

OUR GLORIOUS FELLOWSHIP IN CHRIST

FOREWORD

The 2011 General Pastoral Conference of the CLC responded to concerns expressed by some in our midst that our historic confessional statement, Concerning Church Fellowship, contains language that is hard to understand and that sounds negative in tone. The Board of Doctrine was instructed to draw up a document that sets forth the positive aspects of the doctrine of church fellowship. This is the Board's attempt to address these concerns.

It is important to understand that, though Concerning Church Fellowship was written in the interests of furthering the cause of the gospel (so that the gospel might be preserved among us in its truth and purity and so that we might always have it to share), it was not written per se as an evangelism tool for winning souls for Christ. Its purpose was and is ...

*1 to remind people within our church body of the blessings the Lord graciously bestows on those who abide faithfully in His Word and are unwilling to compromise His Word in any way, and
2 to help those outside our church body to understand the gospel reasons that serve as the foundation for our fellowship practice grounded in Scripture.*

*The admonition of Romans 16:17 – **"mark those who cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which you have learned, and avoid them"** – will always sound negative to those who do not understand the following verse, Romans 16:18 – **"for those who are such do not serve our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly, and by smooth words and flattering speech deceive the hearts of the simple"** – where the Lord provides the loving reason that lies behind His admonition to avoid false teachers. Those who make common cause with people who teach or tolerate doctrinal errors (whether they realize it or not), are undermining the confidence the Lord wants us to have in our salvation and are weakening the church's witness to the gospel of Christ.*

*Church fellowship practiced among like-minded brothers and sisters in Christ is a precious gift of the Spirit that we should never take for granted. It serves the blessed purpose of strengthening the ties of Christian love that bind us together in the Lord. It is the ultimate expression of what King David was inspired to write in the Psalms: **"Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity"** (Psalm 133:1). Maintaining church fellowship in unity of faith will always prove to be a challenge due to the weakness of our flesh and the subtle forces that attack us continually from the outside. We implore the Holy Spirit to strengthen us in our teaching and practice, confident that as we understand the blessings of our fellowship with Christ and, in Him, with one another, we will appreciate that our church's commitment to adhere conscientiously to the fellowship principles set forth in Scripture truly glorifies our Savior, truly promotes the spread of His gospel, and accurately reflects the love He has called us to show for those outside our fellowship who are caught in the confusion of contrary voices claiming to speak in His name.*

May the Lord bless our humble efforts on behalf of His saving Truth.

*Board of Doctrine
Church of the Lutheran Confession
2013*

I. Our Spiritual Brotherhood

Once each year the world promotes "Brotherhood Week." This is pushed by persons who are mildly religious or lukewarm. The brotherhood being celebrated is the "brotherhood of man." In an attempt to instill some kind of good feeling among the inhabitants of earth, they speak of this as a "brotherhood of man under the fatherhood of God."

It is true, of course, that God is the Creator of all men, but it is certainly misleading to speak of God as the

Father of a spiritual family made up of all the brothers and sisters of the world. Although God loves all that He has created, this love is not mutual. The majority of mankind do not love God but rather hate Him. It is written (Romans 8:7): **“The carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be.”**

We all entered this world as aliens from the family of God. Since the fall of Adam it has always been true that **“that which is born of the flesh is flesh”** (John 3:6). We entered this world as persons with a natural hatred of God and His Law. There was no loving father-child relationship between us and our Creator.

But God's love for man still abounded. God still loved man, no matter how wicked and rebellious he had become. Because of His love for His fallen creatures God provided a way to reestablish the father-child relationship which existed at creation. Therefore, even before He created the world, God established **THE GLORIOUS BROTHERHOOD OF CHRIST**, a spiritual body of God's people invisibly bound to Him and to one another by their common faith in Christ.

In order to make this brotherhood a reality, the Son of God had to enter the brotherhood of man, yet without partaking in the sins of man. **“Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage. ... In all things He had to be made like His brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest in all things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people”** (Hebrews 2: 14-17). As sinless man, Jesus took the place of sinful man, appeasing the anger of God by suffering the curse of our sins and establishing a perfect righteousness for us by keeping the Law of God.

Thus the conditions for a new brotherhood, the brotherhood of Christ, were established, and with Christ's resurrection from the dead, all was complete. At first Christ was the only member of the brotherhood of man to live in an intimate relationship with His Father. By His death and resurrection He made it possible for all citizens of earth to live as children of God, for at the moment of His resurrection we all stood justified before the throne of God, having been declared righteous by Him.

One thing remained to be done. Each one of us had to be separated from our natural hatred and unbelief. Each of us needed to be made holy. Jesus had become our Brother in the flesh so that we might become His brothers in the spirit.

To accomplish this, God gave the Gospel in Word and Sacraments. Through this Good News there went out a heavenly call: the Holy Spirit summoning us to believe in Christ. Working within our hearts, God made a drastic change. He separated us from our unbelief and sin. He sanctified us and made us holy, filling our hearts with faith in the vicarious atonement of Christ.

Therefore **“both He who sanctifies and those who are being sanctified are all of one, for which reason He (Christ) is not ashamed to call them brethren”** (Hebrews 2:11). By the activity of the Triune God we have been ushered into **THE GLORIOUS BROTHERHOOD OF CHRIST**. We are now **“holy brethren, partakers of the heavenly calling”** (Hebrews 3:1). This applies to all who base their hope for heaven solely on the redemptive work of Jesus Christ; it transcends nationality, language, culture, and church denominations or any other visible, man-made brotherhood. Oh, the glory of it all, that Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God, should delight in calling us “brothers!”

Surely the brotherhood of Christ is to be treasured above all other brotherhoods. Let all other brotherhoods perish, if need be, in order to preserve this glorious brotherhood. This even applies to that blood brotherhood in our own families. Christ promised: **“There is no one who has left house or parents or brothers or wife or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who shall not receive many times more in this present time, and in the age to come eternal life”** (Luke 18: 29-30). Jesus Himself preferred this spiritual brotherhood over His earthly family. When His mother and brothers came looking for Him on one occasion, Jesus replied: **“Who is My mother and who are My brothers? ... Whoever does the will of My Father in heaven is My brother and sister and mother”** (Matthew 12: 48-50). Any earthly brotherhood that threatens our brotherhood with Christ we shall want to avoid like a deadly plague.

We who are in a brotherhood with Christ are in the most intimate union which exists. It is a union against which even the gates of hell cannot prevail. It is a union which overcomes the devil, the world, and our own flesh. The tie which binds it so securely is the blood of Jesus. Through faith in that blood we have the victory that overcomes all our enemies.

Here is perfect unity. We **“are all one in Christ Jesus”** (Galatians 3:28). We have been reconciled to God **“in one body through the cross”** (Ephesians 2:16). As Jesus said, **“there will be one flock and one Shepherd”** (John 10:16). There is only one foundation and cornerstone of our brotherhood (Ephesians 2:20; 1 Corinthians 3:11). Here is inner unity, a unity of hearts. Every believer in the world is one with every other believer, because of the one faith in Christ. **“There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were 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”** (Ephesians 4: 4-6). This is the unity which the Spirit has achieved in our hearts.

Hand in hand, we strive as one, work as one, think as one. We are an association of people united in a common interest, a common work, a common faith. There is no division in any of these areas, no division in the brotherhood of Christ. If there were, it would collapse, as Christ says: **“If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand”** (Mark 3:24).

As for those who creep into the midst of the brothers and try to sow the seed of discord, the Lord has strong words: **“These six things the LORD hates, yes, seven are an abomination to Him: ... one who sows discord among brethren”** (Proverbs 6: 16-19). To the brotherhood He says through His apostle Paul: **“Now I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them. For those who are such do not serve our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own belly, and by smooth words and flattering speech deceive the hearts of the simple”** (Romans 16: 17-18). Those who create divisions and lead people astray by their errors, insofar as they are teaching contrary to God's Word, are to be regarded as enemies of the brotherhood, since false teaching serves Satan rather than God. Satan is out to destroy the brotherhood and sends his servants to create divisions and cause people to stumble into sin. The brotherhood must always be on the lookout for false brothers, for wolves in sheep's clothing. Brother must protect brother from such as these.

Unity is good and pleasant, as the psalm says: **“Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!”** (Psalm 133:1). Division and disunity, on the other hand, is horrid. But how can we maintain the unity and avoid the division makers?

God has not granted to us in this life the ability to see that glorious inner unity of the Brotherhood of Christ. That He has reserved for Himself. **“For the LORD does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart”** (1 Samuel 16:7). We are unable to judge what

is in the heart, whether good or bad.

God, however, has not left us helpless in the face of the enemy. Recognizing that we can look only at the outward appearance, Christ has given us some markers. He has told us, for instance, that the mouth will reveal what is in the heart (Matthew 12:34). When the heart believes, the mouth will make confession (Romans 10:10). He also tells us that the works that a person performs also reveal his inner condition (Luke 6: 43ff.; Matthew 7:16ff.) Those who perform works of love toward the Brotherhood of Christ will be labeled as disciples of Christ, even by the world (John 13:35).

Words and deeds, then, tell us as much as we need to know in this life. When words and deeds are in line with Scripture, we accept such a person as a brother. Of course we know that appearances can be deceiving. We know there have been many who have come near the Lord with their lips, while their heart was far from Him. The Lord has not laid on us the duty to find these hypocrites. Eventually God's Word will uncover the thoughts of the heart (Hebrews 4:12ff.).

This does not mean that the brother never errs or sins.. Every brother makes his share of mistakes. However, every brother also follows up that wrongdoing with repentance and faith in Christ and an earnest striving against every sin.

But one who refuses to repent of his sins and will not strive against the sin in his life is no longer to be regarded as a brother. Christ says concerning that impenitent individual: **“Let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector”** (Matthew 18:17). Paul gave this counsel to the Christians in Corinth: **“I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner – not even to eat with such a person”** (1 Corinthians 5:11). The hope is that such drastic action will lead the person to repentance.

Likewise, we are told not to accept someone as a brother if he teaches contrary to Scripture. False teachers disturb the unity of the outward brotherhood and cause the weak to stumble into error. They lead the unsuspecting astray. Such false teachers are to be avoided. We are not to support or encourage them.

The efforts of the false teacher run completely contrary to those of the brotherhood of Christ. The false teacher seeks to divide; we seek to unite. He causes people to stumble; we try to restore them. Those who accept one another as brothers are constantly striving to make the outward unity agree with the inner unity. The Scriptures admonish us: **“Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment”** (1 Corinthians 1:10). **“Be of one mind”** (2 Corinthians 13:11). **“Stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel”** (Philippians 1:27).

The faithful brotherhood will not be satisfied with only partial agreement or with letting each person believe as he wants. Our every effort is to be perfectly united in what we say, what we think, what we purpose, and what we do.

Our brotherhood in Christ is our most precious and glorious possession. The inner unity of the heart was created by the Father, through the mediation of Jesus Christ, His Son, and the activity of His Holy Spirit. This brotherhood is priceless. It is worth the sacrifice of all earthly treasures and all earthly brotherhoods that contradict our **GLORIOUS BROTHERHOOD WITH CHRIST**.

The very first thing we should think of in connection with Christian fellowship is the fellowship that we sinners have with the holy God through the redemptive work of Christ Jesus. This is our most precious possession. All the teachings in Scripture on the topic of fellowship are designed to preserve this fellowship with God and every other blessing that results from this fellowship because of the work of Christ.

God graciously calls and gathers people into His Church to be a part of His spiritual fellowship. Using frail human vessels as His instruments, God sends out His gracious invitation through the preaching of His Word. Through that Word the Holy Spirit works in the hearts of people and completely transforms them, making them new creatures so that their outlook on life and their perspective of God is changed. They learn that all their sins have been forgiven because of Christ. They have the sure hope that God will grant them eternal life in heaven because of Christ. Instead of seeking to gratify their sinful flesh, they now seek to do the will of their Father. Instead of looking to the world for direction, they look to the precious truths of God's Word. Those then who walk in the light of God's Word are truly blessed with a fellowship one with another and with God. **“If we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin”** (1 John 1:7).

II. The Breadth and Richness of Biblical Fellowship

The doctrine of fellowship as we have learned it and taught it from Scripture is, in a sense, **“a hard saying”** (John 6:60). But the reality is that it is recorded in Scripture as an expression of love. Since the main purpose of Scripture is to make us **“wise for salvation”** (2 Timothy 3:15), and since only by continuing in the Word of God are we **“disciples indeed”** (John 8:32), the Heavenly Father desires that His Word be preached **“faithfully”** (Jeremiah 23:28). Further, it is His will that hearers sit at the feet of teachers who preach and teach the Word faithfully. It is out of love for His children that the Lord through His apostle instructs us in Romans 16:17-18 to **“avoid”** those **“who cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which you learned.”** Therefore we will surely not want to support or identify with false teachers or with churches and organizations that give them cover.

The application of Romans 16:17,18 is frequently seen as a negative activity. It is hardly possible to speak of or practice what the Lord instructs in this passage without sounding negative to many, especially to those who disagree with Scripture. However, when as faithful children of God we apply the Lord's instruction with regard to fellowship practice, we are showing obedience and love to God, love for His Word, as well as concern for our soul and that of our neighbor. We reflect the love of the Father for all people when we practice truth. Any error that is permitted to fester bears with it the potential to destroy faith and ultimately rob us of eternal life.

But the Scriptural doctrine of church fellowship is *broader* than simply the termination of fellowship, or the avoidance of fellowship with false teaching and false teachers.

First of all, when we speak of fellowship we are not speaking of it in terms of the world's understanding of it. We speak of it in terms of Spirit-worked faith born of the Gospel and manifested in good works or fruits of faith. The apostle Paul wrote to the Galatians: **“And let us not grow weary while doing good, for in due season we shall reap if we do not lose heart. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith”** (Galatians 6: 9-10).

Such **“doing good”** to all surely begins with fulfilling the great commission of our Lord who said that we are to go forth **“and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things”** (Matthew 28:19-20) that He has commanded us. **“Doing good”** begins with reflecting the heart of the Lord Jesus by speaking truth and **“doing”** truth.

“Doing” truth reflects itself in the exercise of love to all people but most especially in exercise of fellowship toward **“those who are of the household of faith.”** Such fellowship is not a natural expression but rather an exercise of those who by the Spirit walk in the light. **“If we walk in the light as He (Jesus) is in the light, we have fellowship with one another...”** (1 John 1:7).

In Scripture we find the following descriptive expressions of a living, caring, faith as well as a beautiful fellowship.

In the early church fellowship consisted of

1. An expression of Christians united in doctrine and faith, breaking of bread and in prayers, having all things common, and works of charity (Acts 2:42-45). After Pentecost the believers continued steadfastly in God's Word; they communed together as an expression of their mutual faith, and joyfully shared their material blessings with one another. The latter was not a grudging sharing, but a willing expression of love by which they mutually supported one another, especially the poor.
2. The kiss of peace (Romans 16: 16; 2 Corinthians 13:12). This was a common greeting with which believers, men and women, acknowledged one another as one in the Lord.
- 3 The right hand of fellowship (Galatians 2:9). Greeting one another was more than a polite acknowledgment of the other. It was a physical exercise that spoke to the unity of faith in Christ and in mutual and united service of the Lord.
4. The confession of sins, one to another, with the accompanying prayer (James 5:16). Children of God confess their sins to God and to one another that they might have the assurance of God's forgiveness and so that there is no animosity between one another — animosity that undermines the peace and unity of the congregation as well as the witness of the Gospel. For the same reason we join in prayer for one another to the Lord, who binds all in one, and we lay the needs of one another before the Lord who answers the prayers of the righteous.
5. Assembling together in worship and provoking to good works (Hebrews 10:24-25). Children of God join together in drawing near to God in order to be instructed and comforted through His Word. Worshiping together is an expression of a living faith and of a responsible love that encourages the brother and sister in their worship life. Together the worshipers lay their petitions before the Lord for themselves and one another.
6. Receiving the Lord's Supper together (1 Corinthians 11:24, 25; 1 Corinthians 10:17). Communing at the Lord's Table is the most intimate expression of fellowship as together penitent sinners partake of the body and blood of the Lord Jesus, who in the Sacrament gives and seals the forgiveness of sins to each communicant and strengthens the bond of the child of God with Him and with fellow communicants. We are one body in Christ.
7. Helping the poor (Acts 11:29). As believers in Christ see another member of the body of Christ in need and hurting, the whole Church hurts. As help is given, it is given as to Christ (Matthew 25:40). Active fellowship is one member of the body of Christ in love serving another.
8. Bearing the infirmities of the weak (Romans 15:1, 5-6). The child of God is not judgmental with those who are weak in faith and understanding, but by word and example patiently seeks to strengthen the weak. The strong will not use their liberty in Christ to cause the weak to stumble, but will be kind to build up the understanding and the conscience of the weak. The fellowship of love does not condone sin, but seeks the spiritual welfare of the weak.

The separation principle in the exercise of fellowship is not a “holier than thou” exercise. It is the Spirit-

worked program to hinder and prevent us from succumbing to temptation in the weakness of our flesh and falling from the faith. It is separation for the sake of preservation — preservation in the truth and thus preservation unto eternal life.

It protects the privilege and the opportunity that we have in the Church to live the fellowship in Christ toward one another in peace and quietness. Our Lord says: **“Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity”** (Psalm 133:1). How blessed to be able to serve one another in mutual love and caring within a united fellowship! But it is a challenge. The Lord through the apostle Paul encourages us therefore to endeavor **“to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace”** (Ephesians 4:3). As we walk together in the unity of faith, the joy of the fellowship of worship and serving one another will abound **“for the edifying of the body of Christ”** (Ephesians 4:13).

Blessed be the fellowship that binds our hearts in Christian love, until

From sorrow, toil, and pain,
And sin we shall be free
And perfect love and friendship reign
Through all eternity (TLH 464).

Christian unity is disturbed when Christians behave contrary to Paul's instructions. If we are proud and insist on our own rights and having things our way, instead of being humble and gentle, we are disturbing the unity. If we follow our natural instincts and are rash and critical and condemnatory of others, instead of being longsuffering and bearing with one another in love, we are disturbing the unity. If we are filled with selfish ambition and are forever stirring up trouble, instead of endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit, we are most certainly creating fracture lines in the bond that unites us.

Although Paul often supported himself by his trade of tent making, he was also helped by his fellow-Christians. Paul's base of operations was Antioch in Syria. The Christians in that city sent Paul and Barnabas out on their first mission trip. Another congregation that was generous in Paul's support was the congregation in Philippi. Lydia opened her home to Paul and his associates. The converted jailer of Philippi fed them and took care of their wounds. This support continued whether he was in their midst or not. They knew the joy of being partners in the Gospel. They were one with God through the blood of Christ, and they were united in fellowship with Christ's Church under His gracious hand.

Error has a way of slowly and subtly working its way in a group until those influenced by the error have lost the saving message of the Gospel altogether. God has described error as leaven or yeast and shows how only a little of that yeast permeates the whole batch of dough. **“A little leaven leavens the whole lump”** (Galatians 5:9). False teaching works like leaven. Most churches don't make radical changes in their teaching all at once. Errors come in slowly, one at a time. Often error starts with something so insignificant that it is barely noticeable and certainly not something that seems dangerous. Satan is very clever, and he can even make these subtle changes seem good. But the leaven keeps working until over the years we now have “Lutheran” churches that don't believe in the creation account or the infallibility of Scripture. Yes, there are “Lutherans” who do not even believe in the bodily resurrection of Christ. They have lost the very heart of the Gospel itself.

III. Christian Fellowship Today

Faith in Jesus Christ, implanted in our hearts as a free gift by the Holy Spirit working through the Gospel, is the blessed “tie that binds our hearts in Christian love” (*The Lutheran Hymnal*, #464). Through the Gospel the Holy Spirit gathers us into a tightly knit spiritual family (also known as the Holy Christian Church) with God as our dear Father and Jesus Christ as our beloved Brother. This is a family whose fears, hopes, aims, comforts, and cares are the same. This is a family that shares its mutual woes and bears its mutual burdens. This is a family whose unity cannot be disturbed even when its members are separated by many miles. Not even death itself is able to destroy the unity of the family of God because on the Last Day He will summon them from the grave and take them to heaven. There they will enjoy an eternity of happiness together with God and all His sons and daughters.

The Need for Christian Fellowship Today

Many of the early Christians lived in evil times. Persecutions were severe. The temptation to abandon the Christian religion and to give up **“contending earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints”** (Jude 3) was strong. If those early believers were to continue as a united family in Christ they needed their faith in Christ bolstered regularly. The Savior strengthened their faith through their gathering together in worship and prayer, their celebration of the Lord's Supper and their study of the Scriptures. They also recognized the importance of keeping in touch with their distant brethren through letters since “face-to-face fellowship” with them was impossible.

What about today? Is it still necessary for believers in Jesus to **“contend earnestly for the faith”**? Is it important for twenty-first century disciples of the Lord to utilize the opportunities given them for Christian fellowship, for worship and prayer, celebration of the Lord's Supper, and Scripture study? The obvious answer is “yes.” For we also are faced with temptations to give up contending for the faith even as early believers were. We still live in a world that persecutes Christians with the hoped-for end of breaking them of their religious convictions. True, we are not confronted with the same kinds of persecution with which the first century believers were confronted, at least not in our country. We don't have to be afraid of being thrown into an arena with ferocious lions. There are no laws as yet which give others the right to arrest us and throw us in jail on account of what we believe. We may not have to endure the kind of physical and mental torture which Paul and countless other Christians of his day had to endure. In our country we are still blessed with religious freedom. The Constitution of the United States guarantees us the right to believe and worship as we choose.

And yet there is persecution in a more subtle form. Consider the television programs and videos which promote attitudes and behavior that stand in direct opposition to the Word of God. The message is being sent to the public: “The moral standard of the Ten Commandments is obsolete! There are no absolutes when it comes to right and wrong! If you believe otherwise, you are a bigot!”

Then too there are the evolutionists who keep bombarding us in newspaper articles, books, magazines, and in public education with their belief (they call it scientific fact) that the world came into existence as a result of the Big Bang and other evolutionary theories and that humans are the descendants of apes. What are they saying to Christians except that Christian belief in an all-powerful Creator God is ridiculous and that the teaching of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ is nonsense?

Then there are those in the churches who contend that it is no longer possible to assume the inerrancy of the Scriptures. These so-called higher critics contend that those who still hold to the inerrancy of Scripture are stupid and naïve people.

Certainly it is clear that the need and importance for believers to assemble around Word and Sacrament for mutual encouragement in the faith is as important today as it was many years ago. If anything, it is even more important in these last evil times. It is through His Word and Sacrament that God supplies His children with the spiritual stamina they need to withstand the assaults which the devil and the unbelieving world are making on their faith. This is how He gives us power and ability to **“hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering”** (Hebrews 10:23) and to continue as a tightly knit spiritual family in Him.

God Blesses Us through Local Congregations

Surely then a local congregation is a tremendous blessing and boon to God's Christians. Here is an “oasis” to which they may return again and again to quench their spiritual thirst as they travel through the barren desert of this world with all its pressures and problems and temptations. Here the Bread of life is offered to them every Sunday for the nourishing of the soul. Regular times are scheduled for the celebration of the Lord's Supper. Together with the earthly elements of bread and wine the Lord Jesus gives them His true body and blood for the forgiveness of sins, the strengthening of their Christian life, and the confirmation of their hope of eternal glory. Other opportunities for fellowship and growth in the faith are also offered in the local congregation: Bible classes, ladies' meetings, church choir, and other church functions such as joining together in some outreach project. Parents are blessed with the opportunity to enroll their children in Sunday School, confirmation class, and perhaps even a Christian Day School as a supplement to the Christian training they provide their children in the home.

Would anyone like to venture a guess as to how much the above-mentioned blessings are worth? It can't be done! All the money in the world cannot compare in value to the spiritual blessings showered on us by the Lord through His Word and Sacraments. As believers in the Lord Jesus we agree heartily with the psalmist who wrote: **“The law of Your mouth is better to me than thousands of shekels of gold and silver. ... Through Your precepts I get understanding; therefore I hate every false way. Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path”** (Psalm 119: 72, 104-105).

God Blesses Us through a True-Teaching Church Body

Just as God blesses Christians through the local Christian congregation, so He blesses Christians through membership in an orthodox (true-teaching) synod. Just as the Lord uses membership in a local congregation to help strengthen the individual Christian in his faith and in his commitment to the cause of Christ, even so He uses membership in a synod to help strengthen groups of Christians in their faith and in their commitment to the cause of Christ.

In our synod, the Church of the Lutheran Confession (CLC), God has given us various opportunities for fellowship: joint Reformation services, special Mission Festival services, gatherings of ladies, conferences and conventions for pastors, teachers, and delegates, pastoral study clubs, special events on the campus of Immanuel Lutheran College, retreats for adult seniors and Christian singles, and summer youth camps.

Not every Christian is able to participate personally in all the above-named activities. Nevertheless, we all may find encouragement and joy in the knowledge that we have a host of spiritual brethren who are united with us in a confessional family and who have the same goals and objectives for our lives as we do. We also find it uplifting to remember that our Christian brethren continue to hold us close in their thoughts and prayers, even if we are separated from them by many miles.

No doubt the greatest blessing of all is the opportunity to join with like-minded Christians in other congregations in mission work and educational work. Together our God-given gifts for missions make it possible for missionaries to proclaim and spread the good news of the Gospel in cities and lands where we ourselves cannot go. There are various mission congregations in our country that are supported by our offerings, as well as mission ventures in other countries near and far. Together our gifts to our church body under God's blessing have enabled us to establish, support, and maintain a high school, college, and seminary in Eau Claire, Wisconsin, where we have the opportunity to send our young people for Christian

training. Here is where men are trained for the preaching ministry and men and women are trained for the teaching ministry. Most of our present pastors and teachers have been trained in our own school, which God has blessed with faithful Bible teaching.

A Closing Word

What great benefits our God has given us through our local congregations and our church body! "Blest be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love; the fellowship of kindred minds is like to that above." But what can we do to help preserve this unity which the Lord has created among us? How may we reinforce "the tie that binds" so that it will become increasingly stronger and never come loose?

First of all, whatever our situation in life may be, we all can lift up holy hands in prayer for one another. We can petition the Lord to keep our local congregations and our synod under the umbrella of His grace and mercy, to always bless all our fellow-members with a joyous faith in the Savior who lived, died, and rose again for us. We can ask the Holy Spirit to use the Gospel to motivate and energize our members to eager and active participation in the work of His kingdom, whether on the congregational level or the synodical level. By this, we first seek God's help and His workings among us.

Then, on our part, we would be willing to encourage one another to make use of both congregational and synodical activities and personally participate in joint services, conferences, conventions, and mission projects. Such participation will serve for our own spiritual benefit and for the health and welfare of both congregation and synod.

For this is why we are here. We have been called to be witnesses for Christ. We have been duly commissioned by God to spread the Good News of forgiveness and salvation so that His name may be glorified among men. The apostle Peter wrote: "**You are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light**" (1 Peter 2:9).

For this purpose God has blessed us with congregations. For this purpose God has blessed us with a church body. May we by God's grace continue to be a close-knit confessional family in the Lord, so that we may with a bold and confident faith in Him carry on the all-important work He has given us of preaching the Gospel to every creature.

O Lord, let this Thy little flock, Thy name alone confessing,
Continue in Thy loving care, True unity possessing.
Thy Sacraments, O Lord, And Thy saving Word
To us e'er pure retain. Grant that they may remain
Our only strength and comfort.

Help us to serve Thee evermore With hearts both pure and lowly;
And may Thy Word, that light divine, Shine on in splendor holy
That we repentance show, in faith ever grow;
The pow'r of sin destroy And all that doth annoy.
Oh, make us faithful Christians. (*The Lutheran Hymnal, #477: 2,3*)

Not every Christian has the necessary gifts to be a preacher or a missionary like Paul. But each of us is a partner in the cause of the Gospel. Paul compares the Church to a human body with its various members, each contributing to the work of the whole body. Abilities may differ and interests may vary; yet all work together and contribute toward the common goal. Everyone has something to offer. Each individual has gifts and talents that can be used for the mutual edification of the whole. A blessed

reciprocity occurs so that a pastor, for example, might leave the bedside of the sick, thoroughly refreshed in his own faith by the testimony of the person he has come to comfort.

There are surely many benefits which we reap in being in Christian fellowship with one another. Being a small minority in a world where God's Word is scorned and Christian faith is buffeted, we can look to one another as a source of strength and support. When we are suffering under any affliction of this life, we can count on our brethren to comfort us and give us reassurance. When we are in need, we can look to our brethren for help. And when our hearts are filled with joy concerning blessings which God has given us, we can share that joy with others, who will join us in thanking and praising God.

Today we also are partners in the Gospel. We are brothers and sisters of those who live many miles away in our sister congregations. We work together with God's Word. We work together to convince, rebuke, comfort, and counsel as full partners. We support the work together. We are saddened together when there are setbacks, and we rejoice together when there are successes. We do not want to be half partners or silent partners, do we? We do not want to stand on the side by ourselves when there is so much work to do and so many prayers that need to be prayed, do we?

While it is the Spirit who unites, it is the devil who divides. The devil is always striving to drive a wedge in to separate us from one another and from the Lord. He sows the seed of error and discord. He is the reason why visible Christendom is divided. His techniques may vary, but are always dangerous. He may rant and rave, howl and cajole, whisper and entice you to defect from the fellowship. He may try to tell you you can be an inactive partner. But those are dangerous thoughts.. Jesus assures us that those who confess Christ will be confessed by Him before the Father in heaven. It is only by clinging to the Word, listening to it, meditating on it, and even wrestling with it at times, that we can maintain our faith and fellowship with God and His saints. In that faith we are able to repel and blunt the devil's vicious attacks and attain the victory.

IV. The Separation Principle: An Exercise of Love

Rightly or wrongly, our church body has often been associated with the so-called separation principle, enunciated most succinctly in the apostle's instruction in Romans 16: 17-18: **“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 by good words and fair speeches deceive the hearts of the simple”** (*King James Version*). For a better understanding of some of these words, we print here also the *New International Version* of the same two verses: **“I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them. For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naïve people.”**

Because controversy concerning this passage was involved in the formation of our church body, it is

natural that much attention was given to these words in the early history of the Church of the Lutheran Confession. Some of those who opposed our position suggested that we should be following the love principle instead of the separation principle, as though the separation principle were devoid of love. This same objection to our position is raised even to this day.

But the question may be asked: How can we show love to others by avoiding them just because their teaching is different from our own? Is it not unloving to tell others that they are promoting or supporting false teaching even though they are still maintaining some of the core Christian teachings? Religious separation is very unpopular in our day, since it is just the opposite of the religious unionism (outward union without unity in confession) which is being pushed by most churches. Obeying God in this matter can lead us into some very awkward and trying situations, and our flesh shies away from such difficulties. How difficult it can be to tell friends or relatives whom we are visiting that we cannot join them in their worship or prayer because we do not share the same Scriptural confession! So others ask (and we are tempted to join them): How can it be love to refuse to join with other Christians in their worship or prayers or church work? Doesn't love demand that we take part in such religious activities with them, lest we hurt their feelings or disturb their consciences! But still God's Word is very clear. The word "**avoid**" clearly forbids any and all religious fellowship, whether public or private, with those who are promoting or supporting false doctrine.

We do not deny that it will sometimes be difficult to apply this separation principle, because of the flesh that we all carry with us. But there is something in God's warning to avoid false religion that can help us to follow God's will, and that is this: **THE SEPARATION PRINCIPLE IS AN EXERCISE OF LOVE.** We should not expect any warning from God to be devoid of love.

First of all, we find in Romans 16: 17-18 **God's love for us.** God would not have to give us a reason for asking us to avoid those who support religious error. He could simply tell us to avoid, for He is God! But God in His wisdom chose to give us a reason. In verse 18 He points out that false teachers are dangerous. Through the "**good words and fair speeches**" with which they have clothed their errors, they are able to deceive Christians in their simple, child-like faith! God is therefore speaking to us in His love when He asks us to avoid. He wants to keep our souls safe from the deadly leaven and gangrene of religious error. When we hear the word "**avoid**," we should recognize the voice of the Good Shepherd, as He carries out for us His promise: "**I give them (My sheep) eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand**" (John 10:28).

Our response to the Lord's instructions in Romans 16: 17-18 is also motivated by love, **our love toward God.** This love, of course, is but a faint reflection of His love to us, for He so loved us that He gave His dearest Treasure, Jesus Christ, into death for our salvation. But if we have appreciated this love of God for us, we will also love Him in return. For Scripture says: "**We love Him, because He first loved us**" (1 John 4:19). And how will this love express itself? The Bible tells us: "**This is the love of (toward) God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome**" (1 John 5:3). As surely as the Gospel has created faith and love in our hearts, we will want to heed the will of our heavenly Father, even when He in His love asks us to do something that is difficult for our flesh, like avoiding. How can this commandment to separate ourselves from religious errorists really be "**burdensome**" when God's purposes for us are so full of His own love.

Are we not to fear, love, and trust in God above all things (Luther's *Small Catechism*: First Commandment)? Think of God's command to Abraham: Sacrifice your only son whom you love, that son in whom the promises of the Savior are centered. It was indeed hard for him to do this, but we are told that he got up early the very next morning and proceeded to carry out God's will. The love of Abraham

toward God was deeper even than his love toward his own flesh and blood. And this was right and proper, for the Lord tells us: **“He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me”** (Matthew 10:37). Will not our love for God prompt us also to be ready and willing to heed His will, even when He asks us to **“avoid”** religious fellowship with those who may be near and dear to us?

In fact, as strange as it may sound, following God's will to avoid those that promote false teaching is also an example of **love toward our neighbor**, a necessary fruit of our faith in Christ. How so? Are we indeed showing love for others when we tell them that we cannot join them in religious fellowship because of the errors which separate us? Yes, we are showing love for them, because those errors are dangerous for their salvation. Scripture admonishes us to **“speak the truth in love”** (Ephesians 4:15). We owe such people the truth, because we owe them love!

Think of how Christ spoke the truth to His disciple Peter in love, when Peter strongly urged Christ not to go to Jerusalem to suffer and die. No doubt Peter's intentions were honorable. He wished to spare Christ from such a horrible ordeal. And yet Peter's suggestion brought forth from Christ the stinging rebuke: **“Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offense to Me: for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men”** (Matthew 16:23). It was Christ's love for Peter that called forth these words. Peter was entrapped in a religious error, and Christ wanted nothing more than to free him from his wrong and dangerous beliefs.

When a Christian, in a loving way, suggests to a friend or relative that he cannot join him in prayer or worship because the two of them do not share the same Scriptural confession, a good result may follow. Because of his flesh that neighbor may first resent such words, but he will surely remember them and ponder them. And if he is in time led to investigate the teachings of his erring church body in the light of Scripture, the Holy Spirit may thereby lead him away from its errors into a church body that is faithful to the Word. This blessed result has happened on more than one occasion. Let it be recognized, then, that when we refuse to participate in prayer or worship or church work with those who deviate from God's Word, this is indeed an act of love to them. For by such God-directed avoiding on our part, they may be moved to see the seriousness of the errors with which they are associated!.

Let us then understand that **God's separation principle is an exercise of love**. God warns us against false teaching because He loves us. We willingly do what He tells us because we love Him in return. And because we love our neighbors, we avoid their falsely teaching church bodies in the hope that they will realize the dangers that these errors pose for them. Romans 16: 17-18 is not devoid of love; it is full of love: God's love for us; our love for God; and our concerned love for those who are involved in religious error. May our heavenly Father's love motivate us to a willing obedience to this important word of our gracious and wise God!

The separation principle enunciated in Scripture can rightly be called “the immune system of the church.” When a doctor perceives the presence of one disease after another in his patient, he is likely to think about an immunodeficiency syndrome. We have learned that, with a dysfunctional immune system, the slightest virus or infection can eventually kill you. So also when a church body swallows one false doctrine after another, one must wonder: “Is their immune system working? Are they practicing the separation principle according to Scripture? Are they identifying error and avoiding it?” If not, the results are fully predictable.

The same love that God manifested in sacrificing His own Son to save us also protects us from all danger, especially the dangers to our soul. God knows that one great danger to our soul is the infiltration of false teachings. So He warns us very urgently to avoid all false teachers who teach anything contrary to His Word. For He knows that every error, no matter how slight it may seem, is Satan's attempt to lead us away from God, to break our fellowship with God and bring us back to his (the devil's) rule.

V. Mission Work and Confessional Integrity

What is mission work? A false notion among many of what constitutes mission work has led to all manner of ill in the church. A faulty understanding of mission work tends to diminish confessional integrity.

Mission work is the proclamation (the planting) of the Word of God, in specific terms the Gospel. The great commission is, **“Go therefore, and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you”** (Matthew 28:19-20). That command of our Lord is consistent with what He said in Mark 13:10: **“And the gospel must first be preached to all the nations.”** In Matthew 24:14 our Lord said: **“And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations.”** The Son of Man Who did not come into the world to condemn the world but to save it said: **“repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations”** (Luke 24:47).

Mission work is teaching all things that God has given us in His Word. It includes preaching the Law to uncover sin and make the sinner guilty before God. Yet it is the Gospel – the message of Christ’s love manifest at the cross and sealed by the resurrection – through which the Spirit creates believers. It is the Gospel which makes wise unto salvation (2 Timothy 3:15) and which is the power of God unto salvation (Romans 1:16). The Gospel imparts certain hope and consolation to the troubled heart. Martin Luther said: “Throughout the Gospel, Christ does no more than draw us out of ourselves and into Himself; He spreads His wings and invites us to take shelter under Him” (*What Luther Says*, Vol. II, para. 1703, page 561). This is the message we want to share with others.

To what end? The purpose is not to fill church pews, though obviously we pray that those who are won by the Gospel will be led to identify with our church, join us in worshiping the Lord and in our witness to the world. God’s kingdom -- His gracious rule to save -- embraces all in whose heart He dwells by faith. God’s kingdom is spiritual and bears no denominational name. We are called to plant the seed that the Spirit of God may bring even people whom we may never meet on earth again to know the confident joy of salvation now and on the great day of our Lord’s return. Our responsibility is to preach the Word faithfully whereupon the Spirit gives the increase (Acts 2:47). The correct mission attitude is that of Paul who said: **“Christ is preached, and in this I rejoice, yes, and will rejoice”** (Philippians 1:18). The confessional Lutheran Church has always been interested in mission work. The church as a body of believers in Christ engages in mission work through the mutual efforts of the constituent congregations that pool resources and efforts to proclaim the gospel **“among the nations.”** Such mission work in concert with others of our fellowship is one of the most wonderful and enjoyable exercises of the fellowship we enjoy with one another in Christ.

While the church engages in “corporate” mission work as members work together in calling missionaries, and pastors, and teachers, the individual Christian is not excused from giving answer of the hope that is in him. Individual mission work occurs when a Christ-believer shares the gospel at work and play as the opportunity presents itself.

We dare never lose sight of the fact that a truly mission-minded church is one that remains a confessional

church. A confessional church is one that believes doctrine is important, and that the apostolic doctrine, including the doctrine of fellowship, dare never be sacrificed for any reason. It dare not deviate from the Scriptures, the divinely inspired Word of God. It dare never forget that **“teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you”** is part of the commission our Lord gave to the church. In the practical aspect of mission work we will start with milk, not meat (1 Corinthians 3:2). Nevertheless, we are to dispense the pure milk of the Word, not milk watered down to make it palatable.

Many formerly confessional Lutheran churches have lost their confessional integrity, in part, through mission efforts that lost sight – however unintentionally -- of the fact that mission work is preaching Christ to the salvation of souls rather than reaching out to “grow the church.” If and when statistical goals become an obsession, the temptation is to veil the doctrine, or to dress it down to make certain teachings of Scripture less offensive to the hearers. Depending on the circumstances we will not ordinarily start with the doctrine of fellowship. But as it is a doctrine that the Lord enjoins upon us, we must as a matter of love for our neighbor as well as honesty share the teaching in our witness to those to whom we speak. We will want to explain the doctrine as well as the love that undergirds this teaching of our Lord. Methods and approaches themselves may contribute to the breakdown of confessional integrity and the exercise of Biblical fellowship if the need is felt to adopt the methods and approaches of church and para-church organizations to whom the means of grace – the staple of true mission work -- is of little, if any, consequence. Confessional integrity, in other words faithfulness to Scripture, in teaching and practice is essential to mission work.

We of the Church of the Lutheran Confession have said: “If people are to know and believe in the Savior, they must learn of Him from the one place where Jesus Christ is revealed. Hence our emphasis is on the teaching of the Word of God, the Bible” (*CLC Directory*, page 2). We believe that what a person is taught is as important as that he is taught.

If in the interest of mission work a church plays loosely with confessional integrity and with the doctrine of fellowship, it ultimately will neither serve those it seeks, nor those sheep for whom it is responsible. To avoid that death trap it is essential that the church remember what the divine commission is all about, namely, teaching all that our Lord has commanded us to people sitting in spiritual darkness, so that they may be counted by the Lord among **“those who believe to the saving of the soul”** (Hebrews 10:39). Effective and God-pleasing mission work goes hand in hand with confessional integrity and with teaching the whole counsel of God.

God's command to separate from error also preserves the preaching of the pure Gospel among us. Cooperation with error always leads to a corruption of Gospel teaching. If the Gospel message we speak among ourselves and spread to others is contaminated, we will be distributing spiritual poison to others in addition to whatever truth remains in our message. Most of the churches in our day do not understand this. They are always calling for compromise of the truth with the understanding that if there is external peace with errorists, more souls will be reached with the Gospel. But compromising the truth is a hindrance to the preaching of the Gospel, never an aid. When error is left unchecked, it gradually spreads until the Gospel itself is lost entirely. And then who will be saved by our preaching?

We will want to encourage people not to be afraid to interact with people of other faiths or to witness to people of other faiths, lest they think that somehow they may be violating the separation (fellowship) principle. On the contrary, God urges us to be bold confessors of our faith, for our principal calling as children of God is to share the Gospel. The mere association with others and the practice of confessing

our faith to others does not of necessity involve the exercise of fellowship.

The Board of Doctrine of the Church of the Lutheran Confession is publishing this collection of essays on Christian fellowship in the conviction that our own members as well as many others will benefit from considering the wonderful blessings of Christian fellowship in a world that has very little understanding of these blessings and the fervent desire of our Savior-God to have all persons everywhere enjoy these blessings. We thank the following for allowing us to make use of their words: James Albrecht,, Daniel Fleischer, Mark Gullerud, John Klatt, David Koenig, Clifford Kuehne, Paul D. Nolting, John Pfeiffer, David Reim, and Thomas Schuetze.

Editors: Daniel Fleischer, David Lau, David Schierenbeck