

Concerning....

Church Fellowship



Church of the Lutheran Confession

A Statement of Principle

Concerning Church Fellowship

A Statement of Principle

Revised Edition

Church of the Lutheran Confession

1961, 1996 Re-edited Reprint

CLC Book House, Eau Claire, Wisconsin

FOREWORD

In presenting this our statement concerning church fellowship we are aware that even a casual reading will soon reveal that we have been following the pattern of the Formula of Concord, and sometimes employing its very words. This may seem presumptuous to some, as though by such a procedure we meant to place our “confession” on a par with the historic confessions of the Lutheran Church; as though we meant to provide the Book of Concord with a supplement. This is not our intention.

There are other and good reasons, however, for taking the classic Formula as a model. Among the great confessions of the 16th century it is the one which deals with the internal conflicts of Lutheranism. It was eminently successful in bringing order out of a welter of controversy and confusion. By the grace of God it served as an instrument for the restoration of unity on a large scale, far larger than seemed possible when the strife was at its height.

It has been said that the controversies of our day may well be compared with the situation that arose soon after the death of Luther, and that plagued the Church until the issues were settled by the Formula of Concord. What better model, then, could be found for our work?

It is true that the trend of our times is toward union, particularly also among Lutherans, and the great mergers of the current century seem to testify to its effectiveness. There was the Norwegian merger of

1917 (ELC), the formation of the United Lutheran Church in 1918 (ULCA), the American Lutheran Church (ALC) and the American Lutheran Conference in 1930, as well as the recent (1960) organic union of the chief partners in that Conference into one large body (TALC). And larger mergers are being planned. Then there are the wider associations of the National Lutheran Council (NLC) and the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), as well as the official participation of many of these groups in the interdenominational National Council of Churches of Christ, and even the World Council of Churches. All this creates the appearance of progress—until one remembers how many doctrinal issues were left unresolved in these unions (e.g., the doctrine of Election in the Norwegian merger), and how this has practically become the accepted pattern for such movements. Nor has the Synodical Conference been left untouched. Its major body, Missouri,* has been drawn far into the area of these negotiations, and in conjunction with the American Lutheran Church has produced a “Common Confession,” a document which a sister synod, Wisconsin,** has had to call “untruthful” because it claimed to be a settlement of historical doctrinal controversies which were not settled in fact. Yet this document still stands as part of the doctrinal position of a once staunchly orthodox synod, committing also the sister synods as long as they remain in the fellowship. So the leaven is working, and error is acquiring parity status with the truth.

We have not tried to cover the entire field of the doctrines of Scripture, nor do we see any need for attempting this. We have not even touched on all the points that are in controversy today. But in addressing ourselves to certain specific issues which, as we firmly believe, are at the root of most if not all of the evils which are troubling our beloved Lutheran Church in our time, we are appealing to the precedent established by the confessors of 1580, who in their opening paragraphs stated:

Necessity, therefore, requires us to explain these controverted articles according to God’s Word and approved writings, so that every one who has Christian understanding can notice which opinion

concerning the matters in controversy accords with God's Word and the Christian Augsburg Confession, and which does not. And sincere Christians who have the truth at heart may guard and protect themselves against the errors and corruptions that have arisen. (Foreword to Thorough Declaration, Formula of Concord, Concordia Triglotta 849:10)

We harbor no extravagant notions as to the impression which this our little confession will make. Yet we venture to dedicate it to a great and noble purpose, one stated so clearly and masterfully in the closing statement of the Formula, so that we can only repeat:

From this our explanation, friends and enemies, and therefore every one, may clearly infer that we have no intention of yielding aught of the eternal, immutable truth of God for the sake of temporal peace, tranquillity, and unity. 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 errors. 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. (Conc. Trgl. 1095: 95)

That God may graciously use and bless our halting efforts toward this end, that is our earnest and confident prayer.

Since it was adopted by the CLC in 1961, and included as an official part of the constitutional position of that church body, this "statement of principle" has served well to present the CLC's teaching and practice CONCERNING CHURCH FELLOWSHIP to all its readers. It has found its way to Europe, Asia, Africa, and Australia in the more than three decades of its existence. This re-edited reprint is now

presented with the assurance that the doctrinal position of the CLC on church fellowship has not altered from what is herein contained, and with the prayer that God may use our booklet to foster and strengthen belief in His truth.

September 1996

CONCERNING CHURCH FELLOWSHIP

The State of the Controversy

§§ 1 One of the most prominent developments in the church history of the first half of the twentieth century was the “Ecumenical Movement.” Under the influence of this movement, a serious dissension arose among the Lutheran Churches on the question of church fellowship. Using the “it is enough” of the Augsburg Confession,* various groups have developed conflicting teachings as to the extent of agreement necessary for church fellowship. Some maintain that it is enough to agree that Jesus is the Lord. Others contend that this means we are to avoid as heterodox only such as teach falsely concerning the cardinal doctrines of salvation. Still others make a distinction between errorists who err in fundamental doctrines and such as err in non-fundamental doctrines, contending that it is an infringement on Christian liberty to demand unity also in the non-fundamental doctrines. Still others would make the Augsburg Confession the standard of unity to the exclusion of other symbols of the Lutheran Church, particularly the Formula of Concord. In opposition to these varying views as to the extensiveness of agreement necessary for true unity, some have maintained that full agreement on all doctrines revealed in Scripture is necessary for that true unity on which alone the exercise of church fellowship may be based.

§§ 2 Among those groups which have insisted on full doctrinal agreement as a necessary requisite for church fellowship, there has arisen dissension concerning the intensiveness of separation required from those who hold to errors. Some have taught that a limited amount of fellowship and cooperation is to be tolerated with certain false teachers and groups. Others maintain that all joint worship and religious work with such errorists is forbidden. Finally, among those who maintain that all manifestations of fellowship with errorists are forbidden, a dispute has arisen concerning the application of the term heterodox church to communions which had previously adhered to

the true teachings of Scripture, but later departed from them. Some have taught that at least a limited fellowship is to be practiced as long as such erring groups do not blaspheme the Word of God and do not refuse to discuss the issues. Others teach that fellowship with such groups is forbidden when it becomes apparent after careful consideration that the error is actually being taught and defended.

Purpose of This Confession

§§ 3 Now since Satan has sown much confusion in these matters in the Lutheran Churches in the past twenty years or more, it is our purpose to state and declare plainly, purely, and clearly our faith and confession concerning these various issues in thesis and antithesis, i.e., the true doctrine and its opposite, in order that the foundation of divine truth might be manifest in all points under discussion, and that all unlawful, doubtful, suspicious, and condemned doctrines, wherever they may be found or heard, might be exposed so that everyone may be faithfully warned against the errors, which are everywhere spread, and no one be misled in this matter by the reputation of any man. We have clearly declared ourselves to one another in these important matters of our faith, both for those now living and also for our posterity. To explain this controversy, and by God’s grace finally to settle it, we present to the Christian reader this our teaching in conformity with the Word of God. Hallowed be Thy name!

STATEMENT OF TRUE DOCTRINE

A. The Need for Full Agreement

The Scriptural Standard of Unity

§§ 4 We believe that the unity of the Church is real and actual. This is the unity of which Luther speaks in our Small Catechism when he says of the Holy Spirit that “He calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth, and keeps it with

Jesus Christ in the one true faith.” Christians are united because each Christian is entirely a creation of the Spirit. Christians share the same nature from beginning to end. “. . . for there is no difference: For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 3:22-24). All Christians are God’s children on the basis of Christ’s redemption of the world and on the basis of the work of the Spirit who through baptism and the word appropriates this holiness to us: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28). Through faith the Holy Spirit unites us with Jesus Christ, and we become part of His Body and united with every Christian, and Jesus’ prayer is fulfilled: “That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us” (John 17:21). This unity of the Body of Christ, the Church, is expressed by Paul in Romans 12:5, “. . . we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another.” This unity is most beautifully expressed in Ephesians 4:4-6, “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.”

§§ 5 Christians according to the new man are perfectly joined together in the same mind. The Holy Spirit makes them children of God, and He makes them all the same. They are agreed on sin, its nature, its origin, its means, its fruits, etc. They are agreed on grace, its sufficiency, its means, its fruits, etc. There may be different degrees of understanding, differences in the intensity of the experience, yet as far as the essence is concerned all believers are perfectly agreed.

§§ 6 As Christians are perfectly joined together in one mind by the Spirit, it follows that the Spirit moves them all that they all speak the same thing. Though the manner of speaking may vary, yet the truth spoken must be ever one and the same thing. The Church exists for the purpose of glorifying God, and only with speaking the same thing

is this result attained: “That ye may with one mind and with one mouth glorify God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 15:6).

§§ 7 Thus the Church tolerates no divisions. The high standard of Scripture is clear. All members of the Church are to speak the same thing in all matters of faith. This is stated by St. Paul in just so many words in 1 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 the same judgment.”

This Speaking is Restricted to the Scriptures

§§ 8 We further believe and confess that this speaking of the Church is restricted to the Word of God. In so far as we are members of the Church we may speak, confess, and teach only the Word. “If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God; if any man minister, let him do it as of the ability which God giveth, that God in all things may be glorified through Jesus Christ: to whom be praise and dominion for ever and ever. Amen” (1 Pet. 4:11). The Church is to speak the same thing, and that thing is called by Peter “the oracles of God.” In so far as they are human beings, the members of the Church have no wisdom, no truth. Their united message is the revelation sent down from heaven, God’s sayings. So testifies St. Paul in 1 Corinthians 2:12, “Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit which is of God; that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God. Which things also we speak . . .” That St. John considers himself a messenger of wisdom from heaven is brought out in 1 John 1:3, “That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you . . .” Jesus promised these apostles His Spirit, who would insure that they taught His sayings exactly: “. . . he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you” (John 14:26). Thus the commission of the Church is “Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:20).

§§ 9 The Church is at all times to follow the example of the first congregation, which “. . . continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine . . .” (Acts 2:42), and may be able to say with Paul, “. . . I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God” (Acts 20:27). That the Church is absolutely limited to speaking the oracles of God is taught by Moses in Deuteronomy 4:2, “Ye shall not add unto the word which I command you, neither shall ye diminish aught from it, that ye may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you.”

The Scriptures Are Inerrant

§§ 10 That the Holy Scriptures are given by God to the Church for the foundation of faith and are the sole source from which all doctrines proclaimed in the Christian Church must be taken, presupposes also this teaching that the Holy Scriptures are divine revelation.* We accordingly teach that the Holy Scriptures differ from all other books in the world in that they are the Word of God. They are the Word of God because the holy men of God who wrote the Scriptures wrote only that which the Holy Ghost communicated to them by inspiration. “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God [God-breathed], and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:16). And again, “For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost” (2 Pet. 1:21). We teach also that the verbal inspiration of the Scriptures is not a so-called theological deduction, but that it is taught by direct statements of the Scriptures, 2 Tim. 3:16; John 10:35: “. . . and the Scriptures cannot be broken”; Rom. 3:2: “. . . unto them were committed the oracles of God”; 1 Cor. 2:13: “Which things also we speak, not in the words which man’s wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth . . .” “Since the Holy Scriptures are the Word of God, it goes without saying that they contain no errors or contradictions, but that they are in all their parts and words the infallible truth, also in those parts which treat of historical, geographical, and other secular matters (John 10:35).

§§ 11 We reject the doctrine which under the name of science has gained wide popularity in the Church of our day that Holy Scripture is not in all its parts the Word of God, but in part the Word of God and in part the word of man and hence does, or at least might, contain error. We reject this erroneous doctrine as horrible and blasphemous, since it flatly contradicts Christ and His holy apostles, sets up men as judges over the Word of God, and thus overthrows the foundation of the Christian Church and its faith.

The Scriptures Are Inviolable

§§ 12 We further believe that this inerrant Scripture which is the sole authority for all doctrine in the Church is inviolable. And it is this quality in particular which suffers at the hands of all who in these days desire latitude in matters of doctrine. We have already mentioned the passage in Deuteronomy 4:2 warning against any additions or subtractions from Scripture. To this must be added the curse of Revelation 22:18, “. . . if any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book.” The warning is also contained in Proverbs 30:5f., “Every word of God is pure: he is a shield unto them that put their trust in him. Add thou not unto his words, lest he reprove thee, and thou be found a liar.” God will tolerate no tampering with His Word, even in seemingly insignificant details, for even the individual jot and tittle must be respected as a part of the divine record (Matt. 5:18). And again, “. . . the Scripture cannot be broken” (John 10:35). Thus are we to tremble at the Word of God, and we believe that any changes, additions, or subtractions constitute a violation of the majesty and holiness of the eternal God, who in love descended to man with the truth.

The Scriptures Are Clear

§§ 13 Neither, do we believe, is there room for private interpretation of Scripture on the basis of any supposed ambiguity or unclarity in the divine revelation. The perspicuity or clarity of Scripture is beyond dispute. To say that the Bible is unclear is blasphemy, charging the

Author of our salvation with giving fallen man confused directions regarding His way to heaven. But we say and teach with all conviction that Holy Writ is clear and makes all doctrines and precepts laid down in the inspired Word freely accessible to every reader. The Bible makes this claim for itself. Psalm 119:105, 130: “Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path. . . . The entrance of thy words giveth light; it giveth understanding unto the simple.” Psalm 19:8 speaks: “. . . the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes.” Christ promises: “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” (John 8:31-32). Thus doctrines are not based on interpretation of Scripture, but on the Word itself. The Church cannot make the Bible clearer by its interpretations, but can only lead men to the naked words of Scripture, so they will base their faith on these words alone. We believe that the many differences in the teaching of the churches are due only to man who, in his perversity, refuses to take his reason captive under the obedience of Christ (2 Cor. 10:5), desiring to be a master over Holy Scripture (1 Tim. 1:7).

All Aberrations Are Condemned

§§ 14 We also believe, teach, and confess that all aberrations from Holy Scripture are condemned. For what is false may not be mixed with truth. In Jeremiah 23:28 the Lord speaks to the preachers: “. . . he that hath my word, let him speak my word faithfully. What is the chaff to the wheat? saith the LORD.” The Church is commissioned to speak only God’s Word in its purity, “teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you.” Paul admonishes Timothy to “Hold fast the form of sound words, which thou hast heard of me” (2 Tim. 1:13). In his First Epistle to Timothy Paul obligates him to “charge some that they teach no other doctrine” (1 Tim. 1:3). Of those who mix the truth with error, Paul tells the Galatians in the first chapter of that letter: “If any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed” (Gal. 1:9). Jeremiah threatens all such with God’s wrath: “Behold, I

am against the prophets, saith the LORD, that use their tongues, and say, He saith. Behold, I am against them that prophesy false dreams, saith the LORD, and do tell them, and cause my people to err by their lies, and by their lightness; yet I sent them not, nor commanded them: therefore they shall not profit this people at all, saith the LORD” (Jer. 23:31-32). For any person to change any teaching of the Holy, Holy, Holy God is a most grave offense against the majesty of God. When we see men dare to tamper with the Divine Record, not trembling at His Word, we can only shudder at what must inevitably be the consequence. We remember God’s wrath at the changing of His worship perpetrated by Aaron at Mt. Sinai, and say with the Psalmist: “Horror hath taken hold upon me because of the wicked that forsake thy law” (119:53).

§§ 15 It would be a tempting of the Holy God even to make a distinction between small and great aberrations, for in all cases of false teaching there is, as far as man is concerned, a mutilating of the Godhead. Furthermore, the doctrines of the Bible are so closely interrelated that the denial of any one of them is a reflection of the false teacher’s attitude toward all revealed truth. So does Dr. Luther teach: “My dear sir, God’s word is God’s word, which will not permit men to find fault with it. He who makes God a liar and blasphemes Him in one word, or says it is a small thing for Him to be blasphemed and called a liar, he blasphemes the whole God and has little regard for all blasphemy of God” (St. Louis Ed. XX:775).

B. Separation From All Who Deviate

§§ 16 These are stern truths, indeed. But they are truths derived from Scripture and laid down there by God Himself for the sake of protecting and preserving for us that perfect truth which is the sole source of faith, life, and salvation. This then is also the reason why Scripture so emphatically and bluntly demands that Christians separate themselves from all who deviate in their doctrinal position from the truth of God’s Word.

A Summary of Our Belief

§§ 17 For a brief summary of what we believe, teach, and confess in this point, we present the Christian reader first of all with this statement: “Since God ordained that His Word only, without the admixture of human doctrine, be taught and believed in the Christian Church, 1 Pet. 4:11; John 8:31-32; 1 Tim. 6:3-4, all Christians are required by God to discriminate between orthodox and heterodox church-bodies, Matt. 7:15, to have church-fellowship only with orthodox church-bodies, and, in case they have strayed into heterodox church-bodies, to leave them, Rom. 16:17. We repudiate unionism, that is, church-fellowship with the adherents of false doctrine, as disobedience to God’s command, as causing divisions in the Church, Rom. 16:17; 2 John 9, 10, and as involving the constant danger of losing the Word of God entirely, 2 Tim. 2:17-21” (Brief Statement, Art. 28).

Two Kinds of Churches

§§ 18 Now, as already has been established above, and as always has been taught by the fathers, we believe that there are two kinds of visible church bodies, pure and impure, or orthodox and heterodox. We have clearly shown that God requires of us that we establish the teaching of His Word in its truth and purity without admixture of error of any kind. This then is a pure or orthodox church which adheres to the unadulterated doctrine of God’s Word and administers the sacraments according to their divine institution. On the other hand, a church which contrary to the divine ordinance tolerates false doctrine in its midst or deviates from the divine institution in the administration of the sacraments is rightly called an impure or heterodox church. That there would be such church bodies is foretold in Scripture. St. Paul says to the elders of Ephesus, Acts 20:29-30: “For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them.” These men who will speak false doctrine will succeed in gaining a following. “For there must be also heresies among you . .

. “ (1 Cor. 11:19).

§§ 19 Though it is generally held today that there is an advantage in having great variety among churches and that we demand too much when we maintain that all Christians should have the same faith, we firmly believe that it is not a thing well pleasing to God that there are heterodox church bodies. They are not desired by God, but exist by His permission only. And thereby we do not deny that there are dear children of God in heterodox churches. Also in those bodies children are born unto Him as long as in them His Word is still preached. But God does not want them to exist as heterodox church bodies. These churches have inscribed false doctrine on their banner and have established a separatistic body. God permits them to exist not because it is good or pleasing to Him, nor that we have a free choice to belong to any kind of groups, but He says: “For there must be also heresies among you, that they which are approved may be made manifest among you” (1 Cor. 11:19). So also did Dr. Luther write: “When it happens that men become disagreed in doctrine, it has this effect, that it separates them and reveals who the true Christians are, namely, those who have the Word of God in all its purity and excellence” (St. Louis Ed. XVII, 1346:71).

Christians Are to Test All Churches

§§ 20 We further believe that all Christians are required by God to discriminate between false and true churches as well as teachers. We read in 1 John 4:1: “Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world.” And the Lord Jesus exhorts: “Beware of false prophets” (Matt. 7:15). Obedience to God’s command requires then that Christians distinguish between true and false prophets.

. . . and Act Accordingly

§§ 21 We further believe, teach, and confess that Christians are required to have church fellowship only with orthodox church bodies. Having distinguished between heterodox and orthodox bodies, they are to act according to this knowledge. This is what God’s Word

declares in all passages which admonish Christians not to hear false prophets, but to flee from them. These warnings tell the Christian not to listen to the false prophets but rather to stay clear of the danger involved in their teachings—the “good words and fair speeches” by which they “deceive the hearts of the simple” (Rom. 16:18). 2 John 10 bluntly requires: “If there come any unto you and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house, neither bid him God-speed; For he that biddeth him God-speed is partaker of his evil deeds.” In his First Letter to Timothy, chapter 6:3-5, St. Paul says: “If any man teach otherwise, and consent not to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which is according to godliness; he is proud, knowing nothing, but doting about questions and strifes of words, whereof cometh envy, strife, railings, evil surmisings, perverse disputings of men of corrupt minds, and destitute of the truth, supposing that gain is godliness: from such withdraw thyself.”

§§ 22 Nor should 2 Corinthians 6:14-18 be lightly dismissed: “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.”

§§ 23 Though a casual reading of this passage might cause one to think it is speaking of unbelievers and not false churches, we would point out that erring churches, insofar as they err, are also unbelieving. They are unbelieving with respect to a number of Bible passages. By their errors they have divided the Church and oppose the truth. False teaching is unrighteousness, and there can be no

fellowship with it. False doctrine is darkness and true revealed doctrine is the light in this world. They have no communion, nothing in common. All false doctrine is the work of Belial; when we fellowship with false teachers we make concord with Satan, the author of their errors. Scripture teaches that we should come out from among them, that is, from the adherents and teachers of error, and be separate.

§§ 24 That this applies to all heterodox teachers and bodies is taught most clearly and explicitly in Romans 16:17. “Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offenses [a cause of stumbling, snare to one’s faith] contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them.” In this text both elements are included, namely, the act of distinguishing and the action resulting therefrom. The brethren of Paul are carefully to fix their eye on those who deviate by teaching or adhering to false doctrine alongside of the true doctrine, and are to avoid them.

The Confession Is the Basis

§§ 25 From this passage it is clear that fellowship is to be based on one thing only, the doctrine which is proclaimed or confessed. It is right here where there is so much confusion sown by Satan. For he always inserts this thought, that since there are believers also in heterodox churches (which we have readily and happily admitted), Christians should not separate from such bodies, or should fellowship with them at least to a certain extent. Here it is necessary to distinguish between Christian brotherhood and Christian fellowship. The Holy Christian Church consists indeed of all believers in Jesus Christ, of all who have been begotten of the Father through the Word of truth and are members of His family. But since faith is invisible, these brethren are invisible, and we are assured of their existence only by the Word and promise of God. That is the brotherhood. Christian fellowship, on the other hand, is a fruit of this brotherhood—and an essential one. Since we belong together as brothers in Christ, we show this by joint worship, prayer, and work.

§§ 26 Now the basis for this fellowship cannot be the same as that for the brotherhood, which is regeneration and true faith. Before we can fellowship we must recognize the brother, and recognition must have as its object something that can be seen. But faith cannot be seen. One cannot recognize a brother by his faith, and it is equally impossible to fellowship with him on that basis. Paul says in Romans 10:10, “For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness . . . “ And in 1 Corinthians 4:5 he makes the significant statement: “Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord come, who both will bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and will make manifest the counsels of the hearts . . . “

§§ 27 We therefore believe and teach that Christian fellowship is based only on profession of faith, by word and deed. As John says in his First Epistle, 4:2-3, “Hereby know ye the spirit of God: Every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God: And every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God . . . “ Confession is the basis for Christian fellowship, for when a man’s confession is in accord with the “teachings which we have learned,” we can recognize him as a brother.

§§ 28 We know, of course, that our fellowship is not identical with the spiritual brotherhood. Behind a good confession may lie a hypocrite. And on the other hand, we know that there are Christians also in those church bodies which confess error together with the truth. We cannot recognize hypocrites in an orthodox body, nor can we recognize the believers in a false church. Moreover, we do not separate ourselves from the children of God among the false sects, but from the sects as such. The sects separate these dear children of God from us. We believe that it is for the benefit of the true believers among the heterodox that we are to refuse fellowship to these churches. Thereby we are constantly reminding them that they are in the wrong place. Time and again people have thereby been led out from the false church into the true, where God wants them to be.

This Includes All Who Deviate

§§ 29 We further believe, teach, and confess that there are no exceptions to this precept to avoid all false teachers and their adherents. Any deviation from the truth is a violation of God’s honor and constitutes a grave threat to believers, who after all can be saved only by the Word of God. St. Paul tells the Galatians: “A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump” (Gal. 5:9). Here Paul emphatically declares that errors, however small, are dangerous things to trifle with. The error into which the Galatians were falling was a false attitude over against circumcision, the assumption that by submitting to circumcision and observing the Sabbath and other ceremonies they could make their justification more secure. They stressed the Gospel, they confessed redemption by Christ, but they wanted to supplement the Gospel by some exercise of their own. Paul warns them against the far-reaching consequences of this “little” deviation from the truth revealed. Before long they will lose the Gospel, and in principle they have denied it already.

§§ 30 Another picture used by Paul to stress that every single deviation is to be avoided is found in 2 Timothy 2:17-19. Here he compares error to gangrene (canker). It is a pitiful thing to behold a strong healthy man in the prime of life who has had an extremity frozen to the point that gangrene sets in. Unless the affected part is removed, the gangrene will relentlessly pursue its course of eating and spreading. The specific error to which Paul refers was in regard to the doctrine of the resurrection. He adds that there is safety in one rule only: “Let every one that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity” (v. 19). Those who confess the truth should separate from all error. How very important this is we see from the source of this quotation. For Paul has taken this expression from the history of the rebellion of Korah in the wilderness. The people were commanded to stand apart from the tents of Korah and his cohorts. We know how fatal it would have been to disobey! Every deviation is a rebellion against the majesty and authority of God.

Such Exclusivism Is Evangelical

§§ 31 Though such an exclusive attitude as we here confess is

everywhere maligned and condemned as unevangelical, it is actually a principle which is in complete accord with the heart of the Gospel. In fact, it is the Gospel of universal salvation for all sinners which is at stake. God's plan of salvation carried out in Christ indeed embraces all sinners. It is all-inclusive. He who would have all men to be saved has placed this life-giving message in the Bible (see 2 Cor. 5:19 and Rom. 5:18). Only these good tidings of God bring hope and comfort and peace to every sinner. On the other hand, every religious effort arising from the unregenerate heart of man will inevitably be just as legalistic as the elements of the world to which it is captive.

§§ 32 It is man's nature to suppress the truth in his unrighteousness. Ever since Eve first explored the possibility, every deviation from the divine truth, every addition or subtraction on the part of man has of necessity been an infringement on the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free. False doctrine is always a threat to the very universality and completeness of the redemption which is in Christ Jesus. It is in the interest of the preservation of the Good News that God is so explicit in forbidding fellowship with error, no matter how minute or trivial it may seem to be. Here Paul is our great teacher. No one will deny that he believed in the all-inclusive nature of the Gospel of Jesus. All his efforts were bent toward bringing this peace of God to every corner of the world. Yet it is Paul in particular who wages constant warfare against each and every effort of man to change, pervert, or mutilate that Gospel. For when men change the Word of God, they are attacking Christ Himself. Paul dreads the thought that his parishioners should be referred to a mutilated Christ for their source of "comfort." What could be a greater tragedy for his posterity than to receive a Gospel less comforting in any way, and less universal, than the beautiful original entrusted to him?

Wrong Exclusivism Rejected

§§ 33 It must be mentioned that there is a wrong exclusivism which does not stem from this all-inclusive Gospel. Where pride in one's self or in one's particular groups is the motive for isolation, this is

sinful and shows a grave lack of understanding of the Gospel. Such was the separation of the Pharisees—and they have many followers who by their exclusive policies glorify only men. Any separation in the Church which is not made in the interest of God's glory and the glory of His Gospel is to be condemned just as much as unionism, the fellowshipping of false teachers.

Examples From Scripture

§§ 34 It is also contended by our opponents that the God of love who wants us to dwell in love and unity with men would not ask us to separate from all who deviate in matters of doctrine. For the Christian who places everything pertaining to his salvation into the divine hand, this is indeed a spurious argument. Just as the same God who gave the promise to Abraham could also instruct the same Abraham to offer up the son of promise as a sacrifice, so it is the same God of love and unity who also instructs the Christian to "avoid," "withdraw," "come out from among them," "reject the heretic," "have no company with him." And since the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth the Christian knows from the outset that there is never a day when he may relax his efforts and not be on guard against the intrusion of false prophets and their errors, as well as the intrusion of error in his own teaching.

§§ 35 Scripture gives countless examples of this endless war which Satan wages against truth. To our warning we see how dreadfully successful he often was. Even in their holiness our first parents lost the truth because they listened to the voice of temptation after it was clear that the voice had deviated from the true Word. From the first opposition altar of Cain to the activities of the beast in Revelation we observe the never-ending efforts of Satan to infiltrate the ranks of those who are to proclaim only the Word of God.

§§ 36 Moses teaches us in Genesis 6:1ff. that all flesh had to be destroyed because ". . . God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually." This situation had come into being

because of the mingling of the Church with the world. It was the joining spirit at Babel (in the interest of strength and security) which after the flood again threatened the Gospel with extinction. This led to a most drastic display of the principle of separation when God found it necessary to remove Abram completely from his family and from all nations so that the Gospel might be preserved until the fullness of the time. Though his children were blessed in every possible way by Jehovah, who delivered them from all their enemies and provided for their every need, yet God had to place them into the straitjacket of the law economy that they might be reminded in a hundred ways every day that they were His peculiar people with a particular destiny. Despite these drastic measures, the history of Israel is a sad story of oft-repeated compromises with error and syncretism, often leading to total apostasy.

§§ 37 In connection with the worship of the golden calf at Sinai, we learn the relative position of our love toward God and that toward our fellow man. When His worship was changed (though they intended to be worshipping Jehovah) and God's anger waxed hot, then the Levites, in love for God and to uphold His honor, were bidden to take the sword to their brethren, of whom three thousand fell that day. Whenever the Word of God is attacked, His honor is involved. In connection with 2 Timothy 2 we mentioned above the rebellion of Korah. The incident forcefully brings home the same thought of the impending wrath of a God whose honor has been violated when His instructions were disobeyed. The New Testament urgings to separate are indeed loving warnings to escape before we become involved in God's wrath.

§§ 38 In Joshua 24 we find a revealing chapter on the subtle and persistent efforts of Satan to syncretize and unionize religion. In the last assembly of Israel that Joshua convened he appealed to the people to put away their idols and to give undivided hearts to God. He is speaking of their attitudes. Although they repeatedly insist that they are Jehovah worshippers, he continues to admonish and plead for purity of worship, and expresses the principle of separation

succinctly: “. . . as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.”

§§ 39 Though under God's glorious guidance this principle of exclusivism for the Gospel's sake gave to Israel full possession of the Holy Land and victory over all foes, nevertheless they soon became lax in this very matter, allowing some of the Canaanites to remain in the land. The apparent advantages of this compromise with God's explicit orders were dissipated by the formal announcement of God at Bochim (Judges 2). Their humanistic tendencies brought endless trouble to them and their posterity, for now God would not drive out these Canaanites, but would permit them to remain as a snare and a trap to Israel. In the New Testament the consequence of tolerating errorists is still the same, namely, that they become thorns in our flesh and cause serious schisms, which God permits so that the Church may be purged (1 Cor. 11:19).

§§ 40 We could adduce many more examples from Scripture illustrating that when men like Abraham stood quite alone—faithful to their God, building their own altars in defiance of all—there God's blessings came in bountiful measure. Contrariwise, when Israel allowed error and falsehood to be mingled with the priceless truth committed to them, it brought ruin and havoc. From the times of the Judges, Solomon, the divided kingdom, the period of restoration, the voice cries out from every page: “. . . come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord” (2 Cor. 6:17).

§§ 41 Thus Scripture clearly teaches by precept and many examples that Christians are to separate from all false religion, from all false teachers, lest the honor of God be violated, His name profaned, and the possession of the Gospel endangered for them and their children; lest, as St. John says, they become partakers of their evil deeds.

C. All Manifestations of Fellowship Are Involved

§§ 42 We further believe, teach, and confess that when our Lord Jesus Christ forbids us to exercise church fellowship with those who deviate in their teachings from the Word of God, thereby all

manifestations of Christian fellowship are forbidden. Though this appears very obvious in the light of the strong Scriptural words—to beware of such people, to avoid them, to reject them, to withdraw from such—we are required to make this matter very clear. Satan is so anxious to have true churches fraternizing with the false, that he has even inserted this thought, that some fellowship should be permitted, even though full recognition may be impossible. Now in church language it has been customary to speak of pulpit, altar, and prayer fellowship. But we must be very careful in using these terms, that we do not thereby think there are three different fellowships, and that each is to be treated differently. There is one fellowship, and these are three outstanding manifestations of that one glorious gift we enjoy.

§§ 43 Christian fellowship is the outgrowth of our brotherhood which we have by virtue of our God-created faith in Jesus Christ. As brothers and sisters in Jesus, we are united in one family, and we express this unity by joining in worship and religious work. This fellowship is a great, glorious, living thing. It manifests itself in countless ways: in the gathering of the disciples on the evening of Easter, in their remaining together at Jerusalem while they were awaiting the fulfillment of the Father’s promise, in the life of the mother church as it is described in the last verses of Acts 2 and again in chapter 4, in the relation of the mother church to the congregations which now began to spring up on every hand. It manifested itself most beautifully in the concern of the Greek churches for the famine-stricken brethren of Judea, which Paul was so careful to cultivate.

§§ 44 Now all these manifestations of fellowship are based on their unity in the Word, “in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship.” As long as they continued in God’s Word, then were they all disciples and could recognize each other as such. But when someone in his teaching departed from the Word, the basis for fellowship was removed. The people who adhere to false teaching are to be shunned and avoided. One can hardly fulfill that command of God by allowing some fellowship but not all. We believe there is one fellowship (koinonia), which manifests itself in many different ways. Where

unity of the confessed faith, unity in the Word, is absent, we are forbidden to practice any fellowship.

§§ 45 Though in this next point there is no disagreement (at least not of a general nature in the Lutheran churches), yet for the sake of complete clarity we re-emphasize that which has always been Lutheran teaching, namely, that our separation both from the world and from errorists and false churches does not involve a separation in purely secular matters. We are in the world, but not of the world. The separation of which Scripture speaks in the passages on church fellowship concerns religious associations with people, not cultural, economic, or civic relations. Here the Christian guards only against intimacy with people who are opposed to the truth, exercising his judgment and liberty with great care. On the other hand, it must be noted that when separation is required from such with whom Christians have been in intimate religious fellowship, even such associations as would ordinarily be within the bounds of Scripture may be wrong, because of the offense which might be given. Here the teachings of the Formula of Concord, Article X, concerning adiaphora (matters of Christian liberty) apply with full force.

D. Suspension of Established Fellowships

§§ 46 We further believe, teach, and confess that established fellowships or existing fellowships are to be terminated when it has been ascertained that a person or group through a false position is causing divisions and offenses in the Church.¹ Among our Lutheran teachers who have held a firm and Scriptural position in regard to making no alliances with those who deviate in their teachings from the Word, there are some who have shown the same humanistic weakness of the unionist when the matter occurred of separating from

¹The place of brotherly admonition in the mutual relations of Christian brethren is discussed later in this article (see § 63, § 65, § 72b). It does not belong to the essence of the principles stated below.

those with whom there has been fellowship of long standing.

§§ 47 We must therefore maintain steadfastly that the only basis for fellowship is complete unity in the doctrine of Christ, and that when this unity is broken, there is no basis for fellowship. Toleration of error, partaking of another's evil deeds, worshipping with someone who profanes the name of God by his false doctrine—all these things are no less wicked because of some previous relationship. In Romans 16:17 St. Paul in no way limits his statement to those outside of the fellowship of the Christians at Rome. Their marking of an errorist would not only include but begin within the communion itself. In Matthew 7:15, where Jesus tells us to beware of false prophets, He stresses that they will come in sheep's clothing; that is, externally they will appear among the sheep. Paul tells the elders of Ephesus to be on the alert for those men who will arise "of your own selves" (Acts 20:30).

§§ 48 Though we instruct "with all long-suffering and doctrine" (2 Tim. 4:2) such as through ignorance hold erroneous opinions and beliefs, this in no wise restricts or limits the avoiding of those who by their deviations "cause divisions and offenses" in the Church. Those cannot be treated as "weak" brethren who are publicly teaching their erroneous opinions as God's truth. Nor does isolation of errorists from one's own communion in such cases indicate a lack of love. For we believe that to obey the Lord and avoid them is true love, and only by thus following God's injunction can we "preserve unity" and heal the breaches in the walls of Zion. Where error is tolerated it will grow. When it is isolated it is unable to propagate itself.

II. REJECTION OF FALSE DOCTRINE

A. Limiting the Extent of the Application

§§ 49 Now we turn to a refutation of the various counter-arguments to this Scriptural presentation, and accordingly with heart and mouth we reject and condemn as false, erroneous, and misleading all teachings which are not in accordance with, but contrary and opposed to, the doctrine above presented.

1. (LIMITED) TO NON-CHRISTIAN BODIES

§§ 50 That the application of the principle of separation is limited to non-Christian bodies is quite generally held among the majority of Protestant sects, most of which are quite willing to form alliances and unions with all church bodies which are willing to say that Jesus is the Lord. Even some Lutheran bodies have joined in such world organizations, though these organizations are not willing to define what is meant even by that statement that Jesus is the Lord. As shown above, there is no Scriptural license for such mingling of truth with error, and it leads only to ever greater indifference to doctrine. It stems from lack of understanding of the work of the Church, which is solely to administer the Office of the Keys, in Word and Sacrament.

2. (LIMITED) TO THOSE WHO DENY REDEMPTION

§§ 51 Thinking that they are serving the cause of truth, many in our day have made a selection of doctrines which they say are necessary for saving faith, and restrict the principle of separation to those who in some way deny the redemptive work of Christ. But actually they are serving the cause of unionism, namely, by their fellowship with those who err in any doctrine of Scripture. These people stress the fundamentals of evangelical truth, whence they are called fundamentalists or evangelicals, and permit differences of belief on all other points of Christian doctrine. We repudiate such groups as sinfully unionistic and condemn the aiding and supporting of such movements as involving a denial of Scriptural doctrines. Though it

is true that these fundamentals of doctrine are usually quite Scriptural, and that he who believes these truths will be saved, the question of saving faith is not admissible in the matter of church fellowship, since such fellowship is based on confession and not on faith, which is invisible.

(REFUTATION OF ARGUMENTS)

Argument from John 17

§§ 52 A favorite and supposedly unanswerable argument urged by protagonists of such church unions is that it is our Lord's own express will that there should be only one visible church. The proof of this is said to be the prayer: "That they all may be one" (John 17:21). But the unity for which Christ prayed was clearly not an external one. It was a spiritual unity, a unity of faith. This is the unity that was created among His disciples in the early Church, and it is this unity which, with indissoluble bonds, still binds together in the Holy Christian Church all true believers, wherever they may be.

Argument on "Strength"

§§ 53 We also refute as an insidious error the argument so frequently heard in these days, namely, that tolerance of other church bodies and a combining of efforts are necessary for the strengthening of the Church. It is said that the churches must unite in order to meet the dangers of atheism, materialism, modernism, secularism, etc. We are told that a united church would be a more powerful force in combating the social ills which beset the nation.

§§ 54 These proponents of union among churches reveal the false motivation behind such efforts. The power of the Church of Christ lies in the Gospel that she preaches. It is blasphemous to think that human numbers and human organization can add strength and effectiveness to God's holy Word. It is rather the mingling of that Gospel truth with error which weakens the Church and impedes its attack on the stronghold of Satan. "Our help is in the name of the LORD, who made heaven and earth" (Ps. 124:8). His strength is

made perfect in our weakness. He who gave victory to Gideon with but 300 men, and He who evangelized the world through a far smaller number, does not need large organizations to accomplish His purpose. But of course it is right here that the opponents go astray, for they have set goals for the Church which God has not given us, such as combating social evils and improving the morality of the world and society.

Argument on "National Interest"

§§ 55 Closely allied with this false argument is the plea that we should forget our doctrinal differences in the national interest. It is said by these people that we owe it to our nation to unite, not only (as shown above) to stem the tide of social ills such as juvenile delinquency and organized crime which hurt the nation, but particularly to meet the common foes of all Christendom, communism and others. The plea is that all Christian churches are in jeopardy and that our democracy is weakened by religious differences among its people.

§§ 56 This is a vicious form of attack made from all sides against our dear Christians. It is bad enough that the world and its leaders and educators tie together our democracy and the Christian religion and constantly urge that for effective democracy we must give up our distinctive beliefs and exercise tolerance toward all other forms. But this is not surprising since the world cannot be expected to distinguish between the interest of the nation and of the churches. It is bad enough that the many Reformed denominations, following the principles of Calvin and other leaders, mingle the activities of the Church with those of the state. But when Lutheran teachers would make the Church the handmaiden of the state and speak as though this were our function as churches against the enemies of our nation, then we begin to realize how mightily Satan is raging against the pure doctrine in our churches.

§§ 57 The Church which earnestly upholds the truth brings down blessings on the nation. In so far as churches give up any part of the Gospel, they bring down the wrath of God, also upon the nation.

Again and again the prophets of Judah and Israel teach the horror of that logic which advocates toleration of error in the interest of “political expediency.” Therefore it is a lie of the Evil One that we serve the national interest by being “more tolerant” of the religious views of our fellow citizens. As citizens let all Christians be taught to be patriotic and loyal, and to grant to others the religious freedom which they claim for themselves. As church members let them be taught that the Church is not to be identified with any nation or form of government, nor are her interests to be tied to the interests of any nation, for “My Kingdom is not of this world.” All who urge their false views on these grounds lower their church to the level of any earthly organization with earthly goals. Our citizenship is in heaven (Phil. 3:20), and we believe that the Church has one function and one function only: to preach the Gospel.

3. (LIMITED) TO THOSE WHO ERR IN FUNDAMENTALS

§§ 58 Though there is a correct and proper distinction made between fundamental and non-fundamental doctrines, we reject as false the teaching that we are required to separate only from those churches which err in the fundamental doctrines. These errorists contend: In non-fundamentals the theologians should have the liberty to propound differing views without laying themselves open to the charge of disturbing the unity of faith or breaking the ties of church fellowship. They say it is neither necessary nor possible to agree in all non-fundamental doctrines.

§§ 59 The distinction between fundamental and non-fundamental doctrines has its place, but that place is most certainly not in the question of what constitutes a sufficient basis for church fellowship. Theologians of the Church have made this distinction in connection with saving faith. Of fundamental doctrines we speak in the sense that a denial or falsification of certain teachings of Scripture undermines the very foundation of saving faith. But non-fundamental doctrines are also Scripture doctrines, just as well as the ones called fundamental. They are all doctrines of faith, i.e., doctrines to be accepted in faith. Hence it is by no means a negligible matter when

one adheres to erroneous views in non-fundamental doctrines. If adhered to despite ample information, errors in non-fundamental doctrines become open rebellion against God and His holy Word, and threaten to lead into perdition.

§§ 60 We must not confound non-fundamental doctrines with theological problems, must not relegate them to the realm of open questions (questions which are not answered by the Word of God). But to say (when discussing the basis for church fellowship) that we neither need nor can attain agreement in non-fundamentals is to deny the clarity of Scripture, the inviolability of Scripture, and to grant equal status to error and truth as well as license to preach and teach unscriptural doctrines. The Bride of Christ is concerned about her purity in doctrine in all respects: “I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ. But I fear, lest by any means, as the serpent beguiled Eve through his subtlety, so your minds should be corrupted from the simplicity that is in Christ” (2 Cor. 11:2-3).

4. LIMITATIONS IN CONNECTION WITH ESTABLISHED FELLOWSHIPS

§§ 61 We further reject the teaching that false teachers and churches are to be avoided only when they no longer listen to admonition. In those communions which agree with us that there must be unanimity in all doctrines of Scripture as a basis for fellowship, some teachers have arisen who have taught that an existing fellowship is not to be terminated as long as the errorists will discuss the issues involved and permit admonition to be addressed to them. Though this argument is presented in the sheep’s clothing of Christian love and patience, we must condemn it as unscriptural and unionistic. When errorists by their adherence to their errors “cause divisions and offenses” in the Church, we are told by the Holy Ghost through the Apostle Paul in Romans 16:17 to avoid them. To say in the face of this clear instruction that we are to fellowship with such as have become manifest errorists, simply because we are still admonishing them, must be condemned as disobedience to God, as allowing false

teachers to ravage the flock, as disregarding the concern expressed in the next verse of Romans 16 (lest “. . . by good words and fair speeches they deceive the hearts of the simple”)——in short, as belittling the Word of God and the importance of all revealed teaching. It can only, as must all unionism, lead to indifference to doctrine and to insecurity for the Christian in matters of faith.

(REFUTATION OF ARGUMENTS)

§§ 62 Our opponents have contended that the passage from Scripture instructing the strong to bear the burdens of the weak must be taken into account in applying the passages on separation from false teachers. They refer, for example, to Galatians 6:1-2, where St. Paul admonishes the strong to restore a fallen brother in the spirit of meekness.

§§ 63 Now let us state at the outset that we fully believe in dealing patiently and lovingly with weak brethren. In every congregation there are Christians who are strong and others who are weak. Each individual Christian is at times strong and at times weak. Certainly this is a prime reason why our Lord does not leave us alone, but sets the solitary into families, that we may serve one another in humility and love. There are members of congregations who are also weak in doctrine. This may be due to immaturity, since they may be novices and need more instruction, or it may be due to ignorance. It may be that some leader has sown confusion in the ranks of a group. Thus the Church is ever busy at this task of strengthening the weak in its midst, “teaching them to observe.” There are many, many Bible passages and Scriptural examples of this constant activity of the teaching, strengthening, edifying Church. But we most assuredly object to this, that this teaching and admonishing function be of necessity carried into the process of separating from errorists.

§§ 64 Essentially the two groups of passages are addressed to opposite situations. Teaching, admonishing, edifying, instructing——all these presuppose disciples, learners, hearers. These learners and hearers may frequently entertain strange notions and erroneous thoughts. That is why they come to be taught the Word of

God. Here the question of separation is totally out of place. But when Scripture tells us to avoid, withdraw, reject, beware, it certainly is not speaking of people who sit at the feet of the true church to learn the way to heaven. It is quite clearly in each case referring to people who are in the role of teaching, or who assume that role over against the true preachers of the Word. They are false prophets, men who claim that their errors are the truth; they are causers of division, men who lead a segment of the Church away from the truth; they are heretics, men who form a new party in connection with their deviations. Let us not fail to note in this connection that error is dangerous (beware!), and that God does not ask His children to risk their salvation on the altar of an admonition which is being carried on in an atmosphere of fellowship where He has prohibited fellowship.

§§ 65 Then there is also the weakness of language. A person may not express himself as he intended the meaning, or others may read something into his words which is not there. We do therefore teach that any Christian ought to be very sure before he will raise the cry of “false teacher.” He will make careful inquiry and ascertain exactly what is being taught by the suspected speaker. This may require little or much time. In the case of a person or group with whom one has been in fellowship, it will by its nature involve an admonition, or several admonitions. But we emphatically teach that the admonishing per se and by itself is not an absolute must, a condition sine qua non, for the application of “avoid them.” As we have seen, there may be years of admonition before a person is revealed as causing divisions and offenses by his errors, or it could become clear at one meeting that the basis for fellowship has been removed by adherence to error. The argument that separation must be delayed as long as the errorist will listen to admonition does not take into account that he is not only listening, but he is teaching his error at the same time. The devil is very happy to have this errorist listen to endless admonition, if this will enable him to continue to fellowship and address the entire Church.

§§ 66 The charge that they who call for separation do not have love

is quite specious: for we are first to have love for Christ, who has been attacked by the errorist, and then we are to have love for all the sheep and lambs, who stand in mortal danger by reason of the teachings of this man or group. And surely, if we act in love for God and His Word, such action will also be the most loving thing toward the errorist, as Paul indicates when also in 2 Thessalonians 3:14-15 he advocates that we cease exercising fellowship with those who are disobedient to his words, that they may be ashamed. If the errorist would always suffer isolation from the Church, he would be induced to give serious thought to his aberrations. But we believe and confess that we dare not be partakers of the evil deeds nor, by offering the hand of fellowship, appear in any way to be sanctioning the error. That is not what is meant by confessing God before men.

Argument Concerning the Examples of Jesus

§§ 67 The ministry of Jesus Christ is cited by the opponents as an example of loving patience with errorists. It is said by some that since He did not break off outward fellowship with Israel, we should not break with a synod which aberrates from the Word. The first fallacy in this argument is that a synod with a confessional position is made parallel to the nation of Israel with its worship that centered at the Temple in Jerusalem. Neither the Temple nor the synagogue had a confessional position as such, except that their worshipers represented God's people of the Old Testament, who possessed the Law and were waiting for the Messiah. The second fallacy lies in the interpretation that is thus put on the actions of Jesus. But let the Lord speak for Himself—and we will not hear the words of the unionist of today: “And ye have not his word abiding in you” (John 5:38). Does this sound as though Jesus ever gave the impression that He either approved or tolerated the Jewish errors- Jesus publicly proclaimed that these false teachers were not of God's family: “. . . he that sent me is true, whom ye know not” (John 7:28). Is this perhaps a manifestation of fellowship? Or again, “. . . ye shall die in your sins” (John 8:21-24). “. . . beware of the leaven of the Pharisees” (Matt. 16:6-11).

§§ 68 Whoever mentions the example of Jesus as an instance of fellowshipping with false teachers has lost sight of the fact that our Savior died on a cross at the hand of His fellowmen just because of His exclusivism and His refusal to sanction and tolerate any variations of doctrine or belief. We therefore refute and condemn as superficial and extreme sophistry this argumentation that would justify the fellowshipping of errorists on the basis of the example of Jesus.

Argument from Ephesians 4

§§ 69 Quite a popular argument used by our adversaries is taken from Ephesians 4:1-7. We are to be zealous to preserve the unity! It is contended that to separate can hardly be evidence of a zeal to preserve the unity and union. It is true that to exclude oneself from a communion destroys the union. But it is not necessarily a breaking of the unity. For if an errorist has arisen and is causing divisions and offenses by his teaching, he bears the guilt of disrupting the unity. This division will grow on and on if unimpeded. The gangrenous member must be cut off. When we “apply” Romans 16:17 we are simply doing what God has advocated to heal the breach. The surgery may indeed be painful, but it is meant to halt the advance of the disease. Ephesians 4 in particular demonstrates that the unity is a unity of faith: one Lord, one baptism, etc.

Argument from Matthew 18

§§ 70 We are also told that, in keeping with Jesus' instructions in Matthew 18:15-17 for making every effort to regain the man who has trespassed against us, patience should be exercised toward the erring teachers. It should be clear that to avoid a false teacher and to look upon a man as a heathen and a publican are two entirely different things. The former is based on the danger inherent in the goods which are being peddled as truth. The latter is based on the evidence of an unrepentant heart. The false teacher may indeed, in individual cases, eventually prove himself to be an unrepentant sinner, one who is willfully blaspheming God's Word against his better knowledge. In

that case we would have to consider him as a heathen man and a publican. But to contend that until this is true he is to be allowed to have the status of a teacher in good standing in the Church, this is utterly preposterous. He is to be avoided because he is dangerous (Rom. 16:18). He is dangerous whether or not there is hope that he may still repent.

§§ 71 Here we must be careful in our use of the word “persistent” in describing a false teacher. This word came into use in the Church as an antonym of “inadvertent.” In this connection it has its place, as we have shown above, namely, that the Christian exercise great care before charging a person or groups with heresy, first determining charitably whether it was done unwittingly and inadvertently, or whether the speaker sticks to his error, which is persistence. To say that we must be positive that the errorist intends stubbornly to pursue his course despite all admonition requires an omniscience not granted to mortals. Yet it is mortals who are asked to withdraw from such as teach falsely.

§§ 72 In the case of one who trespasses against me, my one concern——of which he should be assured——is the sinner and his forgiveness. In the case of false teachers, however, there is first the immediate concern for the honor of God and for the endangered lambs. This does not by any means preclude a sincere concern for the erring man’s soul. The separating action taken in obedience to God is for the sake of His glory and the safety of souls entrusted to the Church. Previously, concurrently, and subsequently, as the Christian has call and opportunity, he will of course try to correct the erring one. Even here there may have to be a stopping point, however, due to the hazard involved in dealing with one who is endangering our faith by mingling lies with the truth. Paul tells Titus to dismiss, reject a heretical one after the first and second admonition (Tit. 3:10), which is an echo of the Savior’s words: “. . . neither cast ye your pearls before swine, lest they . . . turn again and rend you” (Matt. 7:6).

§§ 73 In an age noted for doctrinal indifference (for the cry of the day is “deeds, not creeds”) it is particularly damaging and harmful to urge

the proposition that one should not terminate fellowship until the false teacher or false church refuses to listen to admonition, since it is characteristic of errorists and unionists, who breathe the very air of compromise, to be willing to lend an ear forever, so to speak, to what they term “another point of view.” Where latitude and academic freedom have been adopted as standards, the time may never come that “admonition” will not be allowed. Satan does not demand that truth be silenced; he is quite satisfied to have a partial voice in the matter, for well he knows that even a little lie, mingled with truth, destroys the truth.

SUMMARY

§§ 74 To sum up, we reject and condemn any limitations on the extent of the application of the scriptural injunctions to separate from false teachers and groups. All who deviate are to be avoided. They are to be avoided when it is clear that they are causing divisions and offenses in the Church. They are guilty of serving other interests (“their belly”——Rom. 16:18) rather than Christ, and to fellowship with them is to be a partaker of their evil deeds, a partaker of their influence, a partaker of the judgment they are calling down upon themselves. Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God!

B. Limiting the Intensiveness of the Application

1. (LIMITED) TO JOINT WORSHIP SERVICES

§§ 75 The people who promote this thought, that only joint worship services with errorists are forbidden, recognize that there are injunctions in the Word which prohibit fellowship with errorists. Allowance for joint religious work and activity nevertheless is made by restricting this principle to certain forms or manifestations of our fellowship with other Christians. Now as we said above, there are many, many diverse ways in which our fellowship manifests itself. In each we bear witness to each other and to all men that we are brothers and sisters in Christ, that we are agreed in the faith. When the sad fact emerges that we must mark someone as a false teacher, we avoid him, and thereby give evidence that we are not agreed. We testify to that

erring person and to all men that we do not share his views, but consider them false and contrary to the Word and will of the most high God. It has become part of our confession, the witness that we bring to the truth, that we reject him and his error.

§§ 76 We owe such a confession first of all to God, who wants us to make a true and honest confession to demonstrate our loyalty to Him. We owe this confession to our brothers and sisters in the faith, so that they may be warned against the dangers involved in the errors being held and taught by that person. We owe this confession to the errorist himself, in order that he may not be receiving the false comfort from us that it is not a serious matter that he holds and teaches things which are contrary to the words of Jesus. In short, we are to confess the truth, and that involves rejecting the errors. If the Christian will keep this in mind, namely, that he is not only to believe in his heart but also to confess with his mouth, he will readily see that it is not material whether it be a worship service that is under consideration, or some other form of joint religious worship and work.

§§ 77 To join with heterodox people or groups, as churches or as church people, in works of charity, in dedication services, in conducting a ministry among the armed forces, in producing educational and devotional literature, etc.—all this cannot by any stretch of the imagination be called “testifying” to them and to the world that they are false teachers. Coordination and cooperation with church groups having a different confession can hardly be described as avoiding, withdrawing, or coming out from among them and being separate. We repeat that especially in periods of indifference to doctrine and creeds and confessions, the faithful Christian is required to be very careful not to give the impression that he approves or tolerates the false position of the heterodox. When our people are told on every hand that the divisions in Christendom are not serious, that basically every church is good and that one religion is as good as the next, that all roads lead to heaven, and that the differences in teaching are only theological hair-splitting—what can they be expected to believe when even orthodox teachers and leaders join with heterodox

in religious seminars, address each other’s conventions, work together on joint committees for various religious projects, etc. The trumpet must not give an uncertain sound.

2. (LIMITED) TO PRAYER, BUT NOT JOINT PRAYER

§§ 78 A distinction has been made between prayer fellowship and joint prayer. While it is granted that the general fellowship of prayer with heterodox bodies is out of the question, it is argued that under proper safe-guards a joint prayer on certain occasions would not be objectionable. This distinction is certainly not justified by any difference in the inherent quality or nature of the prayer that would be offered on such a special occasion. It is in either case an act of worship. Neither would it depend on the number of times this act of prayer is performed. Can the number of times, or the habitual performing of an act, affect its ethical nature? Can something be God-pleasing when done only occasionally, but become an offense to Him when repeated regularly?

§§ 79 The sole question is, of course, whether the premises that warrant such prayer are actually present. They are clearly defined in Scripture: “Again I say unto you, that if two of you shall agree on earth as touching anything that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them” (Matt. 18:19-20). The warning of Paul to the Romans (“to avoid”—ch. 16:17) would lose its point if it did not cover joint prayer. He makes no exceptions. The warning of St. John in his Second Epistle deserves to be taken to heart: “Look to yourselves, that we lose not those things which we have wrought, but that we receive a full reward. Whosoever transgresseth, and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God. He that abideth in the doctrine of Christ, he hath both the Father and the Son. If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house, neither bid him God-speed: For he that biddeth him God-speed is partaker of his evil deeds” (2 John 8-11). John is, of course, not speaking against ordinary civility in manners, but warning against a formal brotherly greeting, one that

would carry spiritual implications. Arguing now from the lesser to the greater: if we are to deny a brotherly reception to a man because he is an adherent of false doctrine, what about arranging a joint prayer? If by a mere greeting we already become guilty of the errorist's evil deeds, how then may we join him in prayer? And what would be the nature of such a prayer? Our prayer must needs be directed against his "evil deeds," while he would seek a blessing upon them. This is sheer hypocrisy!

§§ 80 We must reject and condemn this distinction between prayer fellowship and joint prayer as a device for allowing fellowship where fellowship has been forbidden. The proponents of this distinction found it necessary to state that the passages calling for separation (Rom. 16:17; 2 Cor. 6:14-18; Gal. 1:6-9; 1 Tim. 6:3-5; Tit. 1:10-14; 3:10-11; Matt. 7:15; 2 John 7-11) are entirely directed against reprobates, anti-Christian errorists, enemies of Christ; in short, infidels. This sweeping assertion they must make in order to justify their "occasional joint prayer." Since they say of these passages that they are applicable to non-Christians only, they have removed all passages which prohibit fellowship with errorists. Thereby it is manifest that they are opening the door not only to joint prayer, but to complete church fellowship with all those whom one cannot prove to be hardened and faithless enemies of Christ.

3. "COOPERATION IN EXTERNALS"

§§ 81 With great subtlety unionism of many kinds has infiltrated the Church under the guise of innocent phrases such as "cooperation in externals." Though we would not say that it is impossible (especially in days of confessional vigor and honesty) for churches to cooperate in certain secular activities even though they are divided in doctrine, yet when this expression is used to allow working together with heterodox bodies in religious matters, then we condemn the expression as a cloak for sinful disobedience to the Word of God, and a procedure which confuses and offends the simple Christian.

4. FELLOWSHIP WITHOUT COMPLICITY

§§ 82 Many joint services, prayers, and activities are justified by the claim that the specific false teaching that is involved was nevertheless not brought into question at that particular occasion, and that a certain degree of fraternizing with the errorist involved neither complicity in nor approval of his error. The Christian reader will know from all that we have stated from Scripture that it is not only the error that is to be avoided, but likewise the people who propagate it who are to be isolated. We therefore condemn also this phrase as a sophistry which may lead people astray from God's paths.

5. EXTERNAL FELLOWSHIP WITHOUT HEART FELLOWSHIP

§§ 83 By this plea some teachers would allow for the continuation of external fellowship by stressing that our Lord wants our hearts to be pure and purged of error. The latter is of course very true. The prime consideration is that our faith be correct and that we keep the leaven of error from entering into our hearts. It is also true that the denouncing of error and errorists is in such a situation the paramount activity of a confessing Christian. But though these traits and Christian characteristics are essential and highly to be praised, they do not excuse the Christian from also separating externally and publicly from error and errorists. Many a fine confession is vitiated by keeping up the semblance of fellowship with the errorist whom one has rebuked, even though he does not change his ways.

§§ 84 There have indeed been periods in the history of the Church when publicly to dissent from the established teaching of a church body meant automatic suspension, loss of office, loss of property, and even life. Then surely, to speak and rebuke was synonymous with external separation. But to call such testimony of words an "avoiding" and "shunning," when one knows that for lack of action one will continue to be considered an integral part of the organization in question, that is to be using identical words indeed, but with totally different meaning.

6. PROTESTING FELLOWSHIP

§§ 85 The idea of “protesting fellowship” or “a state of confession” is advanced at this point. This is closely related to the preceding, and we refute the abuse of such relationships on the same grounds.

§§ 86 This point has to do with the external membership one has in an organization. When error rears its ugly head in an orthodox communion, the Christian has the duty of raising his voice, taking the sword of the Spirit, and driving out the error. As long as a church body thus attacks error it remains an orthodox church. The orthodox character of a church is established not by its outward acceptance of, and subscription to, an orthodox creed, but by the doctrine which is actually taught in its pulpits, in its theological seminaries, and its publications. On the other hand, a church does not forfeit its orthodox character through the casual intrusion of errors, provided these are combated and eventually removed by means of doctrinal discipline, Acts 20:30; 1 Timothy 1:3 (See the Brief Statement).

§§ 87 Sometimes, however, the issue is in doubt, for it is not clear whether the error has taken such a firm hold that it has become the *doctrina publica* (public doctrine) of the groups, or whether it is being combated successfully and eradicated. During such a period of strife, and in order to make his confession clear, the Christian will be compelled publicly to disavow the various statements, actions, and policies which are not consistent with Scripture, before, however, breaking the organizational bond. He states thereby that he is still on the roster of this communion, but not in sympathy with all the teachings that have arisen within this communion.

§§ 88 When, however, such a state of protesting fellowship is proclaimed, but business is carried on as usual, with the individual continuing to treat the errorists as though they were still faithful teachers and hearers of the Word—exchanging pulpits, transferring members, intercommuning, and the like—then that use of the expression is to be condemned as a cloak for unionistic activity. Without the appropriate action it becomes mere lip-service. Once

again, the simple are deceived into thinking that these matters are not serious, not clearly taught in Scripture, not divisive.

SUMMARY

§§ 89 Finally, whatever other condemnable or erroneous opinions there may still be, over and above the foregoing, can easily be gathered and named from the preceding explanations. For we reject and condemn everything that is not in accordance with, but contrary and opposed to, the doctrine recorded above and thoroughly grounded in God’s Word.

IN CONCLUSION

§§ 90 We believe that Jesus is our only Savior and that only in His precious Gospel do we find peace and joy and comfort and hope. With Him we would ever be in fellowship. We yearn for the day when we shall experience the fullness of that fellowship and see Him face to face. There, with the great cloud of witnesses that has gone before, we shall be in fellowship with all believers in Him. All visible fellowships on earth shall pass away, and are as the grass which withers. His Word shall never pass away. Though we be separated from all human beings, but united with Christ and His Word, we shall be rich in His fellowship, and through Him, with the Father. Deliver us from evil! Come, Lord Jesus, come quickly!

EPITOME

A Summary of the Content of Our Confession CONCERNING CHURCH FELLOWSHIP

The Principal Question in This Controversy

Three questions have arisen in the Lutheran Church concerning this doctrine.

1. What extent of doctrinal agreement does Scripture require as a

basis for fellowship? Some have taught that agreement in all doctrines is required; others, that fellowship is to be permitted though there be less than such complete agreement.

2. Later, a controversy arose among those who taught that complete agreement was necessary as a basis for fellowship. To what extent is fellowship forbidden among those who are not in complete doctrinal agreement? Some have taught that all manifestations of fellowship are forbidden with those who deviate in doctrine; others have taught that there are areas of church work which do not require complete agreement.

3. Finally, a controversy arose among those who taught that all manifestations of fellowship are forbidden with all who deviate in doctrine. What is the Scriptural criterion for termination of fellowship with errorists with whom one has been in fellowship, but who later deviate in doctrine? Some have taught that the exercise of church fellowship is to cease when it is clear that the error is actually being taught and defended; others have taught that fellowship may be practiced as long as the errorists do not blaspheme the Word of God and do not refuse to discuss the issues involved. (§§ 1-3)

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). (§§ 4-7)

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)

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).

Reprinted by

Zion Lutheran Church
468 Northdale Road, Suite D
Lawrenceville, GA 30045
(770) 962-9034