

THE UNIT CONCEPT OF FELLOWSHIP

We in the CLC and our sister churches hold to what has been called the 'unit concept' of fellowship. This is simply the teaching of Scripture that to have religious fellowship we must agree on God's Word and not just on a part of it. And the exercise of fellowship includes all phases of it just as unity in the Word assumes agreement on all the Word.

In the USA when the conservative Lutherans of the Synodical Conference were together this was understood that full agreement on the Word was the basis for fellowship. The WELS held to what was called the 'unit concept' of fellowship. We come mainly from that background. The LC-MS began to teach that there could be different 'levels of fellowship' or that in some situations you could have fellowship, while in others you could not. So for instance a sister church of the LC-MS might be in fellowship with others with which the LC-MS itself is not. This 'levels of fellowship' is simply a mishmash of humanly devised teachings.

The Heart of the Matter

We start our consideration at the heart of the matter, the basis for our faith and life – the Word of God. When Paul said farewell to the Ephesian elders he stated, "...I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God." Acts 20:27 Later in defending himself before Felix, Paul states, "...according to the Way...I worship the God of our fathers, believing everything laid down by the law or written in the prophets." Acts 24:14 This holding to all the Word is our position also. What we believe is what we teach, and what we teach is what we believe. We do not go to the Bible as if it is a buffet meal from which we may pick what we choose and leave the rest. In both of the cited references we see that it is an all or nothing proposition. We believe all the Word and we do not hesitate to teach all the Word. How wickedly bold we would be to pick and choose, when all Scripture is breathed by God and profitable for teaching and so much more. Exercizing our religious fellowship is based on this unity on the Word. A house is not built on half of a foundation with the other part just hanging there. The suspended part would collapse sooner or later. The unity in the Word Paul wrote of repeatedly to congregations – 1 Cor. 1:10, Phil. 1:27,2:2, Rom. 15:5-6.

- I appeal to you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree and that there be no dissensions among you, that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment.
- Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you stand firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel.
- Complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.
- May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The CLC has stated clearly in its doctrinal statement "Concerning Church Fellowship":

"We believe, teach and confess that complete doctrinal agreement is the Scriptural basis for church fellowship. (1 Cor. 1:10)

CLC Practice In Establishing Fellowship

We have practiced the following as we have openly stated:(from B.A.S.I.C Newsletter #178)

Fellowship

For a fellowship relationship to develop as we have seen in the past with our present

sister churches several things must exist:

1. *The inquiring group should have no fellowship with other church bodies or be willing to break such based on non-agreement and the teaching of false doctrine in such a body,*
2. *The group must agree with us on what we believe and teach as drawn from Scripture, as every Lutheran teaching must be a Bible teaching and every Bible teaching must be a Lutheran teaching,*
3. *If and/or when there is correction in error advanced by us to them, they must be willing to bow to the Word and will of God as we will also when corrected,*
4. *They must show a willingness to continue in the Word, and that we study and learn together (we cannot possibly cover all teachings in several days of discussion or even in numerous letters), (This whole idea of learning together is implicit in our brother to brother relationship with both learning.)*
5. *There must be an integrity demonstrated in so far as we can see up to the point of our meetings, realizing that this is something that we watch for throughout our relationship and not just at the outset. We know there are many who see the USA as a cash cow. Some will try to deceive to receive. We hold to the moral and ethical code of Scripture and fully expect our brothers to also.*

The idea of complete agreement on the Word is carried out further as follows:

1. Correspondence – We correspond with our contacts to establish if there is agreement or to establish it.
2. Literature – We send over ever larger amounts of Scripture literature, while not in doctrinal fellowship, though the indications are present that it will likely be.
3. Initial Visit – Face to face discussions are so important in a developing relationship. If this visit turns out favorable then we proceed.
4. Full Doctrinal Meeting – It is wise that everything be confirmed by the mouths of two or three witnesses. We go over what teachings there may be disagreement on as well as much more.
5. Serving, Training, Discipling – After doctrinal agreement is reached, we seek to assist in the training of pastors and leaders. We all grow together as we study. It is like the body in that as the body grows together so we in our fellowship, each of us grow in faith and understanding.

Draw Near, Stay Clear

Fellowship means to draw near to Christ (1 Cor. 10:16) and to stay clear of error and those who practice it (2 Cor. 6:14-18). Scripture never says a little error can be tolerated. Far from it we have the illustration to warn of the danger of a little in leaven in a lump of dough that goes throughout the whole lump though the leaven is a little thing. Gal. 5:9 The warnings are clear and serious about false teaching and false teachers. Mt. 7:15, 24:11,24

- In the reference we already read in Acts 20 on the “whole counsel of God” Paul also said, “I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be alert...” 20:29-31
- This can't help but remind us of our Lord's reference to “Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.” Mt. 7:15 The concern is not about attacking the person of the false prophet, but to point out what false teaching does. It tears and rends unity. It destroys what should be a joy to have, “Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!” Ps. 133:1

- Our Lord warns us, “And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray... For false Christs and false prophets will arise and show great sign and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect.” Mt. 24:11,24 These words Jesus spoke in Jerusalem during His last week on earth out of love for those who would be tossed to and fro with different winds of doctrine. Our Lord knew.

If Even One Teaching Is Disagreed On, There Can't Be Fellowship

Complete agreement is called for to work together as a group of Christians. Back at the beginning of the Lutheran church at the Reformation, this had to be looked at. Luther was the leader of the Reformation in Germany, while Zwingli was the leader of the Reformation in Switzerland. There was a meeting between these two men and other leaders during which they discussed their teachings. They found that there was agreement on everything except on communion. The Zwinglians said that Christ's body and blood could not be present in the Lord's Supper, but were 'represented' by the bread and the wine. The Lutherans maintained that all four elements were present when we partake. The body and blood of Christ is mysteriously present in, under and with the bread and wine. This occurs in a way that is beyond our human reasoning. We must accept it by faith. Because there was not complete agreement (remember that the disagreement was only on one teaching), there could not be fellowship. Luther said that they could not extend the hand of fellowship. They would extend the hand of love though. As we today practice the 'unit concept' we do not want to neglect the hand of love, while not being able to extend the hand of fellowship. Our God is the God of love

He governs according to His will. We follow His Word trusting that He knows what He is doing. Think of the example of the church at Thyatira in Rev. 2. God says that He has this against the church, "...that you tolerate the woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and beguiling My servants to practice immorality..."2:20 God in His wisdom, "...gave her time to repent, but she refuses to repent..."2:21 For us we are not to tolerate and we leave it in God's hands as to judgment on such.

The Most Important

The most important fellowship relationship we have is with our God. We were called into the fellowship of His Son. 1 Cor. 1:9 We must be true to Him and His revealed Word and will. He has bought us with the precious price of His own sacrifice that we should be His own and live under Him until He takes us to what He has prepared for us in heaven.

Then secondly, our fellowship is with one another. 1 Jn. 1:3 We devote ourselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship. Acts. 2:42 How could we be loyal to our Lord if we allowed some teaching contrary to what He taught through the Word? This is not just human reasoning, as it comes from God's Word. Rom. 16:17-18 Error or false teaching is what comes from man's mind in opposition to what God says. "Thus says the Lord of hosts: 'Do not listen to the words of the prophets who prophesy to you, filling you with vain hopes; they speak visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the Lord...'"Jer. 23:16-17 We measure what is taught by the Word as the standard. If what others teach is in conformity with the Word we seek fellowship, but if not we remain separate. 2 Pet. 2:1, 1 Jn. 4:1 The false teachings are destructive to the faith and spiritual life of Christians. So for the sake of protecting believers we remain separate from those who teach contrary to what we have learned from the Word. God's Spirit pleads with us through the Word to agree with one another, to treasure that unity that He alone can give. If you value something, you want to protect and preserve it. If it is a joy to behold, you would want to continue to behold it. And so we are, "eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." Eph. 4:3

Applications, Applications, Applications

The Word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. Naturally then in this as in all things the life applications are there for us to see. We live our faith in this area as in all things.

In searching the Word on this whole question we see the applications of the 'unit concept'.

- Preaching – We cannot invite a pastor from a different church to preach to our people as he does not agree with us on the Word. We believe in infant baptism. A Baptist pastor would preach against that. Furthermore we do not preach in other churches with which we are not in fellowship. If

we were to do that, it would appear as if the differences between us are not important. But God's Word is everything to us. Remember if even one teaching...Luther and Zwingli. This does not mean though that we cannot go to groups even in churches and explain what we believe. We just do not do this upon the basis of agreement, but to see if there is agreement or to foster agreement. This is of course of a shorter duration as it will be seen if there is a willingness to walk together in Him.

- Teaching – There is a great variety of teaching situations within the church. Only those can teach for us who hold to all the Word. Those who teach in Sunday school or Vacation Bible School or in any other situation have to be agreed with us. We cannot allow the children to be taught wrong or possibly wrong. We speak to any and all about our Lord. “Always be prepared to make a defense to any one who calls you to account for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and reverence.” 1 Pet. 3:15 It is one thing to talk with someone, but quite another to speak to a group as a representative of the church.
- Communion – When we stand together to receive the Body and Blood of the Lord in/under/with the bread and wine, it is a visible sign of our unity. We cannot honestly give communion to another unless there is the agreement. There are serious warnings about not doing this properly. 1 Cor. 10:14-20, 11:27-30 We serve the God who is love. We could not give communion to someone to their harm for that is not loving. The Lord's Supper is to build up and not to tear down. The very word for communion is also translated 'fellowship'. How appropriate that to be agreed on God's Word means to stand together and partake of one bread and one cup.
- Worship Leaders – Anyone may come and hear the Word in our worship services, though to conduct our worship means to be one with us. The safeguard that only the truth will be preached is that there is agreement on the truth. For those who lead us in prayer in the worship they should be agreed. It is different if there is a prayer meeting with a group who are each praying.
- Prayer – We may pray for anyone and everyone of course. If invited by someone into their house to pray for them, we gladly go and speak to God. But for someone to lead us in prayer and to pray as if he is the leader and not be agreed is not right.
- Support of the Work – We do not give our support to the preaching of false teachings even if this is accompanied by part of the truth. While we can give a Bible and Christian literature to anyone, we do not give support to other churches other than those we are united with. This does not mean though that we do not extend the hand of love to anyone to assist them as we are able.
- If the Word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path, we will apply it as we live our lives in Christ. We can associate with people in many ways as in social activities, political events, daily work and so on. In religious associations we have God's Word to direct us very specifically. In business activities there are different goals, just as there are different goals in political parties. We can be joined in those kinds of associations because the goals are different and not forbidden in the Word. We might join with others to protect our political rights. We might join with others in some assistance in a disaster. We are to go as far as God's Word goes in following what it says. There are then areas of freedom that God gives us in which to use our common sense and to employ the love He has shown us that we show to others. This is in our

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daily life's walk.

He Owns Us, Bought with a Price

We want to glorify God in all that we do. 1 Cor. 6:20 He knows what is best for us, after all He is God.

If we have clean water to drink, it is healthy for us. Add a little dirt to it and it is no longer clean and healthy for us. So it is with error. God has given us the water of life and His Word that is like a flowing river of health giving water to be consumed for our good.

Some think in their minds 'oh what is so bad about a little error?' Think about poison. You could receive it in small portions that might not kill you right away, though it's long term effect is deadly. Who of us would feed our children little bits of poison and say, “It is in such small amounts it will

not hurt you.” There is a cumulative effect.

We know how cancer starts in the body. It is very tiny, but it grows. Eventually, unless the cancer is removed one dies. So error can cause spiritual death unless it is removed.

Error is like the camel who first puts his nose in the tent. The camel driver thinks, that is not so bad, it is only his head. Then the camel sticks his neck in. Still the camel driver does not think it so bad. Then the camel sticks his forefeet in. The camel driver thinks there is still room. If tolerated, the camel will eventually be in the tent wholly and the camel driver out. That is the way error works, first its nose then more to come. Some people think they will not be effected by error, if they do not hold to it, but belong to a church that does allow it. We have a saying that if you lie down with dogs, you can get up with fleas.

Prov. 6:27 “Can a man carry fire in his bosom and his clothes not be burned?” False teaching affects us.

What a joy to seek to follow the whole counsel of God. We do not waste time arguing with one another over what the Bible says, due to disagreements. There is no contradicting of each other among us, for we are of one mind and one spirit. We believe it all and we teach it all. We put our time and effort into preaching, teaching and spreading the wonderful news of God in the context of the Word. God be praised that He has worked this among us!

Appendix – Excerpt from “Concerning Church Fellowship”

The CLC has not hesitated to put down in writing its teachings. This is common with the Lutheran Church as the Book of Concord shows. If we believe, then we state what we believe. In fellowship and separation it is no different than in any other teachings which we draw from the Word. The Word is clear and so should we be.

STATEMENT OF TRUE DOCTRINE

1. We believe, teach, and confess that complete doctrinal agreement is the Scriptural basis for church fellowship. “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” (1 Cor. 1:10). (§ 4-

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2. We further believe that the doctrine which the Church should teach and hold is restricted to the doctrine of the Bible. “If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God” (1 Pet. 4:11). (§ 8-9)

3. We further believe that the Word of God (the Old and New Testaments) is inerrant, inviolable, and clear. “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:16); “. . . the Scripture cannot be broken (John 10:35); “Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path” (Ps. 119:105). (§ 10-13)

4. We believe that all aberrations from the doctrines of Scripture are condemned by God. “Behold, I am against the prophets, saith the Lord, that use their tongues, and say, He saith” (Jer. 23:31), and “If any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed” (Gal. 1:9). (§14-15)

5. We believe and teach that church fellowship is forbidden with all who deviate from the Word of

God in their teachings. “Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them” (Rom. 16:17). (§ 16-41)

6. We further believe that all manifestations of fellowship are forbidden with those who deviate from the Word of God in their teachings (Rom. 16:17b). (§ 42-45)

7. We further believe and teach that suspension of an established fellowship is to take place when it has been ascertained that a person or group is causing divisions and offenses through a false position in doctrine or practice (Rom. 16:17-18). (§ 46-48)

REJECTION OF FALSE DOCTRINE

1. We reject and condemn any limitations on the extent of the application of the Scriptural injunctions to separate from false churches and teachers. (§ 49)

a. We reject the teaching that the application is limited to non-Christian bodies. (§ 50)

b. We reject the teaching that the application is limited to those who deny the redemptive work of Christ. (§ 51)

c. We reject the teaching that the application is limited to those who err in fundamental doctrines. (§ 58-60)

d. We further reject the teaching that errorists and their followers are to be avoided only when they no longer listen to admonition, or that we are to remain in fellowship with errorists as long as we think there is hope that they might give up their errors. (§ 61-72)

e. Though the teaching Church is ever an admonishing Church, we reject the opinion that separation from errorists is dependent upon the course of admonition. (§ 73)

2. We also reject and condemn all limitations on the intensiveness of such divinely commanded separation from false churches and teachers.

a. We reject as false the teaching which would forbid only joint worship services with errorists. (§ 75-77)

b. We reject as spurious the distinction which is made between prayer fellowship and joint prayer, namely, that while the former is indeed forbidden with errorists, an occasional joint prayer would not be displeasing to God. (§ 78-80)

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c. We also reject the teaching that fellowship with errorists is permitted if there be no complicity with the error itself, or that the errorist may be fellowshipped but not his error. (§ 82)

d. We also reject the teaching that one may practice outward or external fellowship with errorists, if one does not embrace the error in his heart. (§ 83-84)

e. We also reject the idea of protesting fellowships when they are used as license to practice fellowship with errorists. (§ 85-88)

f. Finally, we reject the plea of “cooperation in externals” when it is used as license for actual joint church work with errorists. (§ 81)