we teach that this church actually exists, made up of true believers and righteous men scattered throughout the world" (Ap VII 20, p. 171).

10. The Christian will desire to gather with fellow believers to acknowledge and exercise on earth the church fellowship which he has with other believers (Hebrews 10:25). He desires to unite with others in worshipping the Savior and growing in the life-giving Word (Colossians 3:16). He desires to gather as Christ's one body to receive His true body and blood in the Supper (Acts 2:42). How then is the Christian to find fellow believers if the church is invisible? The Christian will have no great difficulty finding groups or assemblies where he knows Christians are present, even if he cannot identify the Christians individually. Since he was brought to faith through the means of grace, and since God has promised that His Word will not return void (Isaiah 55:11), he knows that where the Word and Sacraments are used there the church is and there Christians are to be found. Thus the means of grace are the marks of the church (*notae ecclesiae*) which show where the church exists (Ap VII 5, p. 169).
11. These visible assemblies gathered around the means of grace are not to be equated with the Holy Christian Church (Ap VII 12-13, p. 170). The Holy Christian Church is found within the visible group; it is hidden in the visible assembly which may be made up of both believers and hypocrites. Visible assemblies like congregations and synods may be called church only because of the believers in their midst. They are church in the improper sense of the term. In its proper sense it refers only to the Holy Christian Church. Therefore church fellowship is not a fellowship of this or that congregation or this or that synod. Rather it is the fellowship of the Holy Christian Church, the communion of saints. There is only one fellowship of the church. It is not that the fellowship we have with all believers in the Holy Christian Church is any different from the church fellowship we have as a congregation or synod. It is the same fellowship. The only difference is that in the former case the fellowship cannot be exercised on earth (Ephesians 4:4-6).

B. The Practice of Church Fellowship

12. The Scripture exhorts Christians to manifest the unity and fellowship already given them by virtue of their incorporation into the body of Christ. St. Paul writes, "I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to have a walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:1-3). *This church fellowship, which is also referred to as "confessional fellowship," includes every joint expression of a common faith.* This fellowship created by the means of grace will manifest itself in various activities connected with the means of grace. Christians will gather to worship and praise the Lord for all His blessings and especially for His greatest blessing, salvation full and free (Hebrews 10:23-25). They will unite in prayer asking His continual blessing (Acts 2:42). As they come together, they will desire to grow in the life-giving Word as St. Paul urges the Colossians, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching, and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord" (Colossians 3:16). Christians will desire to gather as Christ's body, the church, to receive His body and blood in the Supper for the strengthening and nourishment of their faith-life and in this way they are drawn into His one body, the church (Luke 22:19; Acts 2:42; 1 Corinthians 10:17). Christians then will seek out other believers in Jesus Christ in order to build them up and to be built up by them through the means of grace (Romans 1:11-12).

13. Believers exercising their fellowship with God and with one another will labor to extend the fellowship through the means of grace. They will follow Christ's great commission, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19). Christians will not want to preserve the treasure of salvation only for themselves and their children. They will want others to hear the message of Christ crucified. Having received Christ's redemption, Christians cannot but share the blessing of Christian fellowship with the world, that world for which Christ shed His blood (Acts 4:20; 1 John 1:1-2:2).
14. Christians are to acknowledge and exercise the church fellowship which they have with one another by giving special help to one another. The Scriptures say, "Therefore as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith" (Galatians 6:10). Remember a special offering was taken in Asia Minor and Greece for the needy of the congregation in Jerusalem (1 Corinthians 16:1-4). Christians will always be concerned about the needy in their midst and all those in poverty throughout the world.
15. Christians will practice the wonderful fellowship which is theirs in Christ by striving to maintain that fellowship. They will do their utmost to live peacefully with one another, letting nothing disrupt the unity. St. Paul writes, "Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same things, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment" (1 Corinthians 1:10). The followers of Christ will strive "to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:1-3).

C. The Basis for Church Fellowship

16. Christians will find fellow believers where the Holy Word and Blessed Sacraments, the marks of the church, are in use. Concerning these marks of the church Jesus says, "If you remain in My word, you are really My disciples, and you will know the truth and the truth will set you free" (John 8:31-32 [NET]). *Here Jesus emphasizes that the marks of the church are to be pure.* Christians are to gather with those who confess the pure marks of the church, where the Word is taught in its truth and purity and the Sacraments are rightly administered. Jesus does not say gather with all those who confess that I am Lord, but rather gather with them "who remain in My Word." In the great commission He tells us to teach not merely part of His proclamation but all the things He has commanded us (Matthew 28:20). St. Paul warns against those who do not teach the full truth of Christ, "But shun profane and vain babbling, for they will increase to more ungodliness. And their message will spread like cancer. Hymenaeus and Philetus are of this sort, who have strayed concerning the truth, saying that the resurrection is already past; and they overthrow the faith of some" (2 Timothy 2:16-18; Revelation 22:18-19).
17. It is sometimes implied that Christians living in our real world with different opinions and viewpoints cannot know the full truth of Christ in every detail. Those with such ideas have succumbed to the relativism of our modern era. The Scripture declares itself to be infallible and errorless in every detail (2 Timothy 3:16; 2 Peter 3:15-17; John 10:35; John 17:17). The Scripture declares itself to be clear and simple so that even a child can understand it (Psalm 119:105; 2 Timothy 3:15). Luther says, "There is on earth no clearer book than the Holy Scripture. Among other books, it is like the sun among all lights" (St. L. V, 334). One may not find the answer to every question that comes to mind, but all that is needed for salvation is clearly revealed. Therefore the Christian can know the truth of Jesus Christ. The marks of the church are limited to the *pure* Word and Sacrament. The Scripture never attributes any saving power to error or false doctrine. Error or false doctrine is always detrimental to saving faith.

18. When discussing the basis for the acknowledgement and exercise of church fellowship, two Latin phrases may be helpful. They are *fides qua*, that is, the faith by which one believes, personal, subjective faith, the faith of the heart; and *fides quae*, that is, that faith which is believed, the doctrine taught in God's Word. *Fides quae* is and always remains the basis for church fellowship. This is not meant to slight the *fides qua*. It is by such faith that one is justified, made a member of Christ's church, and brought into the fellowship of all believers. At the same time, however, it must be remembered that such personal, subjective faith, though known to God, is hidden to man and therefore cannot be the basis for the acknowledgement and exercise of church fellowship between Christians here on earth. Those who try to make *fides qua* serve this purpose, lose the objective basis for church fellowship and are led into a subjective, pietistic viewpoint. The means of grace are objective, solid and apprehensible. Through these, God's own means, the distinction is drawn between orthodox and heterodox churches. It is *fides quae*, that which is believed, the objective truth of God's inerrant Word, which is the basis for acknowledging and exercising church fellowship (FC Ep I, 4-5, p. 465).
19. If the marks of the church are pure, differences in church organization and church government will not affect church fellowship. Likewise different church rites, liturgies, and hymnbooks will not hinder the fellowship. These things are in the realm of Christian liberty and adiaphora. In these areas Christians will bear with one another in love.

This is indeed the doctrine of our Lutheran Confessions:

For it is sufficient for the true unity of the Christian church that the Gospel be preached in conformity with a pure understanding of it and that the sacraments be administered in accordance with the divine Word. It is not necessary for the true unity of the Christian church that ceremonies, instituted by men, should be observed uniformly in all places. It is as Paul says in Ephesians 4: 4-5, "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism." (AC VII, p. 32)

20. Lutherans of a liberal stripe have tried to interpret the word "Gospel" in this quotation from the *Augsburg Confession* not as meaning all of Scripture and every doctrine of Scripture, but rather only as Scripture's central teachings which are necessary for salvation. However, the *Formula of Concord* shows that the Gospel means all the doctrines of Scripture.

We believe, teach, and confess that no church should condemn another because it has fewer or more external ceremonies not commanded by God, *as long as there is mutual agreement in doctrine in all its articles as well as in the right use of the holy sacraments*, "Disagreement in fasting does not destroy agreement in faith." (FC Ep X, 5, pp. 493-494; see also FC SD X, 31, p. 616; FC Ep V, 5-6, p. 478)

When the *Augsburg Confession* says, "For it is sufficient, etc." (*satis est*) it is not making a contrast between some doctrines of Scripture and other doctrines of Scripture, but between the doctrine of the Gospel and church ceremonies. There must be agreement in all the doctrines of Scripture in order to have church fellowship but there does not need to be agreement in church ceremonies.

21. In emphasizing the scriptural requirement of doctrinal agreement for church fellowship, one must realize that among Christians, especially in congregations and church bodies, there will seldom be more than a "*fundamental unity*" in doctrine and practice. This means that misunderstandings due to a lack of knowledge and understanding of Scripture may arise among those who are in church fellowship. It does not, however, mean an outright denial of any doctrine of Scripture can exist. The church will bear with weak brothers in all patience and love.

D. The Defense of Church Fellowship

22. Christians will guard and defend the precious fellowship that they have with one another by remaining steadfast in the use of the Word and the Sacraments (Acts 2:42; Romans 6:3–5; Galatians 3:25–28; 1 Corinthians 10:16–17; 1 Corinthians 11:26). Dissension and division arise when Christ’s disciples do not carefully listen to His voice as He speaks to them in the Holy Scripture, God’s inspired and inerrant Word. Jesus assures them that they will really be His disciples who possess the liberating truth if they continue to make careful use of His life-giving Word and Sacraments (John 8:31–32). Therefore the Scripture urges Christians to watch their life and doctrine closely and continue in them so as to save themselves and their hearers (1 Timothy 4:16; 2 Timothy 1:13; John 5:39).
23. Satan is continually roaming the earth seeking whom he may devour (1 Peter 5:8). Through false doctrine and unscriptural teaching he is striving to separate the believer from the Good Shepherd and drag him to the pit of destruction. All false doctrine has its origin in Satan, the father of lies (John 8:44). Because of this, Christians will always be on their guard against error and falsehood. In His protective care Jesus urges, “Beware of false prophets” (Matthew 7:15). St. Paul writes, “I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them” (Romans 16:17 [NIV]). The present active infinitive *skopein* in this passage means “to keep on watching out for.” It refers to the Christians’ ongoing activity of being on guard against those who cause divisions and offenses by teaching contrary to God’s Word. Those who teach false doctrine are to be avoided. Christians will not assist or encourage those who do not continue in Christ’s teaching (2 John 10–11; 2 Timothy 2:16–18).
24. Christians motivated by love and concern will exercise and defend their fellowship by admonishing one another whenever they have strayed into error (Ezekiel 33:1–9; Galatians 6:1–5; 2 Timothy 4:2). The purpose of this admonition is to show the erring that they have deviated from the clear truth of Scripture and to draw them back to the inerrant Word. Failure to admonish is contrary to the loving Savior’s expressed desire and is evidence of a loveless spirit. Some consider it unloving to point out a brother’s error. Yet the very opposite is true. Love for Christ constrains Christians to lead those who are erring to the light of God’s Word. Christians will lovingly and humbly admonish those who have fallen into error as the Good Shepherd who came to seek and save the lost and to give His life as the ransom for all.
25. The response to such fraternal admonition given to those who have fallen into error will determine whether their error is a matter of weakness or whether they are persisting in error, that is, one who is causing divisions and offenses contrary to God’s Word (Romans 14:1; Romans 16:17). If those erring are willing to be instructed from God’s Word, the error is a matter of weakness. Christians will rejoice and thank God when those who have erred accept admonition and correction from the Word.
26. The Scripture enjoins us to test the spirits to see whether they are of God (1 John 4:1). This testing involves making a judgment based on the principles of Scripture. Those who are willing to accept instruction from the Scripture are weak brothers. However, those who reject admonition from Scripture and who continue to hold to error, are those who are causing divisions and offenses. Their persistence in error is evidenced by the fact that they openly hold to false doctrine, demand public recognition for it, or even make propaganda for it and thus lead others astray. Concerning these the Scripture commands that we are to avoid them (Romans 16:17; 2 John 9–11; 2 Timothy 2:16–19; Galatians 1:8–9; Matthew 7:15–19), that is, we will not practice church fellowship with them because there no longer is a scriptural basis for such fellowship. The termination of

fellowship with persistent errorists protects Christians from the spiritual poison of false doctrine and it is a continual witness to false prophets that they are teaching contrary to the life-giving Word.

27. When the Scripture urges us to avoid persistent errorists, it makes no distinction in the errorists. All persistent errorists are to be avoided. It is not that error can be tolerated in regard to some doctrines, but in regard to the more essential doctrines of the faith no deviation can be accepted. No, there must be agreement in all the doctrines of Scripture. Scripture knows of no non-fundamental doctrine, doctrine concerning which it is not necessary to agree for the acknowledgement and exercise of church fellowship. Any limitation on the extent of the application of the scriptural injunction to separate from persistent errorists must be rejected. All who deviate are to be avoided.
28. Every expression and manifestation of unity in belief is included in the "avoid" directive of Romans 16:17. The command of the passage is all-inclusive. There are no degrees of avoiding just as there are no degrees in keeping the unity of faith in Ephesians 4:3. This directive makes no distinction between the various expressions of fellowship as though an errorist must be avoided at the Communion rail but can be accepted as a brother in joint prayer. There are various ways in which our fellowship manifests itself (altar fellowship, pulpit fellowship, prayer fellowship, fellowship in church work, in music, in Christian education, in Christian charity; see also paragraphs 12-15). In these, Christians bear witness to each other and to all people that they are brothers and sisters in Christ. All these expressions of a common faith must cease with those who cause divisions and offenses contrary to the teachings of Scripture. When Christians participate in such things with persistent errorists, they are in effect being untruthful. They are saying there is unity of faith when there is no unity.
29. The termination of fellowship is a judgment on the doctrine of those who continue in error. It is not a judgment on their personal faith. The termination of fellowship is not to be equated with excommunication. It does not close the gates of heaven. The termination of fellowship witnesses to the fact that the poison of false doctrine is being tolerated within the church body which is indeed dangerous to the salvation of souls. Yet by the grace of God many believers are being preserved in erring church bodies.

III. The Application of Church Fellowship

A. The Unit Concept of Church Fellowship

1. All Expressions of a Common Faith are One

30. There are not many different kinds of fellowship each one being quite different from another. Rather all manifestations of a common faith are one. All the doctrines of Scripture are a unit. One cannot distinguish between fundamental and non-fundamental doctrines in regard to their necessity for church fellowship. The doctrines of the Bible stand as one. In a similar way, all expressions of church fellowship are a unit. Christians cannot practice fellowship in some areas of church life but not in others. Church fellowship is a unit both in respect to the doctrine of Scripture, that is, there must be consensus in all the doctrines of the Word for fellowship and in respect to the various expressions of a shared faith that they all be considered a unit or an indivisible whole. There is either complete fellowship or none at all.
31. *In the New Testament all expressions of fellowship are treated as a unit.* They are all ways of expressing a common faith worked by the Spirit through the means of grace. Christians exercise fellowship

when they gather together to worship and be strengthened through the life-giving Word (Hebrews 10:24–25; Colossians 3:16). Sharing in the Holy Sacrament of Christ's body and blood is an expression of fellowship and unity between the participants (1 Corinthians 10:17). Joint prayer indicates a oneness in Christ just as it is expressed by adhering to the Word and by participating in the Holy Supper (Acts 4:42). The one who provides support for a teacher of the church or a missionary is expressing fellowship with him. The Philippians were partners in Paul's work through the financial support which they sent him (Philippines 1:5, 4:14–15). On the other hand, those who support or encourage false teachers are partners in their evil deeds (2 John 11).

32. According to the Scripture, church fellowship or confessional fellowship is a participation in the holy things (*communio in sacris*), the means of grace. This fellowship is created by those very means of grace and includes every joint expression and manifestation of the common faith. This fellowship created by Word and Sacrament shows itself in altar and pulpit fellowship and in every expression of a shared faith like prayer which is a result of and a response to the means of grace. There are various ways in which the fellowship is manifested: altar fellowship, pulpit fellowship, prayer fellowship, fellowship in church work, in music, in Christian education, in Christian charity. All these things have this in common, that they manifest a common faith worked by the Spirit through the means of grace. In this respect they are a unit and should be regarded as a unit. There are not many different kinds of fellowships, some being more an expression of the common faith and others less. It is not that pulpit fellowship involves something different from altar fellowship and these again something quite different from prayer fellowship. It is not that the practice of altar and pulpit fellowship requires complete agreement in doctrine while prayer fellowship and joint church work require less agreement. Rather, insofar as they are joint expressions of faith, they are the same and should be regarded as a unit.
33. Certain things like the celebration of the Holy Supper, the proclamation of the Word, and prayer are by their very nature expressions of faith. When these are done jointly, they are always expressions of faith. Other things, like extending hospitality or giving physical help to others are not in themselves expressions of faith. They only become expressions of faith when those involved *intend them to be expressions of faith*. This is seen in 2 John 9–11 where assisting or encouraging a false teacher is considered to be an expression of fellowship.
34. The unit concept of fellowship does not in any way disparage or belittle the means of grace. The objection has been raised that the unit concept places the proclamation of the Word and the administration of the Sacraments, which are acts of God in which He comes to us, on the same level as prayer, which is man's response to God. This, it is implied, confuses God's divine actions and human responses. This argument confuses the issues and leads to unclarity. To be certain the Word and the Sacraments are God's powerful, faith-creating, and therefore church-creating instruments of salvation (*media salutis*) imparting forgiveness, life, and salvation. They are the power sources of the Christian faith-life. *As means of grace, they should never be equated with human action*. What God does for His children is always more vital than what the Christian does in response to God's grace. However, joint proclamation of the Word and joint celebration of the Sacraments, which are God's life-giving means of grace, are at the same time expressions of fellowship, because when Christians proclaim the Word and celebrate the Supper, they are expressing their faith, and when they do these things with others, they are expressing their faith jointly with them. In the proclamation of the Word and the celebration of the Supper the most important fact is that Christians are nourished and strengthened through these means of grace, but also through them Christians are jointly expressing their faith. *The preaching of the Word and the administration of the Sacraments as the means of grace should never be put on the level of any human action. Here God comes to man. But they are also joint expressions of faith and as such are the same as joint prayer and joint church work. This is what is meant when it is said that all expressions of fellowship are to be treated as a unit.*

35. In connection to this objection to the unit concept of fellowship, it has been advocated that because the church is created alone by the Word and Sacraments, church fellowship is limited only to the use of the means of grace, that is, altar and pulpit fellowship. It is true that joint prayer, joint church work, etc., are not part of the marks of the church, the means of grace. But as a response to the means of grace they are an expression and fruit of faith which must be in harmony with and under the control of the marks of the church. To limit church fellowship to altar and pulpit fellowship cannot be supported by Scripture. St. Paul in Galatians speaks of offering the right hand of fellowship showing church fellowship includes all manifestations and demonstrations of a common faith. Likewise the New Testament directives to terminate fellowship are all inclusive (Romans 16:17; 2 Corinthians 6:14, 17; 2 John 10-11). The termination of fellowship is not limited to only certain expressions of fellowship.

2. The Unit Concept is not New and Strange Theology

36. Church fellowship was regarded as an indivisible whole throughout the Ancient Church. This is seen in Werner Elert's exhaustive study, *Eucharist and Church Fellowship*. Indicating that the Ancient Church viewed church fellowship as embracing all expressions of a common faith including prayer, Elert writes, "Epiphanius saw the schism between Bishop Meletius of Lycapolis and Peter of Alexandria completed in the way that they prayed separately from one another, and so also each performed the other holy services by himself" (W. Elert, *Eucharist and Church Fellowship*, p. 167). "Whoever prays together with a man outside the communion of the church even at home, is himself to be excluded" (W. Elert, *Eucharist and Church Fellowship*, p. 94). The Ancient Church did not make any distinction between the various expressions of fellowship, some which needed only partial agreement in doctrine and others which needed complete agreement in doctrine.

Such gradations and distinctions in church fellowship have absolutely no connection with the regulations of the early church ... Either there was or there was not fellowship between two churches or two bishops, which practically amounted to the same thing ... Never did the relations between two churches and their bishops provide for permitting the laity to receive the Sacrament while denying the clergy the privilege of officiating in it because church fellowship was somehow incomplete or because the congregations or their bishops were of different confessions or only in partial confessional agreement. There was either complete fellowship or none at all. (W. Elert, *Eucharist and Church Fellowship*, p. 164)

37. The scriptural doctrine that church fellowship is an indivisible whole, that there is complete fellowship or none at all was also confessed in the Lutheran Reformation. Luther writes, "Whoever really regards his doctrine, faith, and confession as true, right, and certain cannot remain in the same stall with such as teach or adhere to false doctrine" (St. L. XVII, 1180). "When it occurs that individuals become disagreed in doctrine, the result is that it separates them and indicates who the true Christians are, namely, those who have God's Word pure and excellent" (St. L. XVII, 1346). Luther put this statement into practice at the Marburg Colloquy of 1529. As the Colloquy began, all participants considered themselves "Catholic" Christians who wanted the Catholic Church reformed, even if they differed on the manner of the reformation. They viewed themselves as brothers who were coming together to discuss disagreements that had arisen between them. As a result of the Colloquy, Zwingli and the Swiss showed themselves not to be weak brothers but those who were persisting in false teaching in regard to the Sacrament of Christ's body and blood. Thus Luther would not give Zwingli the right hand of fellowship. *The Formula of Concord* quotes Luther's verdict in regard to the Reformed and fellowship with them:

I reckon them all as belonging together (that is, as Sacramentarians and enthusiasts), for that is what they are who will not believe that the Lord's bread in the Supper is his true, natural body, which the godless or Judas receive orally as well as St. Peter and all the saints. Whoever, I say, will not believe this, will please let me alone and expect no fellowship from me. This is final. [FC SD VII 33, p. 575] (For a complete study of the Marburg Colloquy, see H. Sasse, *This is My Body*, pp. 151–238)

38. These scriptural principles of church fellowship were upheld by the Lutherans in Poland under the leadership of the 17th century dogmatists Calov and Hulsemann at the Colloquy of Thorn in 1645. The King of Poland convened this Colloquy hoping to resolve the disagreements between the Roman Catholics, Lutherans, and the Reformed in his domain. The Roman Catholics and the Reformed favored opening the meeting with prayer. Although they found no fault with the content of the prayer suggested, the Lutherans declined to practice prayer fellowship with the Roman Catholics and the Reformed. It appears that there could be no joint prayer for these Lutheran fathers without complete agreement in doctrine. It might be added that *Der Lutheraner* of the LCMS commented favorably upon this action of the Lutherans in Poland. "From this we can see 1. that we are following that same practice as the faithful Lutherans of Poland in the year 1645; 2. that this demand for public prayer with errorists and heretics is a characteristic of the Reformed, but is foreign to the true Lutheran Church" (*Der Lutheraner*, 1908 p. 111 [*Fellowship Then and Now*, pp. 29–30]).
39. The Synodical Conference, likewise, held that church fellowship embraces every expression of a common faith including prayer. In an essay on unionism, Dr. Francis Pieper, one of the leading theologians of the LCMS, writes concerning 2 John 10–11, "God here forbids Unionism, church-fellowship with such as are known as false teachers. With such we are not to fellowship in prayer or in holy Communion etc.; for in so doing we would, as the Apostle says, be partaking of their evil deeds" (Francis Pieper, "Unionism—What Does the Bible Say About Church-Union?", *The 1924 Oregon and Washington District Proceedings*, p. 5; see *Fellowship Then and Now* for examples of the same doctrine of fellowship expressed by Dr. G. F. Bente, Dr. Carl Manthey-Zorn, Dr. Theodore Graebner, Dr. Theodore Engelder, Dr. William Arndt, Dr. Ludwig Fuerbringer, and Dr. John Behnken). Dr. Adolf Hoenecke of the WELS writes in his *Dogmatik* regarding church fellowship:

*In conflict with the biblical teaching concerning prayer are all those who practice prayer fellowship with errorists. To refrain from all prayer fellowship and fellowship in worship with those of another faith, only this is in agreement with God's Word. For we should, on the one hand, according to Matthew 10:32, 33, confess Christ, and this confession includes everything the Scriptures teach concerning him, his person, his office, his work. On the other hand, according to Luke 9:26 and Mark 8:38, we should not be ashamed of him and his words. Practicing prayer fellowship and fellowship in worship with errorists sets this duty aside. Moreover, according to 1 Thessalonians 5:22 we are to 'abstain from every form of evil,' thus also from this evil that we, contrary to 2 Corinthians 6:14, approve of fellowship between light and darkness, between truth and error ... Unionism (false fellowship) opens the doors wide to indifference in doctrine. And how could it be otherwise. All unionism is based on the assumption that the truth of Scripture should not be insisted on so strongly, that we should not in every case condemn all error, even the least, and warn against it as poison to the soul. For as soon as that happens in a false fellowship, such a fellowship can no longer continue. (A. Hoenecke, *Dogmatik*, Vol. III,*

pp. 441f; the English translation is taken from S. Erlandsson, *Church Fellowship. What Does The Bible Say?*, p. 42)

40. At the Theologians Conference at Mankato, Minnesota, in August 1963, the ELS participants expressed the historic ELS understanding of church fellowship.

In practice, church fellowship with others is manifested primarily in a fellowship in the pulpit, at the altar or in prayer. Whatever form it takes, the confession of all concerned must be in harmony with what the marks of the church demand, the pure teaching of the Gospel and the right administration of the Sacraments. If a minimum agreement is required for one form and more complete agreement for other forms, the result will be a fragmentation of the whole concept of what constitutes church fellowship. Werner Elert is credited with the following statement concerning the early church. "There is either complete fellowship, or none at all." ... The matter of prayer fellowship amongst the early Christians is very intimately joined to fellowship in doctrine, "And they continued steadfastly in the apostles doctrine, and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers" (Acts 2:42). Even the Lord's Prayer cannot be prayed with one who clings to a different doctrinal platform, because the very first petition commits those praying together to pure teaching as well as holy living. (*Church Fellowship, The Theologians' Conference at Mankato, MN*, para. 18-19)

3. Scriptural Principles Remain Changeless but Circumstances Vary

41. The principles of church fellowship set forth in the Scriptures do not change. God's Word always remains the same; however, the manner in which these principles are applied may vary as different circumstances arise. The principles of church fellowship are not legalistic rules but loving directives of the Lord for the good of His church. They must be applied in the spirit of the gracious Savior who loved us so much that He gave His life for us. There will be times when prayer together with other Lutheran Christians or even with Christians of other denominations may be proper, such as when it is apparent that their membership in the false church body is the result of a weak faith which does not fully understand the error of the church body, or it is clear that they actually do not share in the error at all. In such situations one must consider more than the confession of their church membership. There will be times when it will be necessary to attend the worship services of an erring church such as at the wedding or funeral of a loved one. Here care must be taken so that such attendance is not understood as agreement with the doctrine of the erring church.
42. The highly individualistic spirit of the times and the abandonment in practice of formal confessions of faith by many church bodies have resulted in many individuals being put in a state of flux regarding their religious convictions and confessions. They do not necessarily hold to the teaching of the church body to which they belong. They may indeed be open to instruction from the Word and may be seeking direction. When such individuals come to us we cannot always deal with them solely on the basis of their formal confession of faith which they make by their formal church membership. One has to also consider their informal confession of faith. However, this informal confession too must be considered on the basis of the true marks of the church.
43. The scriptural principles of church fellowship remain changeless, but the application of the principles may vary as different situations arise. A statement adopted by the CICR of the WELS and the Doctrine Committee of the ELS may shed light on this point:

Do we hold that church fellowship, especially prayer and altar fellowship, can be decided in every instance solely on the basis of formal church membership, that is, on whether or not the person belongs to a congregation or synod in affiliation with us?

No. Ordinarily this is the basis on which such a question is decided since church fellowship is exercised on the basis of one's confession to the pure marks of the church and ordinarily we express our confession by our church membership. There may be cases in the exercise of church fellowship where a person's informal confession of faith must also be considered. This is especially true regarding the weak. But whether one is guided by a person's formal or informal confession of faith, in either instance it must in principle be a confession to the full truth of God's Word. In addition, special care must be exercised so as not to cause offense to others or to interfere with another man's ministry. Further, we are not to judge harshly concerning the manner in which a brother pastor after much agonizing handles such difficult cases. (T. Aaberg, "Church Fellowship," *Lutheran Sentinel*, Vol. 59, No. 14, pp. 220-221)

B. The Levels of Fellowship Concept of Church Fellowship

1. Fellowship Between Christians is Viewed as a Continuum

44. In the past few years new terminology has been heard in the discussion of church fellowship. These terms are levels of relationships between Christians, levels of unity, and levels of fellowship (*Conversations: Inter-Christian Relationships*, a video-taped presentation of LCMS; Samuel Nafzger, *Levels of Fellowship: A Missouri Synod Perspective*). Each of these terms refer to the concept that relationships between Christians may be viewed as a continuum or spectrum ranging from a relatively limited agreement in Christian doctrine all the way to the other end of the spectrum where there is full agreement in all the doctrines of Scripture. The type of relationship or fellowship permitted will depend on the level of doctrinal unity. It is argued that different levels of cooperation and fellowship can be practiced in proportion to the degree of consensus that exist.
45. The levels of fellowship approach is being proposed as a way to give Christians guidance and direction in their relationship with those Christians with whom they are not in full doctrinal agreement. For example, what kind of a relationship can Confessional Lutherans have with those who believe they are saved alone by faith in Christ as the Savior, but who deny the comforting scriptural teaching concerning the Sacraments? What kind of a relationship can Confessional Lutherans have with those who may confess the heart of the Gospel but who deny the inerrancy of the Holy Scripture? A leading member of the LCMS puts the question this way: "How can we relate to those whom we recognize on the basis of their confession, like Billy Graham for example, as a brother in Christ, but with whom we disagree in the confession of our faith in Jesus Christ?" (*Conversations: Inter-Christian Relationships*, a video-taped presentation of LCMS; see also K. Marquart, "Levels of Fellowship: A Response," *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, Vol. 52, No. 4, p. 242).

2. Levels of Fellowship and Cooperation in Externals

46. When the question was raised in the video, *Conversations: Inter-Christian Relationships*, as to what type of relationships Confessional Lutherans can have with those who are not fully agreed with them in doctrine, it was stated that such relationships were limited only to the cooperation in externals (*cooperatio in externis*). Levels of fellowship are to have nothing to do with church fellowship proper (*communio in sacris*). If this is the case, why is the term "levels of fellowship" used

since fellowship in the sense of church fellowship refers to every expression and manifestation of a common faith? The terminology seems confusing. If levels of fellowship really refer only to cooperation in externals, why should Christians speak of levels at all? In externals there is no level of agreement required for cooperation. Here we can cooperate with Calvinists, Papists, Muslims, and Atheists.

47. Cooperation in externals is cooperation in such matters as do not involve joint expressions of a common faith. Christians of every denomination and even non-Christians can work together in helping disaster victims, in providing for the poor and the homeless, and in opposing legislature which legalizes abortion and euthanasia (see paragraph 33 above). Cooperation in externals does not involve joint expressions of a shared faith in contradistinction to church fellowship which is a participation in sacred things, the means of grace, and includes every expression of a common faith. Again it must be asked if levels of fellowship refer merely to cooperation in externals, why discuss levels at all? In this realm no unity of faith is required to cooperate.

3. Levels of Fellowship and Church Fellowship

48. It would seem that the levels of fellowship approach is intended to have a wider application than the narrow limits of true cooperation in externals. It seems that cooperation in externals is being so defined as to include certain fellowship actions. Thus the distinction between cooperation in externals and church fellowship is blurred. Here is the real danger of the levels of fellowship approach. When cooperation in externals includes fellowship activities and church fellowship is defined as something other than every expression of a shared faith, then fellowship relations are viewed as a continuum. Then there are degrees of fellowship based on the amount of doctrinal agreement which is the basic concept behind levels of fellowship. This view point is to be found in the document, *The Nature and Implications of the Concept of Fellowship*.

Through the use of the word "fellowship" almost exclusively to refer to a formal altar and pulpit fellowship relationship established between two church bodies on the basis of agreement in the confession of the faith, *some have been given the impression that no fellowship relationship other than the spiritual unity in the body of Christ can or should exist among members of Christian churches not in altar and pulpit fellowship*. The fact that the LCMS is closer doctrinally to a church body which at least formally accepts the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions than to those denominations which do not is often obscured by the "all or nothing" approach that frequently accompanies ecclesiastical declarations of altar and pulpit fellowship. (*The Nature and Implications of the Concept of Fellowship*, LCMS-CTCR, p. 43)

This document leaves room for the understanding that complete doctrinal agreement is needed for altar and pulpit fellowship, but is not necessary for other expressions of fellowship such as joint prayer. This is confirmed by earlier statements of the LCMS like this one from the *Four Statements on Fellowship*, "Therefore the matter of joint prayer between Christians not in the same confessional-organizational fellowship cannot be determined by a flat universal rule. It would be a dangerous oversimplification to say that any one of the manifestations of fellowship, such as joint prayer, always necessarily presupposes and involves every other manifestation, such as pulpit and altar fellowship" (*Four Statements on Fellowship*, p. 45). This statement contends that there are differences between the various expressions of fellowship.

49. This concept which advocates different degrees or levels in the expression of fellowship has been taken a step further. There seems to be a differentiating between "worship services" which require full fellowship and those which do not. In 1983 the Council of Presidents of the LCMS

approved a set of guidelines on joint worship. This document requires that joint worship be practiced only with those with whom the LCMS has declared pulpit and altar fellowship. However, members of the LCMS may conduct, co-sponsor, or participate jointly with other Christians in celebrations, gatherings, concerts, and rallies provided that the clergy are not vested and there is no sermon or Sacrament. The purpose of these events as found in the guidelines shows that these events are not in the realm of pure cooperation in externals. Valid reasons for such joint celebrations and gatherings include thanksgiving for the doctrinal heritage of Lutherans and prayer for greater doctrinal unity on the basis of God's Word ("The Missouri Synod and Joint Worship," *Lutheran Witness*, May 2, 1983, pp. 4-5). Such thanksgiving and prayer are certainly expressions of fellowship. It seems that only a minimal doctrinal level of agreement is required for a Christian gathering which includes prayer, Bible reading, and sacred music, while a greater level of agreement is required at such gatherings which include sermon, Sacrament, and vestments. The levels view of fellowship leads to a total fragmentation of church fellowship.

50. The dangerous unscriptural results of the levels concept of fellowship are even more clearly indicated in this fellowship survey of the Atlantic District of the LCMS:

Eight themes which are supported by accompanying data emerged from the survey:

1. 71% of the congregations responding have intentional policies regarding admission to the Sacrament of the Altar.
2. 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.
3. The CTCR Document THE NATURE AND IMPLICATION OF THE CONCEPT OF FELLOWSHIP does not reflect the fellowship practice of congregations responding to the survey. These fellowship practices include: communion, joint fellowship, participation in baptisms, weddings, etc., joint mission work, joint school endeavors, and receiving and transferring members.
4. Strong distinction is made between fellowship with other Lutherans and fellowship with non-Lutherans.
5. Narrower fellowship practices at the altar are observed than for pulpit fellowship. There is more reluctance to share the Sacramental meal than to share the Word, especially with non-Lutheran Christians.
6. Participation in such services as baptisms, weddings, funerals, installations, and ordinations is not taken to imply altar and pulpit fellowship.
7. Occasional services such as Thanksgiving, Lent, etc., are viewed as regular opportunities for participation with other Lutheran and non-Lutheran Christians.
8. 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. ("Fellowship Report," *Atlantic District News*, Pentecost 1987)

From this report it is quite evident that the levels of fellowship approach is being applied to church fellowship proper and not merely to cooperation in externals. Point 5 reads, "Narrower fellowship practices at the altar are observed than for pulpit fellowship" implying that altar fellowship demands a greater level of agreement than pulpit fellowship. According to points 6

and 7 there are different kinds of worship services, some which require altar and pulpit fellowship and others which do not. This would seem to be the logical result of a concept of fellowship which does not regard every expression of fellowship as a unit.

51. The fragmentation of church fellowship as a result of the levels of fellowship approach is evident in still another area as is indicated in the report of the Atlantic District of the LCMS.

Any question of fellowship must also recognize the different levels of fellowship that exist between congregations and Synod. As our survey points out, two distinct types of fellowship stand side by side. ... One is the local pulpit and altar fellowship of a particular congregation. ... The other side of fellowship is that which is formulated through a common agreement of congregations. The Synod is one example of the kind of fellowship that unites congregations far from one another in a common mission and ministry and obligates them to accept one another's communicants. ... Problems result when documents fail to distinguish between these types of fellowship and therefore fail to respect the differences. ("Fellowship Report," *Atlantic District News*, Pentecost 1987)

Here the position is defended that a congregation has fellowship on two levels. One level is synodical fellowship and the other fellowship is on the local level with neighboring congregations. These are to "stand side-by-side." On a synodical level fellowship may be practiced in one way but on the local level it may be practiced in quite another way. This practice will lead to a lack of discipline within the organization and to religious pluralism. Such a concept of fellowship is certainly contrary to the *Brief Statement* which states concerning church fellowship, we repudiate *unionism*, that is, church fellowship with adherents to false doctrine (*Brief Statement*, 28). This bi-level explanation of fellowship also reveals a strange concept of the church for there is but one church and one church fellowship.

52. Christians, on the basis of Holy Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions, must reject the view that there can be degrees of fellowship based on the level of doctrinal agreement. There are not many different kinds of fellowship. For example a congregation cannot say, "We will have joint prayer and joint fellowship in church work with another congregation, but we won't have pulpit and altar fellowship because full consensus has not been reached between us." Such a view fragments the concept of church fellowship. Rather church fellowship is an indivisible whole which is the historic teaching of the Lutheran Church and the LCMS (see paragraphs 36-40 above). There is only one fellowship, that of the Holy Christian Church, and that fellowship is expressed in its totality or not at all (see paragraph 11 and 30-33 above). The "avoid" directive of Romans 16:17 gives no degrees of avoiding. All persistent errorists, whether their error is great or small, are to be avoided in every activity that expresses a common faith (see paragraph 28 above). Likewise there is no degree in keeping the unity of the faith in Ephesians 4:3.
53. The question was asked on the video, *Conversations: Inter-Christian Relationships*: "How can we relate to those whom we recognize on the basis of their confession, like Billy Graham for example, as a brother in Christ, but with whom we disagree in the confession of our faith in Jesus Christ?" In reply it must be said that he confesses the central article of the faith, justification by faith alone, but he also teaches many doctrines which are spiritual poison and can so easily erode the central article. We are filled with thanksgiving that God the Spirit has preserved many believers in erring churches. In heaven we will be able to celebrate for all eternity with them in the feast of the Lamb. However, on this side of heaven we can exercise church fellowship only on the basis of one's confession (*fides quae*). Those who accept Jesus' Word in all its truth and purity are His disciples (John 8:31-32; Matthew 28:20). Those who mix God's truth with error are to be avoided (Romans 16:17-18; 2 John 9-11; 2 Timothy 2:16-19; Galatians 1:8-9; Matthew 7:15-19).

54. Church fellowship or confessional fellowship is a participation in sacred things (*communio in sacris*), the means of grace. This fellowship is created by those very means of grace and is evidenced in every expression and manifestation of a common faith. Christians practice church fellowship on the basis of the pure marks of the church. The marks of the church are to be pure, that is, there must be complete agreement in all the doctrines of Scripture in order to exercise fellowship. There are no degrees or levels in the practice of church fellowship and there are no expressions of a shared faith which are excluded from church fellowship. Church fellowship is a unit both in respect to the doctrine of Scripture, that is, there must be consensus in all the doctrines of the Word for fellowship and in respect to the various expressions of a shared faith that they all be considered a unit or an indivisible whole. There is either complete fellowship or none at all.

Soli Deo Gloria

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