

*The Nature, Exercise,  
and Preservation of  
Christian Fellowship*

An Essay delivered to the  
46<sup>th</sup> Annual Convention  
of the  
**Concordia Lutheran Conference**

by  
The Rev. David T. Mensing

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# CONVENTION ESSAY

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## 46th Annual Convention

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### *“The Nature, Exercise, and Preservation of Christian Fellowship”*

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Upon even a casual review of the history of outward Lutheranism, particularly during the present century, a reader's attention is immediately drawn to a striking paradox or uncanny contradiction in “Lutheran” thinking which is evident in the written record. We refer to the obvious conflict between what the orthodox Lutheran fathers stood for, taught, wrote, defended and were ready to die for since the time of the Reformation, indeed, what amounted to a **distinctive characteristic** of the Lutheran Church since 1530, and the way so-called “Lutherans” today, who claim Luther, Chemnitz, Walther and Pieper as the heroes of their spiritual heritage, understand a **basic principle** of Holy Scripture. We shall, of course, cite as contributory to this paradox the differences in doctrine and practice among Lutherans in this century which have all but made the term “*orthodox Lutheranism*” an oxymoron and have done a horrendous disservice to the memory of our fathers who fought for uniformity on the basis of God's inerrant Word. We shall also refer to the callous indifference to error evident among not only “professional theologians” who know better but among the laymen who should be holding them to account but who themselves “*will not endure sound doctrine*” (II Timothy 4:3). We shall certainly speak about the spirit of *ecumenism*, **false** ecumenism to be sure, which is admittedly based upon the premise that the “art of compromise,” even in matters of doctrine and practice, is *necessary* in order to bring Christians together. Indeed, we could spend our entire time listing and discussing almost countless blatant departures in official Lutheran teaching and practice from the “three *solas*” of the Reformation — Scripture alone, grace alone, and faith alone.

There is, of course, no doubt about the obvious relationship between such characteristically “un-Lutheran” departures from the “*old paths*” and the disgraceful mess in which most of the Lutheran bodies find themselves as the turn of the century approaches. It is almost as if the heroic boldness,

the fierce struggle, the unyielding steadfastness, and the selfless sacrifice of God's pious servants for over four hundred years had been in vain, when, outside of our precious Conference, we hear not one voice proclaiming and practicing the blessed truth of God's Word in its purity with genuine consistency! Instead we find "conservatives" —those who like to think of themselves as staunch and faithful confessors of the truth and represent themselves as champions of true Lutheranism, but who don't have the stomach for real **orthodoxy** when their pulpits are at stake, when their pensions are on the line, and when the "umbrella group" of a synodical **fellowship** will no longer shelter them.

And right there we come to the word which strikes the keynote of our present essay, and we recognize as the paradox in Lutheran circles today a completely warped understanding, a grossly perverted view, and a transparently self-serving application of the **Fellowship Principle**. It doesn't surprise us that this principle of Holy Scripture is violated, despised, and all but ignored "*in this adulterous and sinful generation*" (Mark 8:38), when traditional "family values" in today's society are violated, despised, and ignored as well; for the principles of Christian fellowship are nothing more or less than the "family values" which apply to and are to be adhered to by "*the household of faith*," God's family here in this world. They represent the heritage that Christians have in common, the foundation upon which their "family" is built, the blessings that they share, the values that they treasure, the faithfulness that they profess, and the honesty that they practice in their relationships to one another.

But we note that the **fellowship principle** deteriorated, especially in the years following the adoption by the Missouri Synod of its *Brief Statement* in 1932, into what many referred to as the "**fellowship QUESTION**"; and the stage was set for a constant examination and reexamination of what exactly the term "fellowship" meant, what the concept of fellowship included, what the basis of fellowship really was, how far fellowship could legitimately be extended, and how "creatively" it could be practiced to bring into the "family circle" new "relatives" — "by marriage" as it were (even if the "marriage" were in point of fact only an adulterous affair). It was as if the term "fellowship" were, at one and the same time, a "good word" and a "bad word", depending upon whether it was used in a restrictive sense or in an inclusive sense. It was as if the **fellowship principle** were not a "principle" at all, but something strange and completely new, something to be experimented with and manipulated according to what seemed "reasonable" and "charitable" and "practical" and even "comfortable" under ever-changing circumstances.

And yet, the **fellowship principle** is as old as time itself. God Himself established the fellowship principle when He created the first man and woman in His image, in perfect righteousness and holiness, so that they enjoyed a blissful relationship of complete harmony both with God and with one another in the Garden of Eden. God Himself invoked the fellowship principle when He drove out Cain from His presence and from the family circle to be "*a fugitive and a vagabond in the earth*" (Genesis 4:14). God Himself exemplified the fellowship principle when He shut Noah and his family into the ark and kept them safely apart from the "*wickedness of man*" whom He was about to destroy from off the face of the earth (Genesis 6). Abraham followed the fellowship principle when he sent Eliezer to the city of Nahor in Mesopotamia to find a Godly wife for his son Isaac, a wife who would share in the joy of the Messiah to come. Isaac and Rebekah noted how their son, Esau, despised the fellowship principle when he married heathen Hittite women who "*were a grief of mind unto [them]*" (Genesis 26:34-35); and they expressed their concern about Jacob doing the same thing (27:46 and 28:1-4); so they sent him to find a Godly wife of Rebekah's kindred in Padanaram. Moses observed the fellowship principle when He "*refused to be called the*

*son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God*" (Hebrews 11:24-25). Elijah obeyed the fellowship principle when he confronted the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel, ridiculed their futile prayer and the impotence of their idol, and testified boldly of his confidence in the one true God (I Kings 18). Even Naaman of Damascus, a newly-converted, novice believer, recognized the fellowship principle from his natural knowledge of God, that is, without having first been taught it by Elisha, God's prophet, and asked the Lord's pardon for even *appearing* to join his king in the worship of a false god (II Kings 5:18).

One could, of course, go on and on through Bible history in both the Old and New Testaments for numerous other examples; but these should suffice to indicate that the *fellowship principle* is nothing new, nor has it ever been a "fuzzy issue" for the people of God over the course of almost sixty centuries—until apparently the twentieth century after Christ! Now all of a sudden, Christian fellowship is a *question* rather than a *principle*, a *problem* rather than a *privilege*, an opportunity for *compromise* rather than a platform of *solidarity*. For many who claim to be theologians, as well as for hundred of thousands of laymen, the principles of fellowship are either fogged because of self-imposed ignorance, deliberately blurred for the sake of convenience, or have been cunningly warped by false prophets in an effort to disguise them, to neutralize them, and thus to obliterate them as a factor in distinguishing between those who are true brethren in the faith and those who are "*vain talkers and deceivers*" (Titus 1:10). Let us therefore "clear the air" in our present discussion and, enlightened by the precious Word of God, which definitively tells us what Christian fellowship *is*, in what manner it is *practiced*, how it is *preserved* on the one hand, and how it is *endangered* and *destroyed* on the other, let us determine first of all

## I. The Nature of Christian Fellowship

The word "fellowship" is the most common English translation for the New Testament Greek word *κοινωνία* [koi-nŷ-NEE-ah]. It denotes the close, intimate relationship between those who share something special in common. Synonyms offered by lexicographers include *association*, *communion*, *joint participation*, *intimacy*, *spiritual intercourse*, and *sharing in a common interest*. For those acquainted with German, Luther translates the word as *Gemeinschaft*, that is, an association based upon a common possession or mutual interest because of which the partners interact with one another in an intimacy of spirit. It is of interest to note that the word itself, from a purely etymological standpoint, not even considering the Scripture contexts in which it is used, hardly allows for the loose interpretation that ecumenists force upon it; for among secular writers and historians at the time of the apostles, the word *κοινωνία* was "a favorite expression for the marital relationship as the most intimate between human beings."<sup>1</sup>

For the Christian, however, fellowship is much more than a word or expression. It is a **concept**, a **Scriptural** concept, with its *prototype* the intimate, mystical relationship of perfect unity that exists in God Himself. In His high priestly prayer, the Lord Jesus manifested this unity and His good and gracious will that all true believers share in it, saying: "*And now, O Father, glorify Thou Me with Thine own self with the glory which I had with Thee before the world was. ...I pray...for them which Thou hast given Me; for they are Thine, and all Mine are Thine, and Thine are Mine; and I am glorified in them. ...Keep through Thine own name those whom Thou hast given Me, that they may*

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<sup>1</sup> Arndt and Gingrich. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*. (4th Rev. Ed.) Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957.

*be one, as we are. ...Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as Thou, Father, art in Me and I in Thee; that they also may be one in us, that the world may believe that Thou hast sent Me.*” (John 17). The intimate fellowship that the persons of the Godhead enjoy is extended to all true believers in Christ, as they are “*sanctified through [His] truth,*” the truth of God’s precious Word (v. 17), “*by whom ye were called unto the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord*” (I Corinthians 1:9). This call into the fellowship of Christ is the call to saving faith issued by the Holy Ghost through the Means of Grace, “*whereunto He called you by our Gospel to the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ*” (II Thessalonians 2:14). To that blessed end, therefore, the Apostle John was eager to share this Gospel with his readers, saying: “*That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son, Jesus Christ*” (I John 1:3). Indeed, it is “*by faith in Christ Jesus*” that we are God’s children, by faith created in the heart also by the washing of Holy Baptism, “*for as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ*” (Galatians 3:26-27).

Just how intimate is this fellowship that the believers enjoy with Christ, their Savior? Paul writes in Ephesians chapter 5: “*Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for it, that He might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the Word, that He might present it to Himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish. ...For we are members of His body, of His flesh, and of His bones.*” This is not a disjointed fellowship or even a loose-jointed fellowship, as if each member of Christ’s body were allowed to go its own way and do its own thing and still be under His divine headship; but it is a **perfect** fellowship, described by the Apostle Paul in Ephesians chapter 4, verses 4-6: “*There is ONE body and ONE Spirit, even as ye are called in ONE hope of your calling: One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.*”

But **this** fellowship is an **invisible** fellowship; for the fellowship of **true believers** is as imperceptible to men as faith itself, “*neither shall they say, ‘Lo, here!’ or ‘Lo, there!’ For behold the kingdom of God is within you,*” Jesus says in Luke 17:20-21. Therefore, just as we refer to the **true believers** who gather together in one locality about the Means of Grace as the local congregation *in the proper sense* [Lat. *proprie*] —the church “as God sees it”— so we must regard also the **fellowship** of the true believers as that which only God can perceive; for “*the Lord knoweth them that are His*” (II Timothy 2:19).

It is, of course, **this** blessed fellowship, created in us by the Holy Spirit through the Means of Grace, in which we as Christians earnestly desire to remain, the fellowship that lasts into eternity itself. Therefore, as we strive to use the Doctrine of the Church properly, it devolves upon each and every one of us that “we take heed to be and remain members of the Invisible Church by sincere faith in the Redeemer” (*Catechism Q/A 186a*), that we “*hold that fast which [we have], that no man take [our] crown*” (Revelation 3:11), that we cling in childlike confidence to Christ, our “*Head,*” so that we **continue** to enjoy, as His members, the “inward communion of eternal blessings in the heart, as of the Holy Ghost, of faith, of the fear and love of God.”<sup>2</sup>

In the case of the local Christian congregation, it is the church “as **men** see it,” the congregation *in the improper sense* [Lat. *improprie*], with which we must deal here in this world, for it is the **visible**

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<sup>2</sup> *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*, Art. VII and VIII, 5. *Concordia Triglotta*, p. 227.

congregation to which the Savior directs us in Matthew 18:17 when He instructs two or three of us who have admonished an erring brother without evident fruit: “*Tell it unto the church.*” Why? Because it is *that* body which we can identify; it is *that* body, gathered together, to which we can speak; it is *that* body, even though it contain some hypocrites, which can bring final admonition to an erring brother in the third step of Christian church discipline. Likewise, in the case of fellowship, and for the very same reason, it is the **outward** fellowship **only** with which we can deal in determining who is our Christian brother with whom we can and should exercise the duties and privileges of Christian fellowship.

This fellowship, our Confessions state, “has **outward marks** so that it can be recognized, namely, the pure doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments in accordance with the Gospel of Christ.”<sup>3</sup> Thus we confess in our *Catechism*, Q/A 186b, that “we use the doctrine of the church properly when we adhere to that **visible** church or congregation which has, teaches, professes, and practices the Word of God in its full truth and purity and administers the Sacraments according to Christ’s institution.”<sup>4</sup> This is **critically important** in the matter of true Christian fellowship because of how Godpleasing fellowship is determined, how it is nurtured and sustained, how it is recognized and celebrated, and how it is exercised by those who share its blessings. (The *exercise* of Christian fellowship will be treated in detail separately in Part II of our essay, and the *preservation* of Christian fellowship is the specific theme of Part III. However, both of these must also be touched on in this first section, as we discuss what Christian fellowship **is** and how it can be **recognized**.)

We noted somewhat earlier that the Savior in His high priestly prayer referred to **unity** as the basis for fellowship with Him and with His heavenly Father, saying, “*That they all may be one, as Thou, Father, art in Me and I in Thee*” (John 17:21). This cannot refer to mere **union** in an external fashion, in an external organization, in an external relationship apart from genuine unity in faith and confession; for the unity of the Holy Trinity (the **prototype** of Christian unity and fellowship) is **perfect**, so that “the whole three Persons are co-eternal together and coequal, so that, as is aforesaid, the Unity in Trinity and the Trinity in Unity is to be worshiped. He, therefore, that will be saved must think thus of the Trinity.”<sup>5</sup> The **will** of the three persons is the same, their **purpose** is the same, their **word** is the same, so that St. Paul writes to Timothy concerning this God of perfect unity: “*He abideth faithful; He cannot deny Himself*” (II Timothy 2:13). And the Savior prayed that His disciples “*may be one*” as well, in **perfect unity** of will, purpose, and word —a tall order, to be sure, when our sin-darkened understanding in its weakness attempts to comprehend how such unity can ever be achieved, even among those whose will to do good is present in the New Man of faith, but whose ability to perform it is frustrated by the contrary motions of the flesh (Romans 7:18-19). Indeed, the carnal mind of enmity against God dares to challenge the Lord Jesus and wonders out loud whether His prayer wasn’t merely a *wish* on His part, a theoretical *ideal*, a divine “*pipedream*” which even He knew was not possible to achieve here in this world. Let us not stagger at such suggestions, as if they had never been made; for they are part and parcel of the ecumenist’s creed, who says: “God knows that we’re only human and that we can’t be expected to agree on **everything!**”

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Note the essayist’s amplification of this answer from its original wording to include also the definition of the “true visible church”, a genuinely **orthodox** Christian congregation.

<sup>5</sup> *Athanasian Creed*

Let us therefore treasure those things on which we **do** agree, build our union on **them**, and not permit our **differences** to **divide** us.” To such suggestions, the Christian must answer with the Savior: “*Get thee behind me, Satan; thou art an offense unto me; for thou savorest not the things which be of God but those that be of men!*” (Matthew 16:23).

**True** Christian fellowship is based on **unity**, “*the unity of the Spirit*” (Ephesians 4:3), unity which is only possible when Christians heed the exhortation of the Apostle Paul in I Corinthians 1:10, “*Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the **same thing**, and that there be **no divisions** among you; but that ye be **perfectly joined together** in the **same mind** and in the **same judgment**.*” The Savior did not build His church “*upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets*” (Ephesians 2:20) so that His members could simply ignore His Word! On the contrary, He says in John 8:31-32, “*If ye **continue** in My Word, **then** are ye My disciples indeed; and ye shall know **the truth**, and the truth shall make you **free**.*” Freedom from error is the result of “*hold[ing] fast the form of sound words*” (II Timothy 1:13), and **that** is how we “*endeavour to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace,*” with no squabbles, with no divisions, with no compromises, with no accommodations where the doctrines of God inerrant and inviolable Word are concerned. There is no room for doctrinal “plurality” and “diversity” in Christ’s church, only **unity**. **Unity** means **oneness**: “*There is **one** body, and **one** Spirit, even are ye are called in **one** hope of your calling: **One** faith [that is, one body of doctrine which is to be believed, the *fides quae creditur*], **one** baptism, **one** God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all*” (Ephesians 4:4-6). Therefore our Confessions rightly declare: “*To the true unity of the Church it is enough to agree concerning the doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments,*”<sup>6</sup> **not** indeed the Gospel in the narrower sense, as the context clearly shows, but **the entire doctrine of the Holy Scriptures**, to which the passages just quoted hold us as well. Thus the authors of the **Formula of Concord** also state in unequivocal terms what is necessary for true Christian unity and thus also as a legitimate basis for Godpleasing Christian fellowship, namely, strict adherence to the doctrines of God’s pure Word **in every detail**:

*We have no intention of yielding aught of the eternal, immutable truth of God for the sake of temporal peace and unity (which, moreover, is not in our power to do). Nor would such peace and unity, since it is devised against the truth and for its suppression, have any permanency. Still less are we inclined to adorn and conceal a corruption of the pure doctrine and manifest, condemned errorists. But we entertain heartfelt pleasure and love for, and are on our part sincerely inclined and anxious to advance, that unity according to our utmost power by which His glory remains to God uninjured, nothing of the divine truth of the Holy Gospel is surrendered, no room is given to the least error, poor sinners are brought to true, genuine repentance, raised up by faith, confirmed in new obedience, and thus justified and eternally saved alone through the sole merit of Christ.*<sup>7</sup>

Now, as noted before, there is some unavoidable overlapping in our consideration of Christian fellowship between its nature and its exercise; for the *recognition* of fellowship assumes its *exercise*. Let us therefore conclude this portion of our essay on **the nature of Christian fellowship** with just this brief note about how fellowship is recognized, and use this point as our bridge to Part II.

As we have already discussed, true Christian fellowship can be **assumed** only in the *Una Sancta*, where the members of “*body of Christ*,” all true believers, **are** in perfect unity with one another **in**

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<sup>6</sup> *Augsburg Confession*, Art. VII. *Concordia Triglotta*, p. 47.

<sup>7</sup> *Formula of Concord*, Thorough Declaration, XI. *Concordia Triglotta*, p. 1095.



**spirit**; and this we take *on faith* when we confess in the Third Article: “*I believe in the Holy Christian Church, the Communion of Saints.*” Luther remarks concerning this in the **Large Catechism** as follows:

*This is the meaning and substance of this addition: I believe that there is upon earth a little holy group and congregation of pure saints, under one head, even Christ, called together by the Holy Ghost in one faith, mind, and understanding, with manifold gifts, yet agreeing in love, without sects or schisms.*<sup>8</sup>

But this unity, as well as the intimate relationship that obtains between all true believers, is imperceptible to men and known only to God. The Savior says in John 10: “*My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any[one] pluck them out of My hand*” (v’s. 27-28). And St. Paul assures Timothy: “*The foundation of God standeth sure, having this seal: The Lord knoweth them that are His*” (II Timothy 2:19). Only those who presume to “*know the mind of the Lord*” (Romans 11:34) and those who take the quantum leap between the invisible Church and the visible, making the unwarranted and easily refutable claim that “*Where there is confession, there is faith,*” only they would assume those to be in the fellowship of *true believers* who **profess** faith in Jesus Christ as their Savior. **Hypocrites**, too, profess faith in Jesus as their Savior; and it is their false profession and guise of piety that makes them “hypocrites” —**unbelievers** who *masquerade* as believers, **unbelievers** whose deceit is known only to God until they manifest themselves among men, at which time they are no longer “hypocrites”.

**Outward** Christian Fellowship, however, which is the chief focus of our present essay, is the only fellowship with which we can deal here in this world; and **unlike** the true, inward, spiritual fellowship of genuine believers, which is the fruit of saving faith, **outward fellowship** should not merely be *assumed*; for it can be recognized, tested, exercised and cultivated in a manner that we can **perceive with our senses**. Such *external* Christian fellowship is based upon and tested according to a person’s **confession**, and it too, provided it is genuine and not merely pretended, is a fruit of saving faith; for a true and honest and correct profession of the lips is faith in action, and belongs to the Christian’s life of sanctification created in him by the Holy Spirit of God. The Lord Jesus says in Matthew 10:32, “*Whosoever therefore shall confess Me before men, him will I confess also before My Father which is in heaven.*” And St. Paul adds in Romans 10:10, “*With the heart man believeth unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.*”

**What confession is to be accepted** as indicative of truly Godpleasing external fellowship? What are those “in fellowship” with one another to have in common, to share, to build on, to exercise, to rejoice in, and to use for their mutual edification? **To what standard must we adhere** in determining whether individuals, churches, and church bodies —according to their profession— are truly in “*the unity of the Spirit*”? St. Paul writes to the Corinthians, and therefore also to us: “*Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment*” (I Corinthians 1:10). **That** is such a **simple** standard according to which the profession of unity is to be judged that any child of reasonable intelligence can comprehend it, just as he understands the Savior’s words in Matthew 28:20 that we are to teach His disciples “*to*

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<sup>8</sup> *The Large Catechism*, The Creed, Art. III. **Concordia Triglotta**, p. 691.

*observe all things whatsoever [He has] commanded [us].”*

And yet we find—particularly among so-called “theologians” who, by their study of Holy Scripture, **should** “*have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil*” (Hebrews 5:14)— we find in *their* writings literally hundreds of rationalistic arguments by which this simple standard is fractured, frizzled, and fried until nothing at all is left of it. We hear, for example, such questions as these: Does Paul really refer here to the *Bible* as the standard of unity, or is that merely an assumption?? If the Bible is the standard, does this passage require agreement with every *word* of the Bible for fellowship, or just with the *doctrines* of the Bible? Does this passage require unity in ALL doctrines of the Bible or in just the “*fundamental*” doctrines? Which fundamental doctrines, the “*primary*” fundamental doctrines or the “*secondary*” fundamental doctrines? Should *denial* of one or more *non-fundamental* doctrines stand in the way of fellowship? Would a person have to accept the *historical* records in the Bible? How about things that are *unscientific*? What if a person cannot subscribe to a certain doctrine *in good conscience*?? How about a person who is guilty of “Christian erring,” that is, erring *in weakness*, but has no desire and no real willingness to be corrected? —If such rationalistic ramblings sound familiar, it is because they are all too familiar. (We might ask ourselves whether we would put up with such musings concerning the **marriage vow**, questions about “to what degree” fidelity is expected of one’s spouse. Such questions are indeed asked and answered in writing in pre-nuptial agreements nowadays, but many are entertained merely as “mental reservations,” as “family values” are eroded away even before the family is established!)

Such questions regarding **Christian unity**, however, are, in and of themselves, symptomatic of a “libertarian” spirit that doesn’t really **want** to “*speak the same thing*,” that doesn’t really find “*divisions among [Christians]*” **troubling**, that regards being “*perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment*” too **prescriptive** of an individual’s views, and too **restrictive** of personal liberty and academic freedom! Simply put, such people are quite content to “*limp on both sides*” (I Kings 18:21) of doctrinal issues for the sake of temporal peace and tranquility. Others are fearful of intimidation and therefore shrink back from standing up boldly for Jesus and for the full truth of His precious Word, lest they be booed down by colleagues and labeled “S.O.B.s” (“**S**uper **O**rthodox **B**rethren”) by liberal opponents<sup>9</sup>. The Savior says by way of warning to such fence-sitters: “*Whosoever therefore shall be ashamed of Me and of My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him shall the Son of Man be ashamed when He cometh in the glory of His Father with the holy angels*” (Mark 8:38). “*He that is not with Me is against Me; and he that gathereth not with Me scattereth*” (Luke 11:23).

As to the degree of **knowledge** one has of the Holy Scriptures and their doctrines, this, however, also needs to be said: Ignorance of divine truth is the result of **sin** in the world (I Corinthians 2:14, etc.), and even *non-malicious* ignorance in a *Christian*, due to the lack of diligent instruction and even the lack of personal study of the Scriptures and growth in grace (II Peter 3:16-18; Hebrews 5:12-14), dare never be regarded as an “acceptable norm” in either pastors or laymen, but should be deplored and regarded as the foothold that Satan seeks to “*deceive us and seduce us into misbelief, despair, and other great shame and vice*” (Luther: Sixth Petition of the *Lord’s Prayer*). Ignorance in spiritual matters can be remedied **only** by the instruction of the Spirit of God in and through His Word (Psalm 119:18, 105, 130, etc.); and the purpose of personal Bible study as well as pastoral

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<sup>9</sup> The essayist remembers quite clearly how this derisive epithet was used against his father in the Eastern District of the Missouri Synod in the middle 40’s when he took an unbending Scriptural stand at pastoral conferences!

instruction is *not* to learn only “the basics” or “just enough to get by,” but that “*we all come in the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ*” (Ephesians 4:13), so that the believers are “*no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine by the sleight of men and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive; but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up into Him in all things, which is the head, even Christ*” (v’s. 14-15). The Savior also lays down this principle which certainly applies to the degree of **knowledge** that should be expected of those professing unity of faith and confession: “*Unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required; and to whom men have committed much, of him will they ask the more*” (Luke 12:48b). Therefore, in evaluating the profession of a person as to his unity with us on the basis of God’s Word, a greater degree of knowledge and understanding of Christian doctrine should be expected of a Christian pastor, who is required, after all, to be “*apt to teach*” (I Timothy 3:2), than of a Christian layman who may be deficient in his knowledge but who does not **deny** or **oppose** doctrines to which he had never been exposed or in which he had not received adequate instruction. In both cases, however, the real attitude of a person will show itself in his willingness, yea, his *eagerness*, to “*grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ*” (II Peter 3:18).

As the *norma normans* of our faith, the “standard that rules” above all others, the Scriptures are completely clear and unequivocal on this point; and our Lutheran Confessions characteristically agree as the *norma normata*, the “standard that is ruled” by the Word of God, that the unity required for Christian fellowship is **unity in the Word of God**, complete agreement in doctrine and practice, also with respect to the administration of the Sacraments. Such unity is mutually recognized by one another’s *profession* (II Corinthians 4:13), including the express willingness to let Scripture alone (*Sola Scriptura*) be the source and norm of what is to be taught and believed and, where wanting in knowledge of specific matters, gladly to receive instruction, admonition and edification from the Word of God. Once when such unity is found to exist between professing Christians—unity created by the Holy Spirit of God, who guides us into all truth (John 16:13) through the Means of Grace—then **Christian Fellowship** is the blessed result: *The God-given intimate relationship that exists between those who are truly one in faith and confession on the basis of His Word.* How this fellowship is then **exercised**—between individuals as brethren, within local congregations, among local congregations in a wider organizational fellowship, and even between church bodies—is the topic of the second part of our essay.

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## II. The Exercise of Christian Fellowship

Before we address the exercise of Christian fellowship and the various activities in which those in fellowship with one another engage as individuals, within the local congregation, in wider organizational contexts, and even across such organizational lines, it behooves us to touch briefly upon some of the *terminology* that has developed over the years, especially in outward Lutheranism, and is used chiefly among theologians and dogmaticians in the discussion of this very point. Thus far we have simply defined and used the term “*fellowship*” to denote “*the God-given intimate relationship that exists between those who are truly one in faith and confession on the basis of God’s Word.*” But those who have studied the writings of our orthodox fathers, particularly those of the last 150 years or so, have run into terms which *seem* at first hearing to describe either different *kinds* of fellowship or different *degrees* of fellowship among Christians. These terms can be

confusing to the ordinary layman who, from the simple passages of Scripture, understands that Christians either **are** or **are not** in “*fellowship*” with one another. For some reason, we seldom hear the term “*personal fellowship*,” for example, but we do hear of “*church fellowship*,” “*doctrinal fellowship*,” “*confessional fellowship*,” “*prayer fellowship*,” and “*pulpit-and-altar fellowship*.” These do **not** describe different *kinds* or progressive *degrees* of fellowship to which a person *becomes eligible* (after a period of probation or as the result of longevity, severe trial, particular faithfulness, and growth in sanctification, for example); but they really speak to different *manifestations* of fellowship which become evident and are practiced as fellowship is “established,” or, again, to use a better expression, as the *existence* of fellowship becomes “recognized” and its exercise is initiated. For the sake of consistency with what has been written in the past by our orthodox fathers, we shall refer to these terms parenthetically as they naturally arise in our discussion of the exercise of fellowship; and their meaning should in context be completely clear as to what they entail.

Since Christian fellowship is a relationship first and foremost between Christians who “*speak the same thing*” in matters of doctrine and practice, we shall initially explore the exercise of Christian fellowship between *individuals*. No doubt the most obvious application of the fellowship principle in this limited context is found in the **Christian family**. Scripture itself makes the intimate relationship of husbands and wives a *type* of that which exists between Christ and His bride, the Church (Ephesians 5). While marriage is indeed a civil estate, instituted by God even for the unregenerate for mutual companionship and love (Genesis 2:18), for the lawful procreation of children (Genesis 1:28), and as an aid against unchastity (Hebrews 13:4), the love between a *Christian* husband and wife, the procreation of *their* children, and the intimacy of *their* marriage bed and home together is graciously blessed by God Himself (Psalm 128). This promised blessing, in addition to the high responsibility given to Christian fathers (and to their wives by association as their “helpers”) to bring up their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord (Ephesians 6:4), should be a powerful incentive for pious, believing young adults to seek a mate *from among the fellowship* or to make sure that a prospective mate is *of the fellowship before* a marriage commitment has been made.

Those who have in this regard spurned the pious example of Abraham in seeking a Godly wife for Isaac, of Isaac and Rebekah in sending Jacob to Padanaram for the same reason, of Ruth and Boaz, of Mary and Joseph, of the divine wisdom of the Holy Spirit through Solomon in Proverbs 31, and of the warnings of St. Paul in I Corinthians 15:33 and II Corinthians 6:14-18, have learned to regret their shortsighted folly. Why? Because they have no *fellowship* with their spouses; they cannot pray with them; they cannot rely on them to teach their children the way to heaven and to cultivate in their lives a walk in the Spirit; they cannot expect them to serve as Godly role models for the souls entrusted to their care; they cannot assure them of God’s blessing and protection; they cannot look for their spouses to cheer them with the precious Gospel in times of trouble and heartache; and, if the spouse is a manifest unbeliever, one has the prospect ever before him that the person he loves most dearly here in this world will spend eternity in hell!

On the other hand, when *Christian fellowship* is the **first priority** for young adults seeking their life’s companion—above looks, personality, “chemistry,” animal magnetism, money, intelligence and other such carnal considerations—when Christ is valued by both as the Head of their house, the precious Savior of their souls, their incomparably-good Shepherd, their ever-present Friend, and their almighty Helper in every need—**and** when His Word in its truth and purity is cherished as their dearest possession, His Gospel their comfort and the motivator of their lives, and His Law the

measuring-stick of their behavior as they and theirs walk a life of Christian discipline in the paths of righteousness for their Savior's sake, it should be reasonably expected of Christians that these concerns are reflected in their "dating habits" and in the friendships that they cultivate among their peers. For if it is thus evident that "each his lesson has learned with care" about spiritual "family values" **before the fact**, then surely "all the household well shall fare" (Luther) when a family is established *in Christian fellowship* with the Lord's gracious blessing upon it!

Moreover, Christians who enjoy the spiritual intimacy of this Godpleasing relationship, whether as part of a family "*endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace*" (Ephesians 4:3), or as individual members of "*the household of faith*" (Galatians 6:10) in the same Godpleasing pursuit, will **exercise** and celebrate the privileges of Christian fellowship. Thus their joint study of God's Word, their joint prayer in semi-private devotions, their joint praise of God's abiding grace in the hymns they sing together, their application of Holy Scripture to the problems and concerns of daily life, their brotherly admonition of one another, their bearing of one another's burdens in love—all of this "*Godliness*" in the exercise of **personal Christian fellowship** will redound to their great joy and blessing, not only for "*the life that now is, [but for] that which is to come*" (I Timothy 4:8), according to the Lord's own promise.

The application of the fellowship principle is also found in the context of the **local Christian congregation**, the only God-ordained external grouping of Christians, instituted specifically for the regular and consistent **public use** of the Office of The Keys under the oversight of Christ's ambassador, the called pastor or shepherd of the Savior's local flock. Therefore Dr. Walther rightly states: "*Every Christian is obliged, for the sake of his salvation, to profess allegiance, and adhere, to orthodox congregations and their orthodox preachers wherever he finds such.*"<sup>10</sup> Thus we read concerning the Christians at Jerusalem, who gathered together regularly for the exercise of fellowship and love: "*And they continued steadfastly in the Apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers. ... And they, continuing daily with one accord in the Temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart, praising God, and having favor with all the people*" (Acts 2:42, 46, 47). This external fellowship, this visible group with its favorable reputation among men, this congregation of which even hypocrites were "members in good standing" until their wickedness became manifest, Acts 5, was called "*the church*" (Acts 5:11; 8:1; 11:22 and 26; 15:3); and similar "*churches*" (Revelation 1:11) were established by the Apostles throughout Asia Minor. Moreover, Paul writes to Titus that there was a definite **lack or deficiency** among the Christians if such local congregations with the Pastoral Office were not established "*in every city*" (Titus 1:5) where professing believers were living. "*Therefore the formation of Christian congregations, and membership in them, is not a human, but a divine mandate.*"<sup>11</sup> Why? Because, as we still correctly hold according to Scripture, without them the following Christian obligations—obligations requiring **group participation**—cannot be performed:

- a) The regular hearing and learning of God's Word as it is proclaimed by the divinely called ministers who are to feed the flock over which God has placed them. (Acts 20:28; Titus 1:5; Eph. 4:10-12; I Pet. 5:2-3; Acts 2:42-47; 14:23).

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<sup>10</sup> Thesis VIII, C quoted from Dallman and Engelder (Ed.), *Walther and the Church*, 1938, p. 68.

<sup>11</sup> F. Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, III, p. 421.

b) The regular celebration of Holy Communion under the loving and careful watchfulness of the divinely called shepherd. (I Cor. 11:23-29; 10:17; Acts 20:28).

c) The continuous exercise of the duties of Christian fellowship and love. (I Cor. 11:23; 1:10; Col. 3:15-16; I Cor. 9:7-14; Gal. 6:6-7; Heb. 10:23-25; Eph. 4:3-6; Acts 6:1-6).

d) The careful, evangelical exercise of church discipline as commanded by the Lord in Matthew 18:15-17. (*Compare*: 1 Cor. 5:13; 2 Cor. 2:6-8, 10).<sup>12</sup>

All of the above functions of the local congregations involve the **exercise** of *Christian fellowship*, that is, not merely the “existence” of those things which the believers share in common — the precious Means of Grace (the Word of God in its purity and the Holy Sacraments as Christ instituted them); a faithful shepherd properly trained, “*apt to teach*” (I Timothy 3:2), and made the overseer of the flock by the Holy Spirit of God mediately through the congregation’s call; love of God, His Word, his Church, and their brethren in the faith; and the mechanics of Christian discipline as outlined by the Savior in Matthew 18— not merely the “possession” of those things, but their **use**.

To such a list of commonly-shared blessings should also be added the *heritage* (including the *history*) of Christ’s true visible church on earth with the orthodox writings of stalwart “fathers” in the faith who, enabled by the grace of God, fought vicious foes and seemingly overwhelming odds and made huge personal sacrifices to preserve His truth for themselves and for future generations. To this *heritage* belong, for example, our precious Lutheran Confessions, including Luther’s Catechisms; our treasury of Bible-based, edifying hymns; the liturgy of our worship services, consisting of direct quotations from the Scriptures and prayers and praises based on the words and promises of God Himself in His Holy Word; works of art and Christian symbols as visual reminders of events recorded in the Scriptures and of the divine names, attributes and works of God; and even instrumental musical compositions by gifted faithful Christians, written to the glory of God and the praise of His grace, not to *edify* the Christians (as does “*the Word of truth*”) but to enhance their worship, to facilitate their praise, and to beautify the habitation of God’s House.

Merely to **have** all these things, to **possess** them in common, and even to **treasure** them in our hearts *individually* indeed belongs to *Christian fellowship* in the sense of their communal stewardship. And, while we rejoice that we “have” the Word of God in its truth and purity, that we “have” faithful shepherds, that we “have” a heritage or legacy of orthodoxy in our historical past, merely “having” them is of little value if we do not **use them**. In this connection, we will find it valuable for a few moments to go back to some basic terminology briefly referred to earlier in our essay and to distinguish well how certain traditional expressions describe in various facets both the nature and exercise of Christian fellowship.

The term “**doctrinal fellowship**” refers to the fact that churches (and/or church bodies) not only share a common position “on paper” but that they actually **teach** the same thing from their pulpits, in their classes, in their seminary courses, and in their official publications.<sup>13</sup> Whether that fellowship exists can easily be verified by objective examination — certainly even by Christian laymen who are to “*try [or test] the spirits [the teachers of religion] whether they are of God*” (I John 4:1), to “*know them*” as to whether they are true or false prophets on the basis of “*their fruits*”

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<sup>12</sup> Concordia Lutheran Conference, *This Scriptural Position We Still Hold*, 1968, pp. 5-6.

<sup>13</sup> F. Pieper, *op. cit.*, p. 423. (Cf. also the *Brief Statement of 1932*, §29.)

(Matthew 7:16), that is, their doctrine and practice. A church's *publica doctrina*, if indeed it is "public," is no secret or private matter when it is taught; neither can an individual claim a privately-held opinion or privately-held agreement which he is unwilling to acknowledge openly as a supposed basis for "doctrinal fellowship" with any person, church, or church body.

**"Confessional fellowship"** is said to exist between those who "*confess*" the same thing regarding Christian doctrine. St. Paul's exhortation in I Corinthians 1:10, "*that ye all speak the same thing...[and] that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment*" is "a demand for uniformity in speech (λέγειν) or in the profession of the Christian doctrine. ...Here he clearly says that Christians are to use the same words also in the same sense. Agreement in words with disagreement in meaning is altogether contrary to the unity God calls for; and to seek such a 'unity' ('we agree to disagree') is immoral, a trifling with sacred, divine things, which is unseemly for Christians."<sup>14</sup> *Confessional fellowship* has therefore been defined as that which "constitutes the actual discoverable fact that two or more individuals, congregations, or church bodies, are confessing the same doctrine of Holy Writ. It requires more than a mere common name and formal acceptance of the same creeds. Actual teaching and practice must be thoroughly Scriptural."<sup>15</sup> Your present essayist admits quite frankly his inability to distinguish in any substantive manner between "doctrinal" and "confessional" fellowship as here defined, unless public doctrine is not *actually discoverable as to fact* (which seems to be self-contradictory) or unless what is *taught* is somehow different from what is *confessed*, a case of transparent, blatant duplicity which we can scarcely visualize or even imagine! Nevertheless, we hasten to add that in the use of human terms such as these, we find nothing divisive, as long as there is no compromise of Divine Truth in the way the terms are either defined or applied.

Both "**prayer fellowship**" and "**church fellowship**" (also known as "**altar and pulpit fellowship**") are the actual **exercise** of Christian fellowship, where those who have recognized themselves to be in the "*unity of the Spirit*" (Ephesians 4:3) **manifest** their *fraternal* (or *brotherly*) relationship by engaging **jointly** in those **acts** which testify to their complete agreement in doctrine and practice. The fact that the **exercise** of Christian fellowship, "*walking together*" as brethren, *assumes* and *demand*s **unity** as a **prerequisite** is evident from Amos 3:3, where the Prophet asks the rhetorical question: "*Can two walk together except they be agreed?*" Such exercise of Christian fellowship is the natural result or "*fruit*" of that unity, whether between individuals in their personal relationships, between individuals in a congregational setting, between congregations in a wider context (as, for example, among the churches in the early New Testament era, Romans 15:26; II Corinthians 8) —and even in and between federations of congregations organized, not by God's command, but in Christian liberty for purely practical reasons. "Joint church work and worship" is the expression often used to describe the extent of this exercise; and that covers just about every activity which testifies to ***the God-given intimate relationship that exists between those who are truly one in faith and confession on the basis of His Word.***

For the purpose of this present essay, particularly because of the wording of our Convention Motto this year after Acts 2:42, we intend to use that passage here with its concise synopsis of the exercise

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<sup>14</sup> F. Pieper, *op. cit.*, p. 426.

<sup>15</sup> O. W. Schaefer, "*True Christian Fellowship—A Mark of Orthodoxy.*" (Essay) Proceedings of the 32<sup>nd</sup> Annual Convention, CONCORDIA LUTHERAN CONFERENCE, 1983.

of church fellowship by the congregation at Jerusalem as our illustration: *“They continued steadfastly in the Apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers.”* By inspiration of the Holy Ghost, St. Luke here describes with striking simplicity the church life of that first Christian congregation, noting four facets of how the brethren **functioned** in that God-ordained external grouping and how they **exercised** among themselves their God-given relationship. The Apostle pairs these four activities to show their interdependency and complete harmony in the sequence that one would expect from the Scriptural relationship between justification and sanctification, and between sacramental and sacrificial acts in the worship services of the church:

We note that the Christians *“continued”* to *“adhere with strength”* to the *“doctrine”* of the Apostles, to their *“teaching,”* as it was set forth their public gatherings. Here the whole counsel of God was proclaimed with regularity and consistency according to the Savior’s instructions in Matthew 28:20, Mark 16:15-16, and Luke 24:47 —Law and Gospel, sin and grace, *“repentance and remission of sins,”* yea, *“all things whatsoever [He] had commanded [them].”* It was this preaching, already in Peter’s sermon on the first Christian Pentecost, through which the Holy Ghost brought thousands of souls to true contrition for their sins and saving confidence in their Redeemer, created in their hearts new spiritual life, and established in them and for them a foundation of perfect integrity, inerrancy, and clarity upon which to base their confidence and by which to norm their faith: *“The foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the Chief Cornerstone”* (Ephesians 2:20). And, as the early Christians in Jerusalem “stuck” to that doctrine, as they *“continued daily with one accord in the Temple”* (Acts 2:46), as they assembled regularly to hear *“the Apostles’ doctrine”* and to *“grow in grace and in the knowledge of [their] Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ”* (II Peter 3:18), they found themselves in an intimate relationship with one another because of the *“unity of the Spirit”* which they enjoyed together. And they continued in this common ground which they shared, this *“fellowship,”* not because of an emotional bond with the Apostles, not because of common interests in their community, not even because of “the gift of their common faith,”<sup>16</sup> but because of *“the Apostles’ doctrine”* to which they steadfastly adhered and through which the Holy Spirit both created and preserved His blessed *“unity”* in them.

They also *“continued steadfastly”* or *“adhered with strength”* to *“breaking the bread”* of the Lord’s Supper, to the celebration of the New Testament meal instituted by their Savior as the seal and surety of the forgiveness of their sins, for the strengthening and preservation of their confidence in Him, for increase of strength to amend their sinful lives and to walk in evidence of their faith, and as a testimony of their unity with their fellow communicants. **“Altar fellowship”** is the privilege of those who are **one in faith**, those who are in *“the unity of the Spirit,”* those who enjoy together the blessed, intimate, God-given relationship of dear brethren, to partake of the Savior’s body and blood to their souls’ benefit. The picture which St. Paul paints for us in but two verses of his first epistle to the Corinthians is indeed worth much more than “a thousand words” of rationalistic wrangling about the necessity of “close” or “closed” communion, for he likens the closeness of fellowship at the Lord’s Table to the close relationship or *“communion”* between the visible elements in the Holy Sacrament and the body and blood of the Savior. He says: *“The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? For we, being many, are one bread and one body;*

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<sup>16</sup> This term is used by the W.E.L.S. in setting forth its false doctrine on the Church and Ministry indicating a means (*other than the Word*) through which the Holy Ghost works in men’s hearts and leads them to establish various forms of the church and of the ministry. (Enthusiasm)



for we are all partakers of that one bread” (I Corinthians 10:16-17).

The Christians in the congregation at Jerusalem also “*continued steadfastly*” or “*adhered with strength*” to “*the prayers,*” Luke writes of them. It appears from the context, both near and remote, that this expression refers not only to the recitation of prayers, but to their entire worship and praise of God, to the “sacrificial” elements of their church life, both in their own assemblies and in the devotions of the Temple during this transitional period. “**Prayer fellowship**” is the privilege of those who are one in faith and confession, those who are in “*the unity of the Spirit,*” to engage in **joint worship**, to “bring their petitions before God... and to offer up praise and thanksgiving to Him” (Catechism Q/A 201). Concerning such joint prayer, the Psalmist writes: “*In the congregations will I bless the Lord*” (Psalm 26:12), certainly not “*congregations*” made up of worshipers professing mixed doctrine and advocating mixed practice in defiance of God’s Word; for in the Proverbs we read: “*He that turneth away his ear from hearing the law, even his prayer shall be **abomination***” (Proverbs 28:9). On the contrary, the blessing of fellowship is based on true unity, as the Psalmist exclaims: “*Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!*” (133:1); and in the brief Psalm 134, this very unity in the worship of God in His sanctuary is extolled. “*Dwell[ing] together in unity*” and “*walk[ing] together...agreed*” (Amos 3:3) describes the proper use of the **Doctrine of the Church** in “joint church work and worship,” namely, that as brethren we “do all in our power to maintain, promote, and extend this [orthodox visible] church [or congregation] by prayer, personal service, and financial support” and that we “avoid [in church work and worship] all false churches, other organizations, [and even **individuals**] that profess a religion that is false.” (Catechism Q/A 186, C and D, amplified for clarity and completeness). Concerning the rejection of the latter point by those who practice “religious unionism” more will be said in the third part of our essay.

The congregation in Jerusalem also exercised Christian fellowship in the practice of Christian discipline, though we note only one specific example, namely, in Acts 5, and this with special circumstances under the direct auspices of the Apostle Peter. Nevertheless the Lord Jesus in Matthew 18:17 makes it incumbent upon Christians, after fruitless admonition of a “*brother*” (or sister) in the semi-private stage for a sin or “*trespass,*” to “*tell it unto **the church,***” the **local congregation**, so that the offending brother may “*hear **the church***” in **its** admonition from the Word of God, to the intent that he repent of his sins and be “*gained*” for heaven. Should such a “*brother*” **refuse to hear the church** (Gk: παρακούσ<sup>®</sup>, *turn away from hearing*; cf. Proverbs 28:9), he is to be regarded by every individual member of the congregation (“*let him be unto **thee***”) as “*an heathen man and a publican,*” no longer a “*brother,*” no longer a member of the Christian congregation, no longer a member of the Communion of Saints, but an unbeliever. Such action of the congregation is not to be regarded merely as an “ecclesiastical judgment” or the personal judgment of the Pastor, who, in the name of the congregation, pronounces that judgment upon the impenitent (Luther: **Office of the Keys**, “*What Do You Believe According to These Words?*”), but it is judgment that is “*as valid and certain in heaven also, as if Christ our dear Lord dealt with us Himself.*” **He** says so; **He** guarantees it, saying: “*Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven*” (Matthew 18:18), and “*Whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained*” (John 20:23). We note that similar congregational discipline was exercised by the church at Corinth under the direction of the Apostle Paul (I Corinthians 5:13; II Corinthians 2:6-8; 10).

The Jerusalem congregation engaged in joint intercessory prayer for those in peril and distress (Acts 12:5) and in works of Christian charity toward brethren in need (Acts 2:45; 4:34-35; 6:1ff., etc.)

While in the Lord's Word we are commanded to pray "*for all men*" (I Timothy 2:1), even for our enemies (Matthew 5:44), and the Apostle Paul exhorts us to "*do good unto all men*" (Galatians 6:10), these works of love are *especially* enjoined upon us with respect to our Christian **brethren**, those of "*the household of faith*" (Galatians 6:10), our brothers and sisters (James 2:15ff; I John 3:17; 4:21; etc.). This too, therefore, belongs to the exercise of Christian fellowship, not only between individuals but in the context of the Christian congregation, where the brethren know one another, assemble together regularly, and have "*opportunity*" to be of service to one another in love.

Now we consider yet in this section the *exercise of fellowship* in a **wider** context, as Christians in and through their respective congregations cooperate with one another in joint church projects and worship activities. We speak particularly of the exercise of fellowship between congregations organized in federations, conferences, or synods, not by God's command, but in Christian liberty for purely practical reasons. Just such a federation is our beloved **Concordia Lutheran Conference**. Nowhere in the Bible is there even mention made of man-made organizations of churches with formal structures, politics, regulations, and statements of purpose. In fact, as our Conference **Constitution** makes it perfectly clear,

According to Scripture teaching and example, each congregation, or church, is independent, sovereign, autonomous in its own affairs, subject alone to Holy Scripture; and a conference or synod is neither of higher nor of equal authority to any of its congregations (Matthew 18:17, 18; Mark 10:42-45). Therefore, in relation to its members, the Conference is not a church or church-government exercising legislative or coercive powers, but, with respect to the individual congregation's right of self-government, it is but an advisory or service body.<sup>17</sup>

We also confess in the sketch of our Conference's doctrinal position:

Synods and conferences, therefore, are not so-called "super-churches" with the combined church-power of all their member congregations, nor are they churches *at all* in the Scriptural usage, but are rather humanly-devised organizations OF churches, established BY local churches in their liberty for the purpose of carrying out joint endeavors and projects which may be difficult for an individual church to handle locally.<sup>18</sup>

Since, however, the Conference and every member thereof subscribes without reservation to its **confessional standard**, namely, the canonical Scriptures as the verbally inspired Word of God and the only norm of Christian faith and life, all of the symbolical writings comprising the *Book of Concord of 1580*, and the *Brief Statement of 1932*, all of the Conference congregations, their members, and their pastors mutually recognize that, by God's grace, they "*all speak the same thing, and that there [are] no divisions among [them], but that [they are] perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment*" (I Corinthians 1:10). They therefore enjoy "*the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace*" (Ephesians 4:3) and, on the basis of that unity, the **God-given, intimate relationship that exists between those who are truly one in faith and confession in both doctrine and practice**. For that reason, and only for that reason, we legitimately exercise Christian fellowship in this wider context and engage in joint church work and worship with those who are our true brethren. (Needless to say, we repudiate the kind of loose fellowship practiced by most Lutheran

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<sup>17</sup> Concordia Lutheran Conference, *CONSTITUTION*, Article VI, 1.

<sup>18</sup> *A Sketch of the Doctrinal Position of the Concordia Lutheran Conference*, p. 9.

church bodies today, where differences in doctrine and practice *within their own midst* are regarded as “healthy pluralism” and not at all divisive of their fellowship! Concerning such aberrations, more will be said in the third part of our essay.)

How do the member-congregations of our *Concordia Lutheran Conference* exercise Christian fellowship in their joint church work and worship? Our congregations and their members have the privilege of worshipping together, both privately and publicly, as brethren in the faith. Provided that they are in good standing in their home congregations, members may be received as guest communicants at one another’s altars. Their pastors may exchange pulpits at the invitations of one another’s congregations. They gather together at annual conventions for joint edification from the Word of God in essays, sermons, and devotions; for joint worship and praise of the God of all grace, who is the Author and Finisher of their faith, of their unity, and of their fellowship; for the joint consideration of mutual problems and the joint carrying out of mutual endeavors; and for joint participation in the Holy Supper of their Savior’s body and blood as guests of the local host congregation. And as to the specific projects upon which they work together, the *Objects of the Conference* summarize them simply and concisely as follows:

1. The conservation of the unity of the true faith (including the exercise of due care in the reception of new member congregations and pastors).
2. Joint testimony and defense against all public errors in doctrine and practice (including “doctrinal discipline” in our own midst so that no one is permitted to remain in membership or fellowship who departs from our confessional position in doctrine or practice and refuses to heed correction).
3. Joint effort toward God-pleasing union with other Lutherans, namely, such union as is based upon the unity of the spirit —full agreement in doctrine and practice on the basis of God’s Word.
4. Joint extension of the Kingdom of God through cooperative mission work of our congregations.
5. The adequate training of pastors for the work of the ministry in our midst, and of parochial school teachers and other helps to the ministry.
6. The publication and distribution of orthodox religious books, periodicals, and other literature for the promotion of the true faith.
7. The endeavor to bring about the best possible uniformity in orders of service, church customs, and other congregational externals, without, however, abridging any congregation’s right in matters indifferent (*adiaphora*).<sup>19</sup>

It bears repeating at this juncture, before beginning the third part of our essay, that, contrary to common jargon even among those who know (or should know) the principles of fellowship, **we** do not “establish” fellowship between ourselves and others, as if fellowship were something to be manipulated, granted, and withdrawn as a religious favor or perquisite. Fellowship is a treasured gift of **God**, who establishes this blessed relationship between His children on the basis of the **unity** into which **He** brings us through His precious Word. We only “exercise” fellowship in accordance with His will as we continue in His Word and walk in His ways as the fruit of saving faith in Christ Jesus. We **can**, however, **forsake** the foundation of faith, **destroy** our unity and thus **scuttle** our

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<sup>19</sup> Concordia Lutheran Conference, *CONSTITUTION*, Article III.

fellowship if we do not give due heed to its preservation in our midst. “*From this preserve us, Heavenly Father!*” (Luther, *Small Catechism*, 1st Petition).

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### III. The Preservation of Christian Fellowship

As we noted in the first part of our essay, *true Christian fellowship* can be **assumed** only among those who are members of the Holy Christian Church, the Communion of Saints; for “[*they*] are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:26). Those who have been “*justified by faith*” and “*have peace with God*” through Christ are members of His spiritual household, have fellowship with the Triune God, have the Lord Jesus dwelling in their hearts by faith, have the internal and external testimony of the Spirit, and have the distinction of such intimacy with their Savior that they are called collectively “*the bride of Christ.*”

But since the **true** believers are **known only to God**, we cannot recognize them to a certainty. Even on the basis of their profession, we cannot be sure of their *spiritual* fellowship; for hypocrites too are confessors of Jesus Christ as their Savior, but are artful liars and deceivers and remain undetectable until they manifest themselves, or until God Himself unmasks them. Therefore the Lord directs us away from the *subjective judgment* of hearts (Luke 17:20-21; 6:37) to the **objective judgment** of that which can be seen, examined, tested, measured, and enjoined, namely, **purity of doctrine and faithful practice** (Matthew 7:15ff; 15:9; Jeremiah 23:31; I John 4:1; Romans 16:17; I Corinthians 1:10; etc.) on the basis of its **only source and norm**, the Holy Scriptures (Deuteronomy 12:32; Luke 11:28; Jeremiah 23:28; Ephesians 2:20; John 8:31-32; II Timothy 1:13; 4:2; etc.). According to Scripture, there is no room for “theological creativity” in what is preached and taught in Christ’s church, no room for “academic freedom” for self-styled “experts” who would re-design the doctrines of Holy Writ on the basis of worldly scholarship, no room for human reason to vaunt itself above the wisdom of God, and no room for so-called “healthy dissent” and “honest differences of opinion” in matters of Christian doctrine.

True, Godpleasing Christian fellowship is, therefore, based solely upon “*the unity of the Spirit*” (Ephesians 4:3) which is **confessed** and which is **evidenced** by strict conformity with the Word of God. Is that *too much* to ask? **God** doesn’t think so! He **demands** it! Is such unity even *possible* to achieve in this world of sin and error? **God** says that it *is*, since it is wrought and preserved by *Him*; and He **insists** that we “*endeavor to keep [it] in the bond of peace*” by not permitting vain talkers and deceivers and spiritual know-nothings to distract us from the “*one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in [us] all,*” as He manifests Himself in His precious Word!

Where “*the unity of the Spirit*” is **evident**, where it **manifests itself** in observable, measurable purity of doctrine and practice, when “[*we*] all speak the same thing,” when there are “*no divisions among [us],*” and when we are “*perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment,*” (I Corinthians 1:10), **then and only then** do we also enjoy that **God-given, intimate relationship that exists between those who are truly one in faith and confession** known as **fellowship**.

How is that true Christian fellowship **preserved**? The question is almost superfluous after what has been said about the nature and exercise of fellowship. Its answer is **obvious** in the simple prooftexts

which all our children, and hopefully our adults as well, memorize in connection with their pre-confirmation instruction in the chief doctrines of our faith. Jesus says, for example, in John 8:31 and 32: “If ye continue in **My Word**, then are ye My disciples indeed; and ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.” Paul writes to Timothy: “Hold fast the **form of sound words** which thou hast heard of me” (II Timothy 1:13); “take heed unto thyself and unto the **doctrine**; continue in them; for in so doing thou shalt both save thyself and them that hear thee” (I Timothy 4:16); and to Titus, describing the staunch Christian pastor as “holding fast **the faithful Word** as he hath been taught, that he may be able by **sound doctrine** both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers” (1:9) Peter writes: “If any man speak, let him speak as the **oracles of God**” (I Peter 4:11). Again St. Paul to the Romans: “Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offenses contrary to **the doctrine which ye have learned**, and avoid them; for they that are such serve not our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly.” And there are, of course, **many more**—some short and easy to learn, some longer and well worth looking up and studying— but ALL pointing to the one and only standard of what is to be preached and taught and believed in the Savior’s church, the only standard of **true unity**, and the only standard of **Godpleasing fellowship**. How then is that fellowship to be **preserved**? “Search **the Scriptures!**” (John 5:39). “Preach **the Word!**” (II Timothy 4:2) “Grow in...**the knowledge** of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!” (II Peter 3:18). “Let the **Word of Christ** dwell in you richly!” (Colossians 3:16). “Not forsaking the **assembling of ourselves together ... ,but exhorting** one another, and so much the more as ye see the day approaching.” (Hebrews 10:25). THAT’S how our blessed unity and our Christian fellowship will be preserved — preserved in us by the Holy Spirit of God through the means of His precious, inerrant, infallible, all-sufficient, and perfectly clear Word!

There are, however, lurking in the “shadows” in the service of Satan several **vicious threats** to true unity and Godpleasing fellowship —besides ignorance of the Scriptures, that is— and these need to be briefly identified, defined, and exposed for what they are. They aren’t the **false prophets** who lie in wait to deceive; for they are easy to identify, to beware of, and to avoid if we hold to the only legitimate standard of divine truth. They aren’t the **false doctrines** which have been invented by men over the years to supplant “*the doctrine which is according to Godliness*” (I Timothy 6:3), for those bruised and rotten and pithy fruits can easily be spotted and promptly removed from the banquet table of spiritual nourishment. But the threats to which we refer are **false practices** which detract from the importance of true unity, which abolish the difference between truth and error and nullify the importance of pure doctrine, which minimize the importance of faithful practice consistent with sound doctrine, and which give the impression that Christian fellowship has no more real, intrinsic value and meaning than a cigar-band ring at a children’s make-believe wedding! While there are **three false practices** in particular that we intend to address briefly but forthrightly in this essay, we would first of all speak to a matter of utmost importance to the maintenance of true unity, particularly in the local Christian congregation.

It is assumed on the basis of Scripture that **Christian church discipline** is diligently and faithfully practiced in local congregations whose members are truly “endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:3). Admonition of the erring, contrary to the label of “lovelessness” falsely attached to it by its antinomistic opponents, is really **Christian love in action**. The entire process, as the Savior Himself instituted it, is intended, not for the eternal ruin of those who are admonished, but for the salvation of their souls. The Lord Jesus in Matthew 18 clearly

states that, if a sinning brother hears and heeds<sup>20</sup> the Christian admonition brought to him from the Word of God, he has been “*gained*” from his sins for heaven. The rebuke of a sinning brother is (and always has been) regarded by the Lord Himself as an act of **love**, while to “*suffer sin upon him,*” simply to let him continue in sin without admonition, is to “***hate [one’s] brother***” (Leviticus 19:17). Yea, the Savior says of His own loving desire for the repentance of erring members in His churches, “*As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten; be zealous therefore, and repent*” (Revelation 3:19). But when Christian discipline is **not** maintained in the Christian congregation, “[*they*] which ***[ought to be] spiritual***” (Galatians 6:1)—instead of restoring erring brethren to “*keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace*”—foster **disunity**, aid and abet those who “*cause divisions and offenses,*” become “***partaker of other men’s sins***” (I Timothy 5:22), and bring upon themselves and upon their congregations the Savior’s angry rebuke and threat of swift punishment (I Corinthians 5; Revelation 2:14-16, 20-23; 3:2-3).

Now as to the **three false practices** in particular to which we address ourselves in this present essay, practices which militate against and destroy true Godpleasing fellowship among professing Christians, they are the sins of ***unionism, separatism, and selective fellowship.***

***Unionism*** can be defined very simply as *engaging in religious work and/or worship with those who are not of the same faith and confession, that is, with those with whom one is not in fellowship.* Unionists practice fellowship where there is no true fellowship, feign unity where there is no true unity, grant the same authority to error as they do to the truth of God’s Word, and establish unions where there is no Scriptural basis for union. In this present study we have defined Christian fellowship as “***the God-given intimate relationship that exists between those who are truly one in faith and confession on the basis of God’s Word;***” and therefore, according to St. Paul’s analogy in Ephesians chapter 5, the **exercise** of Christian fellowship --fellowship with Christ and with one another-- can be likened to the intimacy enjoyed between husband and wife in Holy Marriage, based on their mutually-exclusive commitment to one another. ***Unionism***, then, very simply put, is **spiritual adultery** on the part of those who profess to be “*chaste virgin[s] ...espoused...to one Husband,*” namely, Christ (II Corinthians 11:2), and “*members one of another*” (Romans 12:5), those who, at their Confirmation, swore faithfulness to their Savior, His Word and Church even unto death; for they engage in religious intimacy with those who are not in “*the unity of the Spirit,*” with those who are not committed to the truth of God’s Word, with those who “*cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine*” of Holy Scripture, with those who are “*the enemies of the cross of Christ,*” with those who “*serve not our Lord Jesus Christ but their own belly.*” Unionists quite literally “*embrace the bosom of a stranger*” (Proverbs 5:20) by practicing the spiritual intimacy of fellowship with those who mock the very principles upon which true fellowship is based. And, in so doing, they claim the Lord Jesus, the bridegroom of His chaste believers, as the author of their promiscuity. They violently rape the Savior’s prayer in John 17, “*that they all may be one,*” tearing the words from their context, and turning them quite literally “on their head” to make it seem as if the Lord Jesus *advocated* the indiscriminate joining together of all professing Christians into one outward fellowship, regardless of their lack of real unity! But unionism is **the devil’s** work and results in the very opposite of what the term at first hearing seems to imply. It ***divides the church*** instead of uniting it; it ***fosters heterodoxy*** at the expense of orthodoxy; it ***destroys true fellowship*** with a false concept of love; it ***makes God a liar*** by denying the existence of divine truth; it not only

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<sup>20</sup> The aorist of •κούω assumes a hearing to completion, to agreement, to obedience. Hearing merely of the ear and not of the heart, i.e. short of **heeding**, would not result in the “gaining” of an erring brother.

*permits* truth and error to exist side-by-side, but it *promotes* spiritual **promiscuity** and *praises* doctrinal **pluralism**.

Since the term “unionism” has always been used **negatively** to denote something to be **avoided** by sincere Christians, errorists have devised a more attractive-sounding word for exactly the same thing, the name under which they are successfully “selling” the concept in the marketplace of outward Christendom. They call it **ecumenism**. It’s BIG; it’s popular; it’s everywhere; but the **ecumenical movement** is nothing but a “wild party” of spiritual “swingers” whose concept of fellowship is “free love” with no commitment, no bounds, no faithfulness.

Contrary to what we see and hear nowadays of spiritual promiscuity in outward Lutheranism, unionism is clearly “**un**Lutheran” judging from the Reformer’s own words: “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.”<sup>21</sup> Luther, of course, did not arrive at this conclusion on his own. Rather, he paraphrased the Holy Ghost through St. Paul, who warns us in the strongest of terms: “*Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers! For what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? And what communion hath light with darkness? And what concord hath Christ with Belial? Or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel? And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols?? For ye are the temple of the living God, as God hath said: ‘I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate,’ saith the Lord, ‘and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, and will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be My sons and daughters,’ saith the Lord Almighty*” (II Corinthians 6:14-18). Dr. Pieper notes concerning these verses that

Objections have been raised against the use of this passage as proof that God has forbidden fellowship with heterodox churches. The objectors claim that this passage speaks of unbelievers and not of erring believers. But erring churches are, to the extent that they err, also unbelieving. They are unbelieving with respect to quite a number of Bible passages. And to this they add the terrible sin, that on the basis of their errors they have established sectarian communions in the Christian Church. Thereby they split up Christendom and oppose, fight against, the orthodox Church. Word for word, the passage, II Corinthians 6, applies to the erring churches *insofar* as they are such.<sup>22</sup>

While the term “unionism” is usually applied to indiscriminate **church fellowship**, we note that the very same *spiritual adultery* is committed by **individuals** who engage in acts of **personal fellowship** in their casual everyday contact with the heterodox --with family members who are not of the same fellowship, with neighbors, with peers at school, with colleagues in the workplace, with players on sports teams, and in other social associations. When Christians in weakness yield to pressure to set aside differences and to concentrate only on those things they have in common with such people, they are swept into the treacherous undertow of unionism and soon find themselves casually engaging with the heterodox in joint table prayers, in the singing of hymns and carols (especially at Christmas time), in pre-game devotions led by coaches and team chaplains, or in religious rituals at otherwise civic observances. Regarding even such *personal* acts of fellowship with the

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<sup>21</sup> Martin Luther, *Sämtliche Schriften*, St. Louis Ed., Vol. XVII, p. 1180.

<sup>22</sup> F. Pieper, *The Difference between Orthodox and Heterodox Churches*, an essay delivered by Dr. Pieper in 1889 to the Southern District Convention of the Missouri Synod. (Tr. by E. L. M. 1981)

heterodox, the Lord's Apostle Paul writes in Romans 16:17, "**Mark them ...and avoid them!**" And, as we heard just before, "**Come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord!**"

In 1945, as the Missouri Synod began its cataclysmic slide into the heterodoxy from which it was never to recover, the liberal signers of "*A Statement*" "deplored the fact" that Romans 16:17 had been applied by faithful pastors and professors to joint prayer in private and semi-private settings between **individual Christians** not united in doctrine and practice. They maintained that the passage speaks only to fraternization with false **teachers**, with false **churches**, with false **groups**. Thus the "Statementarians" set the stage, as it were, for church-approved spiritual adultery and the unscriptural notion that differences between **individual Christians** are not divisive of fellowship. It was apparently all right with them for their people, in their *spiritual lives*, to engage in promiscuous "sleeping around" on a one-to-one basis, as long as they didn't do it in groups! Some "family values"! --And yet, (and this shouldn't surprise us in the least), it was within just **five years** that not only that vocal minority of "the 44" and their subsequent co-signers of "*A Statement*" but the entire Missouri Synod at its Milwaukee convention adopted a so-called "*Common Confession*" with the American Lutheran Church in which doctrines of Holy Scripture were artfully compromised in an effort to form a union where there was no true unity. And, when those who were our "fathers" in the early Orthodox Lutheran Conference, but were still at *that* time members of the Missouri Synod, spoke out against such blatant unionism with an undeniably heterodox church body, they were booed on the convention floor, ruled "out of order," and for all practical purposes silenced, while that **doctrinal** measure passed by a mere **majority vote!** Whatever happened to the unanimity required by I Corinthians 1:10 and other passages in matters of Christian doctrine and practice?? We **know** what happened! It was ignored, shoved aside, and deliberately rejected as being at all necessary in determining whether there is true unity between Christians, between churches, and between church bodies! And **today**, as even the most casual reader of religious newspapers and magazines can observe, the Lutheran Church-Missouri routinely passes resolutions "confirming" its stand on a doctrine of Holy Scripture *by a majority vote!!*

Our younger members, and those who came into our fellowship long after "the split" with the Missouri Synod, should know that *the very formation of our conference* was due to the blatant **unionism** that was practiced and officially tolerated in that synod in spite of repeated and almost incessant admonition by those who were then our brethren in a true "state of confession" or active, meaningful protest overagainst the synod. In the **Preamble** of our Conference **Constitution** we find the following testimony by our orthodox fathers:

1. In obedience to the Word of God (Romans 16:17; Titus 3:10), a number of our original members withdrew from the Missouri Synod in the year 1951 for the following reasons:

a. Because of that Synod's progressive deterioration in doctrine and practice during the two preceding decades, in spite of much patient admonition to the contrary on the part of many pastors and congregations in its midst...

b. More specifically because of:

1) Its **unionistic character** evinced by the unretracted "A Statement," Chicago, 1945, and the unscriptural, compromising "Common Confession" of 1950.

2) Its **tyrannical procedures** overagainst its own protesting pastors and congregations in defiance of God's Word, Matthew 23:8-12; Mark 10:42-45; and



contrary to its own Constitution, Article VII.

And, after almost half a century, the Missouri Synod is more unionistic than ever before, permits error to stand on an equal footing with the truth, refuses to exercise doctrinal discipline toward its erring members, allows marked errorists to teach in its colleges and seminaries, and actively persecutes anyone who publicly challenges its false doctrine and practice. How humbly grateful we should be to the God of all grace for having delivered us from such a spiritual cesspool in which we ourselves would no doubt have drowned had we remained it to be leavened with indifference to the truth and tolerance of error, all for the sake of “temporal peace and tranquility”!

Another vicious threat to Christian fellowship is *sinful separatism*. Our dogmaticians have comparatively little to say about this threat, no doubt because of its easily recognizable *terminus* or end result. While in *unionism*, those who profess to be true brethren also “sleep with the enemy,” as it were, in spiritual adultery, and carry on secret “affairs” with the heterodox --often going undetected by the unwary and undisciplined by those who don’t want to “rock the boat,” *separatism* occurs when professing Christians *refuse to practice fellowship with those whom they recognize to be orthodox in doctrine and practice*. They refuse to acknowledge and stand along side those who are their brethren in the faith; they refuse to defend them; and after a relatively short time, they desert them altogether (II Timothy 1:8). Thus they cause “schisms” or splits in the church, not for reasons that God in His holy Word *commands* (such as we discussed under sinful unionism), but **for purely carnal or fleshly reasons**: Their feelings were hurt by someone in the church; they don’t like to be admonished for their sins; they don’t like the length of the pastor’s sermons, his expectations for children in Confirmation Class, and the way in which he preaches against false prophets. For others, it’s the use of the “common cup” in the Lord’s Supper, the “ornate” liturgy in the worship service, the “old” music that may be hard for them to sing, or the type of gown that the pastor wears. Perhaps it is what some refer to as “a personality conflict” with the pastor or with another member, because of which a person estranges himself from the congregation and permits resentment, disrespect, and even hatred to destroy his love for the brethren. But whatever it is, it is **not** a matter because of which a Christian should leave an orthodox Christian congregation and fellowship. Rather, it is a matter to be discussed with dear brethren in the spirit of meekness and love, so that in all things the Name of the Lord Jesus is glorified and the unity of the Spirit is kept in the bond of peace.

Again, it is a matter of “family values” in the “*household of faith*” in that *sinful separatism* is much like malicious desertion from the marriage relationship. “*If the unbelieving depart, let him depart. A brother or sister is not under bondage in such cases*” (I Corinthians 7:15). Just about all of us at some time or other have witnessed the defection of a brother or sister from the fellowship -- sometimes without warning-- and we feel hurt, used, deserted, and deceived, much like an innocent spouse whose partner suddenly leaves the marriage over “irreconcilable differences,” “mental cruelty,” or simply because there is “no love in the marriage” anymore. When such a desertion occurs from the fellowship, the faithful members should not feel guilty; they should not feel that it was somehow “their fault,” or ask themselves what they could have done to prevent such a carnal act. For the Apostle John writes concerning *sinful separatists* who have left our fellowship: “*They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would no doubt have continued with us. But they went out, that they might be made manifest that they were not all of us*” (I John 2:19). --“*Will ye also go away?*” Jesus asked His faithful disciples (John 6:67); and we must answer, as we steadfastly continue in His precious doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers, “*Lord, to whom shall we go?? Thou hast the words of eternal life; and we*

*believe and are sure that Thou art that Christ, the Son of the living God!”*

But there is yet one other significant threat to Christian fellowship, an insidious and cunning trick of Satan that we call *selective fellowship*. The term itself has a hollow ring to it, because the “selectivity” is purely subjective, purely personal; and no one is quite sure who is in fellowship with whom. That kind of uncertainty is not characteristic of *“the God-given intimate relationship that exists between those who are truly one in faith and confession on the basis of His Word.”* We find this arbitrary “picking and choosing” rather typical of spiritual fence-sitters who find themselves, particularly in relationships with family members, relatives, and close personal friends, unable objectively to distinguish between true brethren and *“false brethren”* (II Corinthians 11:26). Because of flesh-and-blood ties (“Blood is thicker than water!”), they are reticent to mark close friends and relatives as heterodox, even when the perfect, objective measuring-stick of Holy Writ makes the spiritual rift as plain as night and day and forbids the practice of fellowship with those who are not *“agreed”* (Amos 3:3) in doctrine and practice. The Lord Jesus Himself made it abundantly clear to **His** earthly relatives that there is an affinity “thicker than blood”, namely, the affinity of *“the household of faith”*, the affinity of Christian fellowship (Matthew 12:48-50). Moreover, His requirement that we confess Him before men (Matthew 10:32-33) dare not be so limited that it makes an exception to forthright testimony to those who are erring *relatives* and *friends* in a heterodox fellowship—for the sake of “domestic” peace and tranquility!

While the selfish snobbery of *selective fellowship* is common also among the sects, it is most rampant among those **Lutherans** who identify themselves as “conservatives” and “confessionals”. One might expect *such* people to be very **careful** about the exercise of Christian fellowship and to make sure that their fellowship is based on the true *“unity of the Spirit.”* But these are spiritual “two-timers” who practice a finely-chopped form of spiritual promiscuity. They are “selective” adulterers who won’t sleep with just **anybody**, but their “standards” go only as deep as the label in their prospective partner’s clothes. They only seek to determine whether a person is a “conservative” or a “confessional” (whatever that means nowadays) and don’t really care to examine a person’s doctrine and practice in **everything**. For if they do **that**, they’ll have to eliminate most from consideration. And so they pick and choose, practicing fellowship with the consistency of a buckshot pattern on a paper target! “Brother **A** and I are in fellowship together. I realize that he’s a member of a heterodox church body and isn’t about to leave it, but he’s a *conservative* after all. He communes at pastoral conferences with fellas with whom **I** could never commune in good conscience, but he’s trying to gain them for the *conservative* cause. That has to count for something! I’m also in fellowship with Brother **B** in a still different church body. He’s a *conservative* too, but he and Brother **A** just don’t see eye-to-eye and aren’t in fellowship. Too bad, too, because I consider **BOTH** of them **MY** brethren. I think it’s just one of those doctrines that is not divisive of fellowship that is coming between them. You just can’t tell nowadays what’s divisive and what’s not. But you surely treasure **fellowship**, don’t you?” --Sometimes such examples sound a bit far fetched and far-stretched to make a point; but there is no exaggeration in **this** one. So-called “conservatives” who are **far** from being truly one in doctrine and practice think nothing of wishing one another “God’s richest blessings,” when they should know that God does not bless those who pervert, subvert, and ignore His Word! (Cf. II John 1:10-11). This loose-lipped dialog, almost to the word, goes on every day in the circles of *“Lutheran conservatives”* and makes a mockery of true Christian fellowship!

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In conclusion, let us very briefly refer again to David’s words in Psalm 133:1, *“Behold, how good*

*and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!*” Why?? Because true Christian fellowship is a precious blessing from God, “good” and “pleasant” not just because of the sociability it affords us in our congregations, not merely because of the friendships that it creates and builds in our Conference, not only because our marriages and families are more likely to remain strong and stable when their members are in fellowship with one another, but because of the “unity” in which we “dwell together,” the “unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” That unity is only possible when “[we] all speak the same thing, [when] there are no divisions among [us], [when we are] perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment” (I Corinthians 1:10). Such unity is no “pipedream” of the Holy Spirit, it’s not a theoretical goal for Christians which can never be fully achieved, it’s not the “ideal situation” which we will only realize in heaven someday! No, by God’s grace, true unity is ours **right now, right here** in our precious Conference, not because of *our* faithfulness, but because of *God’s* faithfulness to us in His Word. We are His dear children “by faith in Christ Jesus,” and we are “members one of another” according to the tangible, observable, discoverable test of full adherence to the Holy Scriptures in both doctrine and practice. May we all so value the precious Word of our God that we gladly grow in it on a daily basis, let it dwell in us richly, assemble eagerly to hear it preached and taught, hold fast to it in faith, follow it in our lives as Christians, and thus continue to enjoy, exercise, and keep among us true Christian fellowship, ***the God-given intimate relationship that exists between those who are truly one in faith and confession on the basis of His precious Word!*** To that we pray with the hymnwriter “unto Him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think” (Ephesians 3:20):

*Spirit of life, of love, and peace,  
unite our hearts, our joy increase,  
Thy gracious help supply.  
To each of us the blessing give  
in Christian Fellowship to live,  
in joyful hope to die!  
Amen.*

(TLH, 412, 3)

***Soli Deo gloria!***

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