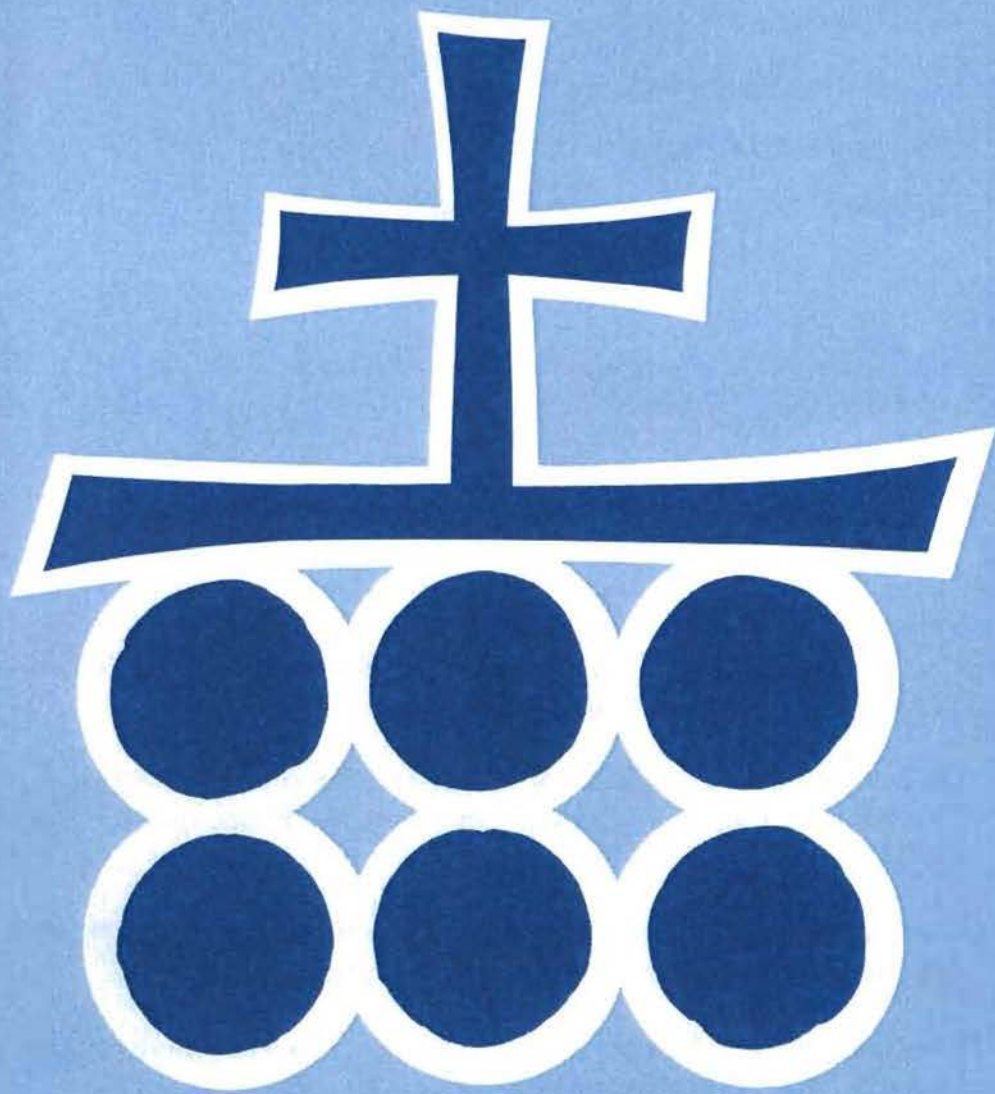


# **THE NATURE AND IMPLICATIONS of the CONCEPT OF FELLOWSHIP**



**A Report of the  
Commission on Theology and Church Relations of  
The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod**

**APRIL 1981**

## Abbreviations

AC—Augsburg Confession

Ap—Apology of the Augsburg Confession

Ep—Epitome of the Formula of Concord

FC—Formula of Concord

LC—Large Catechism

SA—Smalcald Articles

SD—Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord

Scripture quotations in this publication are from the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyrighted 1946, 1952, © 1971, 1973 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., and used by permission.

Quotations from *The Book of Concord* translated and edited by Theodore G. Tappert, copyright 1959, Fortress Press, used by permission.

The quotations from *The Unity of the Church: A Symposium*, © 1957 Augustana Book Concern, are used by permission.

The quotation from *Essays on New Testament Themes* (London: SCM Press, 1971) is used by permission.

The quotations from *The Struggle for Lutheran Unity and Consolidation in the U.S.A. from the Late 1930's to the Early 1970's* are © 1980, Estate of Edward C. Fendt. Used by permission of Augsburg Publishing House.

# CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	4
I. THE NATURE OF FELLOWSHIP	7
A. The Scriptural Concept of Fellowship	8
1. Fellowship: Having Part in a Common Thing	8
2. Fellowship: A Spiritual Relationship Which Is Given	9
a. Unity with Christ	9
b. Unity in the Church, the Body of Christ	10
3. Fellowship: An External Relationship to Be Manifested and Maintained	11
a. "Forbearing One Another in Love"	11
b. For the Sake of the Spiritual Unity of the Church	12
B. Scriptural Principles of Fellowship	13
II. THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE NATURE OF FELLOWSHIP FOR CHURCH-BODY-LEVEL RELATIONSHIPS	17
A. Principles—Not Specific Procedures for Individual Cases	18
B. A Brief Review of the Church's Application of the Scriptural Principles of Fellowship	19
C. Models for External Unity in the Church	21
1. Conciliarity	21
2. Reconciled Diversity	24
3. Selective Fellowship	27
4. Ecclesiastical Declaration of Altar and Pulpit Fellowship	32
CONCLUSION	39
POSTSCRIPT: A Plea for Responsible Freedom in the Context of Responsible Commitment	44

# INTRODUCTION

Many complex and sensitive problems regarding inter-Christian relationships confront Christendom today. The multiplicity of denominations and movements, the high degree of mobility in the modern world, and the proliferation of ideologies and beliefs complicate the efforts of Christians to build relationships at both the individual and church-body levels which will be faithful not only to the Biblical mandates to proclaim and preserve the pure Gospel but also to the Scriptural exhortations to show love for all people and especially for fellow members of the household of faith.

Members of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod are not exempt from the effects of these developments. Lay members of the Synod are seeking guidance regarding participation in numerous kinds of joint activities with members of other Christian churches in Bible study groups, mass evangelism programs, interdenominational workshops and retreats, and a variety of religious associations. Pastors are increasingly confronted with requests to take part in ecumenical weddings, funerals, and occasional services and rallies of every description. Many congregations are discussing their policy for admission to Holy Communion, and the question is frequently asked: "How much agreement with another church body is necessary before altar and pulpit fellowship can be declared?" Some today are even questioning whether ecclesiastical declarations of altar and pulpit fellowship are workable in this age of "ambiguous denominationalism."<sup>1</sup> It is in the

---

<sup>1</sup>Ambiguous denominationalism is a phrase which is sometimes used to refer to the fact that doctrinal divergence today is often as great within a denomination as between denominations.



context of questions such as these that the Commission on Theology and Church Relations has prepared this report in response to a 1977 request of the Synod that it "prepare a comprehensive report on the nature and implications of the concept of fellowship."<sup>2</sup>

The CTCR has attempted to involve the entire Synod in the preparation of this report. In 1978 it conducted 55 synodwide conferences involving over 4,000 pastors, teachers, and directors of Christian education on the topic "Formula for Concord." A Bible Study on Fellowship, which included a response questionnaire for the use of congregations and individuals, was distributed in January of 1980 to all congregations of the Synod and to pastors not serving congregations. The CTCR is grateful to all those who took the time to participate in these discussions and to share with the Commission the insights which they gained through these studies of the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions on the subject of fellowship.

The discussions which took place in the "Formula for Concord" conferences and the responses to the Bible Study on Fellowship indicate that both aspects of the Commission's assignment to prepare a report on the *nature* and *implications* of the concept of fellowship are in need of clarification. On the one hand, the discussion of the *nature* of fellowship is complicated by the fact that the word "fellowship" itself is frequently used to refer to a number of different relationships, often without an awareness that

---

<sup>2</sup>Resolution 3-02A, *Convention Proceedings*, 1977, p. 126. In this resolution the Synod stated that years of discussions between representatives of the ALC and LCMS had revealed clear doctrinal differences between them on the doctrine of Scripture, the ordination of women, the nature and basis of fellowship, and membership in ecumenical organizations. At the same time, however, the Synod noted that "there is some evidence of agreement in doctrine and practice between members of the ALC and LCMS on the local level," that "not all members of the ALC share the objectionable positions and practices of the ALC," that "many LCMS members are unaware of the serious differences that exist at the church body level," and that "there is considerable evidence of doctrinal disagreement and confusion in understanding the nature and implications of the concept of fellowship." Taking all of these factors into account, the Synod proceeded to declare itself to be in a state of "fellowship in protest with the ALC" on account of doctrinal disagreements and to ask the CTCR "to prepare a comprehensive study and report on the nature and implications of the concept of fellowship." This assignment to the CTCR was renewed in 1979. Cf. Resolution 3-03, *Convention Proceedings*, 1979, pp. 117f.

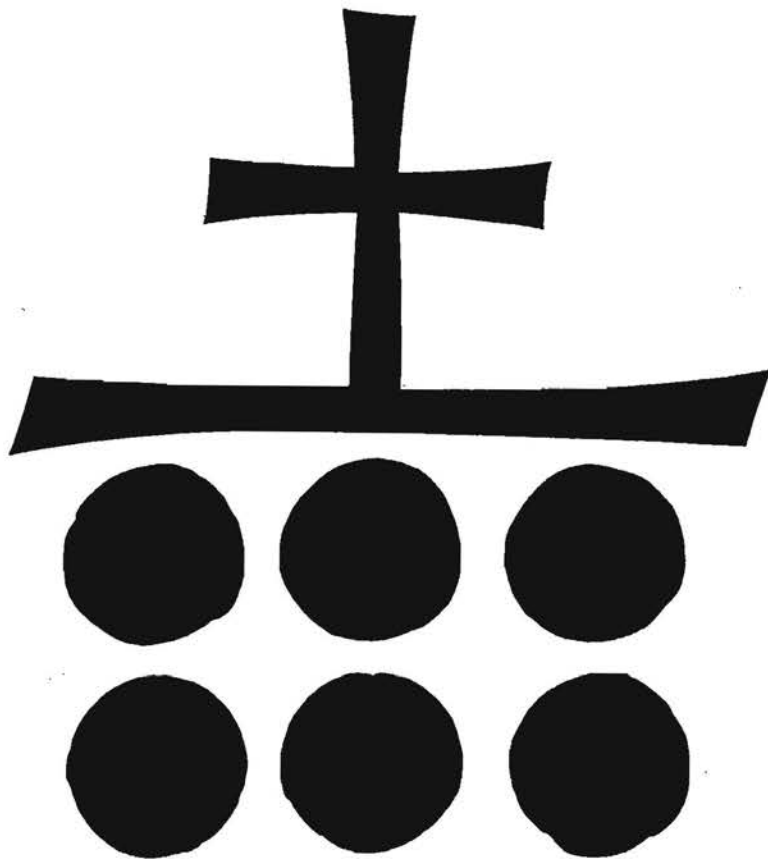
this is being done. On the other hand, the discussion of the *implications* of fellowship is made more difficult by the frequent failure to distinguish between the principles which should guide inter-Christian relationships and their application at different levels.

In the first part of this document the Commission presents an overview of what God's Word teaches about the nature of fellowship, together with a listing of the basic Scriptural principles which should guide Christians in their relationships with one another. Section II discusses the implications of these principles for church-body-level relationships. The CTCR concludes this report with a suggestion that the Synod continue to study the topic of fellowship by directing its attention specifically to the application of the principles of fellowship presented in this report at the congregational, pastoral, and individuals levels.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup>Some have suggested that the starting point for a comprehensive treatment of the concept of fellowship should be Article VII of the Augsburg Confession. Such an approach would certainly be legitimate, since this article has important implications for this subject. As the CTCR has stated ("A Review of the Question 'What Is a Doctrine,'" A Report of the CTCR, 1967, p. 7): "A pure understanding of the Gospel, and therefore correct preaching of the Gospel, calls for a correct understanding of the articles of faith treated in the Augsburg Confession, defended in its Apology, and explained in the remaining Lutheran Confessions, particularly the Formula of Concord. All articles of faith are integrally related to the Gospel and articulate the Gospel from different perspectives. Consequently the preaching of the Gospel according to a pure understanding of it is not possible when any article of faith is either falsified or denied." At the same time, the CTCR has stated that AC VII "is not in the first instance a programmatic statement for the establishment of denominational fellowship." Therefore the Commission has approached this assignment from the doctrine of the means by which the church is created, nurtured, and preserved (the marks of the church), rather than from the doctrine of the church itself.

## I. THE NATURE OF FELLOWSHIP



# I. THE NATURE OF FELLOWSHIP

## A. THE SCRIPTURAL CONCEPT OF FELLOWSHIP

### 1. Fellowship: Having Part in a Common Thing

In the New Testament the word *koinonia* (and its cognates), the Greek term for fellowship, appears in a number of places. This is the word which St. Paul uses to refer to the offering which the churches of Macedonia collected for the saints in Jerusalem (Rom. 15:26; 2 Cor. 9:13; cf. also 2 Cor. 8:4). The apostle also employs it with reference to the relationship existing between the wine and the blood and the bread and body of Christ received by participants in the Sacrament of the Altar, who, though many, are one body in Christ (1 Cor. 10:16-17). Not only does St. Paul speak of the Philippian Christians as "partakers (*synkoinonoi*) with me of grace" (Phil. 1:7), but he also says that partaking (*synkoinoneo*, *koinoneo*) in the sins of others is to be avoided (Eph. 5:11; 1 Tim. 5:22). Luke calls James and John partners (*koinonoi*) with Simon in the fishing business (Luke 5:10).

The New Testament describes Christians as partners who share in the Gospel (1 Cor. 9:23), in faith (Philemon 6), in sufferings and comfort (Phil. 3:10; 2 Cor. 1:7; Rev. 1:9), in the Holy Spirit (2 Cor. 13:14; Phil. 2:1), and in eternal glory (1 Peter 5:1). St. Paul tells the Corinthians that they have been called "into the fellowship (*koinonia*) of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord" (1 Cor. 1:9), and St. John writes that he proclaims that which he has seen and heard "so that you may have fellowship (*koinonia*) with us; and our fellowship (*koinonia*) is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ" (1 John 1:3). St. Luke reports (Acts 2:42) that the early Christians "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship" (*koinonia*), and St. Paul writes that when James, Cephas, and John "perceived the grace that was given to me," they gave to him and Barnabas "the right hand of fellowship" (*koinonia*) (Gal. 2:9).

Without referring to every place where *koinonia* (and its cognates) appears in the New Testament, it can be concluded that this is a term which

---

<sup>4</sup>J. V. Campbell says that *koinonia* means "having something in common with someone" or "participating in something" (J. V. Campbell, "Koinonia and Its Cognates in the New Testament," *Journal of Biblical Literature* (1932), pp. 356 f.). The Bauer-Arndt-Gingrich lexicon (second edition) lists four meanings: 1) association, communion, fellowship, close relationship; 2) generosity, fellow-feeling, altruism; 3) sign of fellowship, proof of brotherly unity, gift, contribution; and 4) participation, sharing in something (W. F. Arndt and F. W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian*



has as its root meaning "having part in a common thing."<sup>4</sup> It is with this meaning in mind that the New Testament writers use it to refer to a variety of relationships. Important in this discussion on the nature of fellowship in the context of inter-Christian relationships is the fact that *koinonia* most frequently appears in connection with that spiritual unity which exists in the body of Christ (e. g., 1 Cor. 1:9; 1 John 1:3), but it is also used at times to refer to the attempts of Christians to manifest this unity externally (e. g., Acts 2:42; Gal. 2:9). It dare not be overlooked, however, that the Scriptures also have much to say about each of these two distinct (but not separate) relationships without making specific use of the term *koinonia* at all. For example, this word appears neither in Paul's discussion of spiritual unity in the body of Christ in Eph. 4:1-6 nor in Christ's High Priestly Prayer in John 17:20 f., nor is it used in many of those sections of Scripture which exhort Christians to guard the truth and to live together in the church in an external relationship of peace and love on the basis of agreement in God's Word (e. g., 1 Cor. 1:10; 2 Tim. 1:13-14).

The implications of that which has just been stated are clear. This study on fellowship will have to be more than a mere word study on the meaning and usages of *koinonia* in the New Testament. If we are to be faithful to the Scriptural understanding of the nature of fellowship in the context of inter-Christian and interchurch relationships, then it will be necessary not only to examine those sections of the Scriptures where the word *koinonia* appears but also to take into account what God's Word has to say about the spiritual unity which is given with faith in Christ and to heed the guidance the Scriptures give to Christians regarding external unity in the church.

## 2. Fellowship: A Spiritual Relationship Which Is Given

### a. Unity with Christ

Even before the foundation of the world, God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ planned for our redemption and chose us to be His sons and

---

*Literature*, 2nd ed. rev. and augmented by F. W. Gingrich and Frederick Danker [Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979], pp. 438-39). Friedrich Hauck in the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* outlines his discussion of the New Testament's use of *koinonia* and its cognates under the headings: 1) "to share with someone in something"; 2) "to give someone a share in something"; and 3) "fellowship" (Friedrich Hauck, "Koinon- in the New Testament," Vol. 3 [Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1965], pp. 804-809). Cf. also Heinrich Seesemann, *Der Begriff Koinonia im Neuen Testament* (Giessen: Verlag von Alfred Töpelmann, 1933).

daughters (Eph. 1:3-14). Although God had created the human race to be in fellowship with Him (Gen. 1:26-29; 2:16-17), this relationship was destroyed when Adam and Eve yielded to the temptation of Satan and transgressed His command (Gen. 3). But in the fullness of time God, in accordance with His plan, sent His Son Jesus Christ, “born of woman, born under the Law, to redeem those who were under the Law” (Gal. 4:4). St. Paul tells the Galatians that “in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ” (Gal. 3:26-27). “By the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit” God unites us with Christ and makes us “heirs in hope of eternal life” (Titus 3:5-7). The apostle Paul writes: “Justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 5:1). We are given access by faith to His grace (Rom. 5:2).

Fellowship with Christ is therefore given with faith in Him. Through the means of grace God offers and conveys to us forgiveness for our sins. By Baptism we are incorporated into the body of Christ, and we are now privileged to call God “Father.” The treasures of forgiveness, life, and salvation are ours already now in this life through faith. Furthermore, the Holy Spirit works through the Word and sacraments to preserve us in union with our Savior until He returns on the last day. This vertical relationship of spiritual unity with Christ is not something we can achieve. It is a gift from God to all believers in Jesus Christ.

#### *b. Unity in the Church, the Body of Christ*

Faith not only places believers in Christ into a spiritual fellowship with their Lord, but it also unites them with one another. St. Paul writes: “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one Baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all” (Eph. 4:4-6). The apostle refers to Christ as “the Head of the body, the church” (Col. 1:18), and he says that “we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another” (Rom. 12:5). This means that, properly speaking, there is only one church.<sup>5</sup>

Since the one holy Christian church (*una sancta ecclesia*) includes all believers in Christ, its members are to be found throughout the world in all Christian denominations where the Gospel is taught and the sacraments are

---

<sup>5</sup>We therefore confess in the Nicene Creed: “And I believe one holy, Christian, and apostolic church.” That there is, properly speaking, only one church is also confessed in the third article of the Apostles’ Creed: “I believe in . . . the holy Christian church” (*The Book of Concord*, pp. 18–19).

administered. (Is. 55:10-11; Rom. 1:16-17, 10:17; Matt. 13:37 f.; 26:26-28; Gal. 3:27-28; 1 Cor. 1:2; 2 Tim. 2:19a). The members of this church do not exist as pebbles in a box but as branches on a vine (John 15:5). "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, among those who have put on Christ in Baptism, for they are "all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28). Christ speaks of members of His body as being one "even as Thou, Father, art in Me, and I in Thee" (John 17:21). But not all who are listed as members of Christian churches are necessarily included in this fellowship, for church rosters may contain the names of unbelievers and hypocrites.<sup>6</sup>

Like the vertical fellowship of the believer with Christ, this spiritual unity which binds all true Christians together in a horizontal relationship in the body of Christ is a gift from God and not the product of human efforts.

### **3. Fellowship: An External Relationship to Be Manifested and Maintained<sup>7</sup>**

#### *a. "Forbearing One Another in Love"*

Since it is *faith in the heart* which binds believers together with Christ and with one another, no human eye can see this spiritual unity. But there is an inner dynamic to faith in Jesus Christ which works toward an external unity embracing all those who confess faith in Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 1:10). What the church is by God's design is what He wants the church to show itself to be—one—so that "the world may believe" (John 17:21).

The Scriptures, therefore, exhort Christians to manifest the unity which has already been given them by virtue of their incorporation into the body of Christ. St. Paul writes: "I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all lowliness and meekness, with patience, *forbearing one another in love*, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:1-3). Those who have been grafted into Him who is the true vine are to bear the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22). Having been incorporated by Baptism into the body of Christ, they should manifest love for the fellow members of His body. Love for the brethren, writes St. John, is evidence that we have "passed out of death into life" (1 John 3:14; cf. Eph. 5:2). This external unity, although involving human efforts, is also a gift from God.

---

<sup>6</sup>It is for this reason that the Lutheran Confessions distinguish between the church properly speaking (*proprie dicta*) and broadly speaking (*large dicta*) (Ap, VII and VIII, 10, 12-13, 16, 20, 22).

<sup>7</sup>Fellowship understood as an external relationship to be manifested and maintained also possesses a spiritual dimension, to be sure, in that it is constituted by agreement in the confession of the Scriptural Gospel and the administration of the sacraments.

To the extent that love controls their conduct, Christians seek out fellow believers in Jesus Christ in order to build them up and to be built up by them (Rom. 1:11-12). Love rejoices with those who rejoice, it weeps with those who weep (Rom. 12:15; 1 Cor. 12—13). It works to strengthen the weak, encourage the strong, and admonish the erring (Gal. 6:1-2). Above all, it seeks to help fellow believers remain faithful to Christ and to His Word. This love may in certain situations lead members of the church to separate themselves from fellow Christians and even to exercise church discipline, although it be with many tears (1 Cor. 5:5; 2 Cor. 2:4).

*b. For the Sake of the Spiritual Unity of the Church*

Error in the understanding and use of the Scriptures threatens unity with Christ and with the saints. Since teachings contrary to God's Word lead away from Christ and not to Him, it is necessary that the Gospel be preached *purely* and the sacraments administered *rightly*. Love for Him who is the Truth and for the saints for whom He died will have nothing to do with subverting or compromising in any way the only means through which Christians are made one with Christ and with one another.

Members of the body of Christ are therefore commanded by God to seek external unity in the church for the sake of the spiritual unity of the church. The Holy Scriptures exhort Christians to teach sound doctrine as it is given in the writings of the prophets and apostles and to defend and preserve the Gospel against all error. It is for the sake of the spiritual unity of the church that the Old Testament prophets repeatedly speak out against false prophets and their false teachings (e. g., Deut. 13:1-5; Jer. 9:13-15). It is for the sake of the spiritual unity of the church that Jesus Himself warns against false prophets who come in sheep's clothing (Matt. 7:15; cf. Acts 20:28-30) and commissions His disciples to "observe all that I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:19-20). It is for the sake of the spiritual unity of the church that St. Paul condemns those who "pervert the Gospel of Christ" (Gal. 1:7), that he stresses the necessity of avoiding those who create "dissensions and difficulties, in opposition to the doctrine which you have been taught" (Rom. 16:17),<sup>8</sup> and that he encourages his co-worker Titus to "hold firm to the sure Word" and rebuke "sharply" those who "reject the truth" (Titus 1:9-16).

Moreover, the Gospel which Christians cherish they are also to proclaim. The church's commission to proclaim the Good News is part of God's plan to unite all things together in Christ (Eph. 1:3-10; 3:7-10). Believers are God's chosen witnesses (Acts 1:8). Through the Word which

---

<sup>8</sup>Cf. Martin Franzmann, "Exegesis on Romans 16:17 ff.," *Concordia Journal*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (January 1981), pp. 13—20.



the church proclaims, people actually receive forgiveness for their sins and become fellow citizens with the saints and members of God's household (Eph. 2:19).

## **B. SCRIPTURAL PRINCIPLES OF FELLOWSHIP<sup>9</sup>**

**1. Spiritual fellowship with Christ and with all believers is given with faith in the heart (*fides qua*)**<sup>10</sup> (1 Cor. 1:2; John 10:16; 17:20-21; Rom. 3:28; 12:4-5; 1 Cor. 12:4 f.; Eph. 1:15-23; 2:8-9; 4:3-6; Gal. 3:26-28; 1 John 1:1-4. Cf. AC, VII, 2; Ap, VII and VIII, 5, 31; SC, II, 5). All Christians are united in a spiritual unity with Christ by faith in the heart (*fides qua*). As members of the one holy Christian church they are also one with every other Christian who lives or who has ever lived on the face of the earth.

**2. Faith in the heart (*fides qua*) comes into being through the power of the Holy Spirit working through the Gospel** (Mark 16:16; Rom. 1:16-17; 10:17; 1 Cor. 1:21; 4:15; 12:3; 2 Thess. 2:14; John 17:20; Titus 3:5; 1 Peter 1:23. Cf. AC, V; AC, VII, 1, 2; IX, 1, 2; XIII, 1; Ap, VII and VIII, 8; SC, II, 6; IV, 1-14.) The word Gospel is here used in its narrow sense (i. e., "the delightful proclamation of God's grace and favor acquired through the merits of Christ").<sup>11</sup> Faith in the heart (*fides qua*) is produced not by the teaching that the Bible is a holy book, not by the acceptance of the inerrancy of Scripture, and not by concern for pure doctrine, but only by the Holy Spirit working through the means of grace, i. e. Word and sacrament.

**3. For the church today Holy Scripture is the only judge, rule, and norm of the Gospel** (Ps. 119:105; Luke 1:1-4; John 20:31; Rom. 1:2; 15:4; 1 Thess. 2:13; 2 Tim. 3:15-16; Gal. 1:8. Cf. LC, V, 31-32; Ap, IV, 81; Ap, XV, 17; FC Ep, Rule and Norm, 1-2; FC SD, Rule and Norm, 3; SA, II, ii, 15). Although the first proclamation of the Gospel preceded the writings of the prophets and apostles, for us today in the post-apostolic church Holy Scripture is the only norm for the preaching and teaching of the Gospel. The Holy Spirit creates faith in the heart through the *Scriptural Gospel*. Any

---

<sup>9</sup>Cf. "A Lutheran Stance Toward Ecumenism," A Report of the CTCR, 1974, pp. 9 f., for a more extensive treatment of what the Lutheran Confessions teach about church fellowship.

<sup>10</sup>Theologians use the Latin phrase *fides qua creditur* ("the faith by which one believes") and *fides quae creditur* ("the faith which is believed") to distinguish between faith understood as the believer's trust in God's redemptive activity in Christ (*fides qua*) and "faith" understood as the body of Christian doctrine (*fides quae*).

<sup>11</sup>FC Ep, V, 7.

qualification of the divine authority of Scripture (for example, through the use of historical criticism as it has been developed over the past two hundred years in the investigation of Scripture) endangers the Gospel in the narrow sense and consequently the unity of the church.

**4. Good works flow out of faith and are responses to the Gospel** (John 15:1-11; 17:17; Eph. 4:1-3; Gal. 5:6; 1 Peter 1:22; 1 John 3:14; 4:7-12. Cf. AC, XX, 27-34; Ap, IV, 74, 106, 111; XII, 37, 82; FC Ep, IV, 11; FC SD, III, 27; IV, 9-12). Justification comes before sanctification. Apart from faith in the Gospel there can be no good works. But when the Holy Spirit is given through faith, the heart is moved to do good works. In the same way that faith precedes good works, it is proper and necessary to speak of the priority of the truth of the Gospel over love.

**5. Love, which heads the list of "the fruit of the Spirit," always seeks the edification of the members of the body of Christ** (Gal. 5:22-25; 6:1-5; 1 Cor. 8:1; 13:4-7; 14:12; 2 Cor. 2:4; Rom. 15:1-3; 12:9-13; Eph. 4:15-16; Col. 3:14-15. Cf. Ap, IV, 125, 225-226, 231-232; FC SD, IV, 10-12). Love, which is a response to the Gospel, stands uppermost in the realm of sanctification (1 Cor. 13). But because love always seeks the edification of the members of Christ's body, it manifests itself in a variety of ways, depending on the situation and need. At one time it shows itself in tears, at another time in rejoicing, at yet another time in admonition, but never by compromising the means by which the spiritual unity of the church comes into being.

**6. The confession of the apostolic faith (*fides quae*)<sup>12</sup> as it is taught in the Scriptures is mandated by God for the sake of the edification and extension of Christ's body, the church** (Matt. 28:18-20; 1 Tim. 1:3-5; 6:3 f.; 2 Tim. 2:14-18; Acts 20:28-32; Gal. 2:4-5, 14; Eph. 4:14-16; Heb. 13:9. Cf. Preface to *The Book of Concord*, p. 13; Preface to Apology, 15-17; Ap, XX, 6-8; FC SD, Rule and Norm, 14 f.). Faith in the heart (*fides qua*) continues to be saving faith as long as it has as its object the Scriptural Gospel of Jesus Christ. God therefore commands that the church teach and confess the faith (*fides quae*) as it has been recorded by the prophets and apostles in order that the body of Christ may be edified and extended.

**7. Church fellowship (in the sense of external unity in the church) is constituted by agreement in the faith which is confessed (*fides quae*) and not by faith in the heart (*fides qua*)<sup>13</sup>** (Matt. 3:12; 13:24-30, 36-43; 1 Cor. 1:10; 2 Tim. 1:13-14; 2:19; Gal. 2:9; Acts 2:42. Cf. Ap, VII and VIII, 12-13, 17-19; Preface to *The Book of Concord*, p. 6; FC SD, XI, 94-96; FC SD, VII, 33; FC SD Rule and Norm, 14; FC SD, Rule and Norm, 1). Faith in the heart (*fides qua*) is, to be sure, presupposed in those who confess

---

<sup>12</sup>See note 10 above.

<sup>13</sup>There is no Scriptural evidence to indicate that external unity in the church necessarily implies organizational unity.

faith in the Gospel. However, if this faith in the heart constituted church fellowship, it would be impossible to speak of church fellowship in the sense of external unity in the church, since spiritual fellowship in the body of Christ is a matter of faith in the heart (Thesis I) and is hidden from human eyes.<sup>14</sup> According to the Scriptures, external unity in the church is a matter of the right confession of the prophetic and apostolic faith.

**8. The refusal to affirm church fellowship (in the sense of external unity in the church) with those who do not confess the faith (*fides quae*) as it is taught in the Scriptures is not an optional matter but a Scriptural mandate** (Rom. 16:17-20; Gal. 1:6 f.; Matt. 7:15-16; Acts 19:8-10; Titus 1:9-16; 2 John 9-11; 2 Thess. 3:14; Treatise, 41-44; FC SD, X, 21 f.; AC, XXVIII, 21-26, FC SD, VII, 33). Just as the law of Christian love leads members of the body of Christ to assume that faith (*fides qua*) exists in the heart of all those who profess faith in the Gospel (narrow sense), so it also, in the interest of the Gospel and that faith, forbids the affirmation of church fellowship where there is a lack of agreement in the confession of the faith (*fides quae*).<sup>15</sup> Although the Scriptures do not present a timetable or

---

<sup>14</sup>Cf. Peter Brunner, "The Realization of Church Fellowship," *The Unity of the Church: A Symposium* (Rock Island, Ill.: Augustana Press, 1957), p. 13. Brunner writes: "The unity of the church is unquestionably constantly given. The unity of the spiritual body of Jesus is indestructible. . . . When we take this seriously, we cannot formulate our task in the ecumenical consultations to be the establishing of the unity of the Church of Jesus Christ. Contrariwise, we must derive our ecumenical obligation from the unity of the church that is continually given. We should not formulate our task in such a way as to say that we have to make the unity of the church of God visible on earth. For we cannot visibly draw the lines of division which truly separate the living members of the body of Jesus from those who will not inherit the kingdom of God. This line of separation is seen now only by the eye of God. Therefore the unity of the Church of God will only first be manifest for our eyes in the apocalyptic revelation of the kingdom of God."

<sup>15</sup>Cf. *ibid.*, p. 20: "For the sake of men's salvation, the church stands under the command to preserve clearly the apostolic Word, and thereby, the mark of apostolicity at its center. In obedience to this principal ecclesiological command, the church must repudiate all false doctrine. In obedience to this command, it must refuse to grant church fellowship where agreement cannot be reached on the content of the Word which is to be proclaimed as the apostolic message and faithfully administered in its sacraments."

the specific procedures to be followed in delineating external relationships with those who do not correctly confess the faith (*fides quae*), they do clearly teach that separation from them (refusal to affirm or continue church fellowship) is commanded by God.

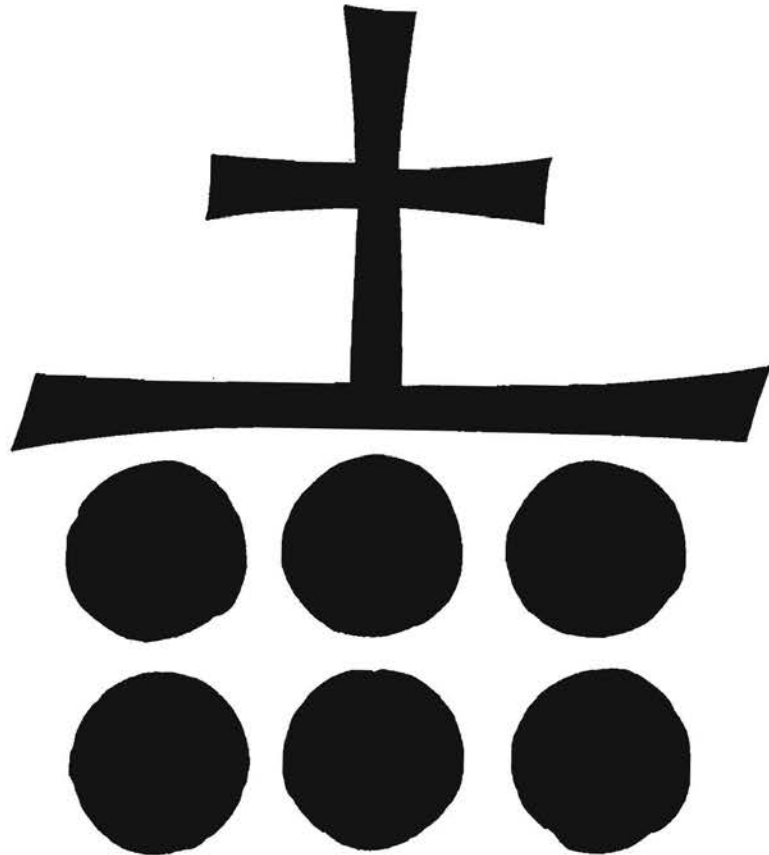
**9. The quest for church fellowship (in the sense of external unity in the church), as well as its acknowledgement when agreement in the confession of the faith has been achieved, are not optional matters but Scriptural mandates** (Rom. 12:14-21; 15:5-6; Eph. 4:1-3; 1 Cor. 1:10-13; 2 Cor. 13:11; Gal. 2:9; Phil. 4:2. Cf. Preface to *The Book of Concord*, pp. 13-14; Preface to the Augsburg Confession, 4, 10; FCSD, Rule and Norm, 14; X, 31).<sup>16</sup> The refusal of church fellowship for any reason other than disagreement in the confession of the faith (e. g., differences in ceremonies, polity, national origin, language), violates the law of Christian love, even as does all loveless and misguided "concern" for the truth. Separatism (sectarianism) is condemned by God's Word. The Scriptures command those who are one in Christ both to seek agreement in the confession of the faith (*fides quae*) with all those who profess faith in Christ and to acknowledge the existence of church fellowship once this agreement has been reached.

---

<sup>16</sup>Cf. "A Lutheran Stance Toward Ecumenism," pp. 9—10.



## II. THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE NATURE OF FELLOWSHIP FOR CHURCH-BODY-LEVEL RELATIONSHIPS



## II. THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE NATURE OF FELLOWSHIP FOR CHURCH-BODY-LEVEL RELATIONSHIPS

### A. PRINCIPLES—NOT SPECIFIC PROCEDURES FOR INDIVIDUAL CASES

Although the Scriptures have much to say about the spiritual unity which binds all believers together in the body of Christ and with one another, and despite the exhortations of the inspired writers that the church should seek to manifest its given unity externally without endangering the means by which the unity of the church is created, God's Word does not prescribe specific procedures for carrying this out in each particular case. St. Paul, for example, writes to "the churches of Galatia" that he was astonished that they were "so quickly deserting Him who called you in the grace of Christ and turning to a different gospel." He says to the one who preaches a gospel contrary to that which they had received, "Let him be accursed" (Gal. 1:6-9). But the apostle does not tell us precisely how he dealt with these Judaizers upon his arrival in Galatia.<sup>17</sup>

Did St. Paul continue to worship with them? Did he exclude them from the Lord's Supper? And even if he had reported how he handled this

---

<sup>17</sup>Cf. Martin Franzmann, "Exegesis on Romans 16:17 ff.," p. 18. Franzmann describes the complexity of the situation which existed in the church in Galatia: "The most persistent troublers of Pauline congregations and Pauline missions . . . were undoubtedly Judaizers, known to us best and most clearly from the Epistles to the Galatians and the Book of Acts. Acts (15:5) tells that they were Pharisees who had come to the faith. St. Paul's language concerning them in Galatians is stern and uncompromising, designed to lay bare the fundamental contradiction between their propaganda and the Gospel of the free grace of God in Christ Jesus. But the very force and fury of his language is evidence that what the Judaizers brought was deceptively like the real article. What they preached was, in their understanding of it, 'another gospel,' and it is understandable that whereas St. Paul stresses the 'another,' they stressed the 'gospel.' It is not beyond imagination to think that they were of the conviction that they were propagating a more conservative type of Christianity, the genuine Jerusalem variety, made of sterner stuff than the man-pleasing dilution of it that St. Paul had originally proclaimed among the Galatians."

situation, this would not necessarily mean that the specific procedure which he followed in this particular instance would be applicable for all times and places. We know, for example, that on one occasion St. Paul refused to compel Titus to be circumcised so that "the truth of the Gospel might be preserved" (Gal. 2:1-5). But he also reports that in a different situation he insisted on the circumcision of Timothy "because of the Jews that were in those places, for they all knew that his father was a Greek" (Acts 16:3).<sup>18</sup> The Scriptures, rather than presenting the church with specific regulations for each and every inter-Christian relationship, set forth fundamental principles which are to be applied to the unique situation in which Christians find themselves at any given point in history.

### **B. A BRIEF REVIEW OF THE CHURCH'S APPLICATION OF THE SCRIPTURAL PRINCIPLES OF FELLOWSHIP<sup>19</sup>**

Down through the centuries, seeking to be faithful to the principles of fellowship presented in the Scriptures, Christians have developed various procedures and organizational structures which have attempted to provide orderly and helpful guidance for local congregations in their relationships with one another.

During the first four centuries of the church as Christianity spread throughout the world, it became necessary to develop ways for geographically separated congregations to advise one another regarding church membership. For the early church, church fellowship was altar fellowship, and unity in doctrine was its prerequisite.<sup>20</sup> In keeping with this understanding, circular letters were sent throughout Christendom reporting excommunications. "Letters of Commendation" and later "Letters of Fellowship" and "Letters of Peace" were "universally required of Christians in a strange place as

---

<sup>18</sup>Titus was a Greek. Hence to compel him to be circumcised would be to compromise the Gospel. But Timothy, although he had a Greek father, as the son of a Jewish mother could be considered to be a Jew. Paul could therefore circumcise him without compromising the Gospel.

<sup>19</sup>See "Theology of Fellowship," A Report of the CTCR, 1967, pp. 12 f., for a more complete review of the practice of church fellowship in church history.

<sup>20</sup>Werner Elert, *Eucharist and Church Fellowship in the First Four Centuries*, trans. N. E. Nagel (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1966), p. 109. Elert writes (p. 113): "Heterodoxy breaks church fellowship and therefore self-evidently and primarily also altar fellowship."

evidence toward their reception by a new congregation or its bishops."<sup>21</sup>

As a result of the Christianization of the West, membership in the church was more or less taken for granted in most parts of Europe during the Middle Ages. Disruptive disagreement with the traditional teaching and authority of the church resulted in excommunication. Following the Reformation, membership in Lutheran, Reformed, and Roman Catholic churches was largely a matter of the faith confessed by the territorial rulers. Lutherans, while expressly refusing to condemn "entire churches inside or outside the Holy Empire of the German Nation" but "only false and seductive doctrines and their stiff-necked proponents and blasphemers" (Preface to *The Book of Concord*, p. 11),<sup>22</sup> taught that external unity in the church was not a matter of ceremonies but of agreement "in doctrine and in all its articles" and in "the right use of the holy sacraments" (FC SD, X, 31). With the rise of "denominationalism" in the 19th century, confessional Lutherans sought to apply these same Scriptural principles of fellowship through declarations of altar and pulpit fellowship with those church bodies with which they were in doctrinal agreement and by the repudiation of church fellowship with the adherents of false doctrine. In recent years other models for achieving external unity in an increasingly splintered Christendom have been advocated.

In an attempt to provide guidance to the Synod today as it relates to other church bodies, we shall examine three of these proposals which are more frequently mentioned in addition to the more traditional ecclesiastical declaration of altar and pulpit fellowship, and evaluate them on the basis of the Scriptural principles of fellowship presented in the first section of this report.<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 128.

<sup>22</sup>Cf. Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, ed. J. Pelikan, Vol. 26: *Lectures on Galatians 1535* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1963), p. 25. Commenting on Gal. 1:2, Luther writes: "Therefore the church is holy even where the fanatics are dominant, so long as they do not deny the Word and the sacraments; if they deny these, they are no longer the church. Wherever the substance of the Word and the sacraments abides, therefore, there the holy church is present, even though Anti-christ may reign there."

<sup>23</sup>Examined here are only those models for external unity in the church which have been proposed by worldwide ecumenical organizations such as the World Council of Churches and the Lutheran World Federation, or which have been frequently discussed in the Synod. Models for external unity in the church not reviewed here range from "ecclesial communion," proposed



## C. MODELS FOR EXTERNAL UNITY IN THE CHURCH

### 1. Conciliarity

Conciliarity or conciliar fellowship refers to the model for church unity which has been promoted by the World Council of Churches. Serious consideration of church unity has taken place in the WCC ever since its formation in 1948.<sup>24</sup> In 1957 the Faith and Order Commission initiated a study on "The Nature of the Unity We Seek." The New Delhi Assembly of the WCC in 1961 spoke of the nature of the unity for which the member churches of the WCC should strive in terms of a visible unity of "all in each place" in "a fully committed fellowship."<sup>25</sup> The term "conciliar" was first used by the Uppsala Assembly in 1968 when it spoke of "eventually actualizing a truly universal, ecumenical, conciliar form of common life and witness."<sup>26</sup> Conciliarity as the World Council of Churches' model for unity in the church was given definitive form in the report of a consultation convened by its Faith and Order Commission to discuss "concepts of unity and models of union" in Salamanca in September 1973.<sup>27</sup>

Having noted that "Jesus Christ founded one Church," the Salamanca Report says that "today we live in diverse churches divided from one another." Consistent with this view, it proceeds to speak of "a united Church" as a "vision" and as a "goal" to be achieved at some point in the future as follows:

The one Church is to be envisioned as a conciliar fellowship of local churches which are themselves truly united. In this conciliar fellowship each local church possesses, in communion with the others, the fulness of catholicity, witnesses to the same apostolic faith and therefore recognizes the others as belonging to the same Church of Christ and guided by the same spirit.<sup>28</sup>

---

by the Second Vatican Council, based on a sacramental expression of the mystery of the Trinity (cf. John Hotchkin's "Probing the Possibilities," *Interface*, 1980, pp. 3 f.), to the demand of separatistic groups for total agreement not only in doctrine but also in ceremonies, polity, and all matters of adiaphora.

<sup>24</sup>Cf., e. g., "The Church, the Churches, and the World Council of Churches," Central Committee Minutes, Toronto, 1950, pp. 84—90.

<sup>25</sup>*The New Delhi Report* (London: SCM, 1962), p. 116.

<sup>26</sup>*The Uppsala 68 Report* (Geneva: WCC, 1968), p. 17.

<sup>27</sup>The WCC has continued to discuss conciliarity since 1973, e. g., at Accra, Ghana (July—August 1974), and Nairobi (1975).

<sup>28</sup>"The Unity of the Church—Next Steps," *The Ecumenical Review*, 26 (April 1974), p. 293.

According to this report, the word "conciliar" refers "to the mutual relationships of local churches within the one Church." Stating that "conciliar fellowship requires organic union," many advocates of the World Council's model for external unity in the church have expressly rejected the idea that "reconciled diversity" can serve as a model for the "shape of the unity" to be sought.<sup>29</sup>

Advocates of conciliarity recognize that unity in the church demands a certain amount of consensus. "Fellowship will only last if it shares certain articulated forms of expression."<sup>30</sup> But this should not be understood as implying a need for agreement in "a complete statement of faith." On the contrary, consensus "can be confined to a few fundamental affirmations, provided it is relevant to present conditions."<sup>31</sup> This means that "the traditional expressions of our identity as confessions and communions" must be recognized as "time-bound in their terms of reference and relevance."<sup>32</sup>

The divided churches' readiness to surrender their traditional identities can be assisted by recognizing that "the criteria for establishing unity are not fixed in advance."<sup>33</sup> The Salamanca study document says that recent New

---

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., pp. 293—95. Cf. "Concepts of Unity and Models of Union: A Preliminary Study Document," 1972, p. 11. "Organic union seems, therefore, the only model worth considering. The statements of the New Delhi and Uppsala assemblies point in the same direction. The 'fully committed fellowship' for which New Delhi pleaded can only come about by the organic union of Christians and congregations 'in each place.' . . . Such a degree of fellowship cannot be secured by the other models: movement, federation, mutual recognition." J. E. Lesslie Newbigin, one of the fathers of conciliarism, writes: "We have not included among the legitimate groups for provisional separation the distinct 'types' of Christian discipleship which have developed in history on the basis of special experiences of individual leaders or national churches, 'types' defined by such names as Anglican, Lutheran, Roman, etc. Such forms of separation seem to be roundly condemned by the language of St. Paul in dealing with the Corinthian factions. . . . The provisional arrangements of which we have been speaking are those which arise from missionary obligation" ("What Is 'a Local Church Truly United'?" quoted in John F. Hotchkin's "Probing the Possibilities," *Interface* [Spring 1980], 8).

<sup>30</sup>"Concepts of Unity and Models of Union," p. 13.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>32</sup>"The Unity of the Church—Next Steps," p. 298.

<sup>33</sup>"Concepts of Unity and Models of Union," p. 3.

Testament scholarship has contributed to the possibility of achieving this kind of consensus by demonstrating that there was far greater diversity in the early church than had generally been supposed at the beginning of the ecumenical movement.<sup>34</sup>

In recent years the question has been raised ever more insistently as to whether the New Testament really contains a concept of unity. At first the churches assumed that it did. Each was convinced that its own concept of unity was derived from the New Testament or, at any rate, could be substantiated from the New Testament. They also agreed that they must all submit themselves and their concepts to the judgement of Holy Scripture and they expected that one correct concept of unity would emerge from this confrontation with the Bible. They soon discovered, however, that their different concepts all represented contractions of the witness of Scripture. They realized that the claims of the other churches were not altogether unfounded.<sup>35</sup>

Conciliarity, therefore, in addition to demanding organic unity, embraces a unity in diversity which includes doctrinal pluralism.

How does conciliarity as a model for external unity in the church stand up when measured by the Scriptural principles of fellowship? On the positive side, it should be recognized that this proposal is to be commended for its attempt to pursue the Biblical mandate to seek external unity in the church. The Scriptures clearly teach that it is God's will and command that those who are one in Christ should seek to manifest their spiritual unity in His body externally (Thesis 9). At the same time, it must also be stated that this

---

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., p. 7. Ernst Käsemann, among others, argues, on the basis of a historical-critical investigation of the New Testament, that we now know that many of the doctrinal differences found in contemporary denominationalism simply mirror the diversity to be found in the New Testament itself. Cf. "The New Testament Canon and the Unity of the Church," *Essays on New Testament Themes* (London: SCM Press, 1971). Käsemann writes (pp. 103—104): "The New Testament canon does not, as such, constitute the foundation of the unity of the church. On the contrary, as such (that is, in its accessibility to the historian) it provides the basis for the multiplicity of the confessions. The variability of the kerygma in the New Testament is an expression of the fact that in primitive Christianity a wealth of different confessions were already in existence. . . . If the canon as such is binding in its totality, the various confessions may, with differing degree of historical justification, claim as their own larger or smaller tracts of it, better or less known New Testament writers."

proposal, failing to distinguish clearly between *spiritual fellowship* and *church fellowship*, does not take seriously either the unity of the church which is given with faith (Thesis 1) or external unity in the church which is constituted by agreement in confession (Thesis 7). As a result the advocates of this model frequently give the impression that Christians can actually effect the spiritual unity of the church through their own efforts toward organic union. In addition conciliarity, based on a doctrinal pluralism resulting from the forfeiture of the normative authority of Holy Scripture (Thesis 3), comes into direct conflict with the Scriptural exhortations for Christians to seek the edification of the members of Christ's body by confessing the faith in accordance with God's Word (Thesis 6). The Scriptures condemn all attempts to achieve external unity in the church by compromising the prophetic and apostolic witness through which the Holy Spirit works to create the unity of the church as a violation of the law of Christian love (Thesis 5).

## 2. Reconciled Diversity

Just as conciliarity has come to be identified with the World Council of Churches, so reconciled diversity is the model for external unity in the church which is generally thought of in connection with the Lutheran World Federation and the other confessional groupings of churches. This model is described in a discussion paper on "The Ecumenical Role of the World Confessional Families in the One Ecumenical Movement" which was discussed at a 1974 meeting of the Conference of Secretaries of World Confessional Families.<sup>36</sup>

The advocates of reconciled diversity, referring to the "acceptance of one another not only as individuals, but also in our different traditions and confessions" as a "fundamental insight of the ecumenical movement," maintain "that fidelity to truth as perceived by individual confessions is not incompatible."<sup>37</sup> Although the church of Jesus Christ is "by definition a confessing Church with its identity grounded in him who is confessed as Lord," this confession "is expressed incompletely in the different confessional identities of the world families of churches."<sup>38</sup> It is a mistake, according to the report of the World Confessional Families, to equate confessional

---

<sup>36</sup>WCC *Exchange*, No. 3/2, July 1977. Representatives from 14 confessional families including the Lutheran World Federation participate in the meetings of the "Conferences of Secretaries of WCFs," which are informal. (The Conference has no constitution.)

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 7.



identity with an anti-ecumenical stance. To expect “some kind of uniform ecumenical Christian theology and culture to emerge in a uniform pattern would be to deny the multiplicity of the gifts of the Spirit and the manifold variety of creation and history.”<sup>39</sup> This report continues:

We consider the variety of denominational heritages legitimate insofar as the truth of the one faith explicates itself in history in a variety of expressions. We do not overlook the fact that such explications of the faith have been marked by error which has threatened the unity of the Church. On the other hand, it needs to be seen that a heritage remains legitimate and can be preserved, if it is properly translated into new historical situations. If it is, it remains a valuable contribution to the richness of life in the Church universal.

In the open encounter with other heritages the contribution of a particular denomination can lose its character of denominational exclusiveness. Therefore, unity and fellowship among the churches do not require uniformity of faith and order, but can and must encompass a plurality or diversity of convictions and traditions. . . . Confessional loyalties and ecumenical commitment are no contradiction, but are one—paradoxical as it may seem. When existing differences between churches lose their divisive character, a vision of unity emerges which has the character of a ‘reconciled diversity.’<sup>40</sup>

The conclusion of this way of thinking, therefore, is that it is not organic unity but “‘reconciled diversity,’ which acknowledges under the Gospel that the things of the faith which unite are greater than those that separate,” which offers the most appropriate model of achieving external unity in the church today.<sup>41</sup>

Bishop Andreas Aarflot from Norway has encouraged the Lutheran World Federation to pursue the goal of “reconciled diversity” in its quest for external unity in the church. In an essay he presented to the sixth assembly of the LWF in Dar-es-Salaam in 1977, Bishop Aarflot asks the question: “What kind of unity do we seek?”<sup>42</sup> In answering this question, Aarflot takes up what he calls “two tendencies within the ecumenical movement”: “organic union” as the attempt to unite churches of different confessional traditions “in such a way that they surrender their previous confessional identity in order to constitute a new church with new norms and new identity” and “reconciled

---

<sup>39</sup>Ibid.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>42</sup> Andreas Aarflot, “The Lutheran Church and the Unity of the Church,” *In Christ—A New Community: The Proceedings of the Sixth Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation* (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 1977), pp. 35–51.

diversity” as “an ecumenical fellowship in which each confessional heritage and confessional identity is still maintained.”<sup>43</sup> Contending that both of these models “are lacking in clarity and explicitness,” he concludes that “the idea of unity as ‘reconciled diversity’ can still be of some help, as long as it is purified and critically examined diversity, since it describes a way of unity which does not automatically entail the surrender of confessional traditions and confessional identities.”<sup>44</sup> Aarflot continues:

This way to unity is a way of living encounter, spiritual experience together, theological dialogue and mutual correction, a way in which the distinctiveness of each partner is not lost sight of but stands out, is transformed and renewed, and in this way becomes visible and palpable to the other partners. There is no glossing over differences. Nor are the differences simply preserved and maintained unaltered. But they lose their divisive character as they are reconciled to each other.<sup>45</sup>

Bishop Aarflot strongly emphasizes the element of reconciliation. “Unity and reconciliation do not mean mere coexistences” but “genuine church fellowship, including as its essential elements the recognition of baptism, pulpit and altar fellowship, the mutual recognition of church ministries, and a binding common purpose of witness and service.”<sup>46</sup>

Although differences exist between conciliarity and reconciled diversity as models for implementing external unity in the church, they share the same basic strengths and weaknesses with respect to the Scriptural principles of fellowship. Like conciliarity, reconciled diversity rightly emphasizes the Scriptural exhortations for Christians “to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Thesis 9).<sup>47</sup> But despite a greater awareness by those

---

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., p. 43.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., p. 45.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., p. 45—46.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., p. 46.

<sup>47</sup>Cf. Ibid., p. 41. Bishop Aarflot writes: “We are under obligation to strive together to bring forth the true unity of the church (Eph. 4, 1 ff.). This basic obligation constrains us, both within our own churches and in wider organizational structures of an ecumenical character. . . . The guiding principle of our efforts is the *basic universal unity* which we believe the churches share as long as they are committed to the one apostolic faith. This is a unity given in Christ. . . . We want to stress the fact, however, that the unity we seek should be an *outward recognizable unity* which becomes historically manifest in the life of the churches. The confession of the hidden unity of the church is not a sufficient expression of the true unity that we seek.”

who advocate reconciled diversity that “certain elements of common Christian understanding are indispensable for the true unity of the church” (Thesis 6), and that “we must . . . carry the burden of separation wherever this is necessary in order to witness to the truth of the gospel” (Thesis 8),<sup>48</sup> in the final analysis this model for external unity in the church is founded on the unscriptural notion that church fellowship can be based on agreement in the Gospel in the narrow sense while tolerating disagreement in other doctrines taught in the Scriptures (Thesis 7).<sup>49</sup> Like “the lowest common denominator” approach of conciliarism, so the “agreement to disagree” model of reconciled diversity violates the law of Christian love through its willingness to practice “genuine church fellowship” where there is disagreement “in doctrine and in all its articles” and in “the right use of the holy sacraments” (Thesis 5).

There is a troublesome ambiguity about reconciled diversity as a model for effecting external unity in the church. As the Rev. John Gatu, general secretary of the Presbyterian Church of East Africa, stated in his response to Bishop Aarflot’s address to the LWF assembly: “My problem . . . is that the speaker expects a perpetuation of a Lutheran identity in the organic union. That of course is tantamount to saying that the only way to church unity is for all of us to become Lutherans!”<sup>50</sup> Reconciled diversity either has no theological reason for preserving the identity of the individual confessional families in that it is genuinely willing to tolerate doctrinal pluralism, or it implicitly suggests the superiority of one confessional position over the other, a stance which is offensive to Christians belonging to other confessional families who are expected to be a part of this external unity of reconciled diversity. Each of these viewpoints compromises certain of the Scriptural principles of fellowship.

### 3. Selective Fellowship

Selective altar and pulpit fellowship is sometimes proposed as a model for external unity in the church. The 1946 convention of the former American Lutheran Church, for example, adopted a resolution calling for the practice

---

<sup>48</sup>Ibid., p. 45.

<sup>49</sup>Cf. “The Ecumenical Role of the World Confessional Families in the One Ecumenical Movement,” p. 9: “Unity and fellowship among the churches do not require uniformity of *faith* and order, but can and must encompass a plurality of diversity of convictions and traditions.” (Emphasis added.)

<sup>50</sup>“Response by The Rev. John Gatu,” *In Christ—A New Community: The Proceedings of the Sixth Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation* (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 1977), p. 53.

of selective fellowship.<sup>51</sup> Memorials requesting that The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod permit selective fellowship have been submitted to each of the last seven conventions of the Synod.<sup>52</sup> In addition, a number of responses to the CTCR's "Bible Study on Fellowship" have also suggested that the Synod adopt this way of relating to other Christian churches. It is argued that since differences within church bodies are often as great as those dividing denominations, selective fellowship offers a model for the practice of church fellowship which is faithful not only to the Scriptural mandate to preserve the truth of God's Word but also to the apostolic exhortations to manifest love for all fellow members of Christ's body, no matter where they may be located.

But what is selective fellowship?<sup>53</sup> The answers to this question are

---

<sup>51</sup>*Minutes of the American Lutheran Church*, 1946, p. 23. Quoted by Edward C. Fendt in *The Struggle for Lutheran Unity and Consolidation in the U.S.A. from the Late 1930's to the Early 1970's*, pp. 41—42. This resolution states: "WHEREAS the matter of 'Selective Fellowship' was discussed at the 1944 convention of the Church and was referred to the districts for study and consideration, and WHEREAS the Committee on Fellowship of the American Lutheran Church reports that all districts endorsed 'Selective Fellowship' in principle, therefore be it Resolved that pastors and parishes of the American Lutheran Church shall be free to have pulpit, altar, and prayer fellowship with such pastors and parishes of other Lutheran Synods as agree, in doctrine and practice, with the declarations made in Sections 1, 2, 3, and 4 of Article II—Confession of Faith—of the Constitution of the American Lutheran Church." This resolution was based on a statement prepared by Dr. M. Reu.

<sup>52</sup>Cf. 1967 *Convention Workbook*, p. 60; 1969 *Convention Workbook*, pp. 107—108; 1971 *Convention Workbook*, p. 190; 1973 *Convention Workbook*, pp. 90—91; 1975 *Convention Workbook*, p. 129; 1977 *Convention Workbook*, p. 122; and 1979 *Convention Workbook*, pp. 118—119.

<sup>53</sup>The *Lutheran Encyclopedia* defines selective fellowship as the principle whereby the exercise of Christian fellowship (e.g., pulpit, altar, prayer) is determined by an individual or by a local church" (1975 ed., s. v. "Selective Fellowship"). But *The Encyclopedia of the Lutheran Church* gives this definition: "When one church body establishes pulpit and altar fellowship with another, it may be further stipulated that such fellowship may be selective, i.e., that only that pastor or congregation be admitted to this fellowship in whose case it is felt genuine Christian fellowship is not violated, say, for doctrinal reasons" (1965 ed., s. v. "Selective Fellowship").



almost as numerous and varied as those who propose it as a model for working toward external unity in the church. There are those who regard selective fellowship as a church body's decision to allow each of its local congregations to decide on whether or not to engage in altar and pulpit fellowship with a congregation of another church body on the basis of a repudiation of the false doctrine(s) officially held by the denomination to which it belongs.<sup>54</sup> Some, thinking of church fellowship as being constituted by faith in the heart (*fides qua*), advocate this model because they believe that the local congregation is in a better position than synodical conventions to recognize with which members of other denominations its members are already in fellowship by virtue of their common faith in Jesus Christ.<sup>55</sup> Still

---

<sup>54</sup>Cf. the following response of an LCMS Bible class to the CTCR's "Bible Study on Fellowship": "The question before a synodical convention should not be whether we have church fellowship [with another denomination]. . . . Rather, we believe the Synod can and should go on record as condemning particular false teachings or unscriptural practices taught or tolerated in these bodies. . . . The doctrinal integrity of the Synod would thus be safeguarded. It would remain in the sphere of the individual congregation whether to commune guests from synods which have thus been marked as teaching or tolerating false teachings. It would remain in the sphere of the local congregation whether to have a joint service or activity with a particular congregation from such a synod. We think this would be realistic, since the label of false teaching does not apply in each individual case."

<sup>55</sup>Cf. the following response of an LCMS Bible class to the CTCR's "Bible Class on Fellowship": "It is the experience and belief of the people in this Bible class that there are many individuals who have faith in Christ, who trust God's grace, and who sincerely—though imperfectly—desire to serve the Lord, and that these people are found in varying degrees in most all Christian denominations. We have a God-given fellowship with all these people, a fellowship which is not destroyed by the fact that we each hold membership in different imperfect denominations. We are duty-bound to express our fellowship with these people and need to find ways of doing so. It makes no sense for us to refuse to join them in prayer, worship, etc., because some people in their denominations are out of fellowship with us or because some things are taught in their denominations which we consider wrong. Such refusal is not Biblical. . . . Not only are there many individuals with Christian faith in other denominations, but many of the congregations and pastors of these denominations confess

others regard selective fellowship as a model for external unity in the church which provides an opportunity for Christians at the local level to give expression to their unity in Christ despite their differences in doctrine.<sup>56</sup>

It is not necessary to attempt to describe here each and every variation of this model. Quite obviously, different forms of selective fellowship come into conflict with different principles of fellowship. A selective fellowship, for example, which would base altar and pulpit fellowship on faith in the heart confuses spiritual fellowship in the body of Christ (Thesis 1) and church

---

---

and proclaim the saving faith in Jesus Christ and sincerely work to serve Him. This faith unites us with these pastors and congregations, as well as with the individual believers. Whatever our denominational conventions may assert, God says that we have fellowship with those pastors and congregations (non-Lutheran as well as Lutheran), and we need to find ways of expressing this God-given fellowship with them. . . . Questions of how and with whom to acknowledge and express fellowship are best decided on the level where that acknowledgement and expression is to take place. . . . We on the local level should not let conventions and/or synodical administrations interfere with our exercise of this right and responsibility.”

<sup>56</sup>Cf. the following reponse of a pastor’s conference to the CTCR’s “Bible Study on Fellowship”: “It must border on false doctrine to believe that sinful human beings can know the Gospel of Christ purely and can communicate that Gospel of Christ purely. . . . Fellowship is not ‘establishing relationships.’ Fellowship exists through ‘the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.’ We are united in ‘one body and one Spirit . . . one hope . . . one Lord, one faith, one Baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all’ (Eph. 4:3-6). Christians have that fellowship regardless of whether church bodies establish relationships or not. Individual Christians have both the right and perhaps the obligation to practice (give manifestation to a belief) on an individual basis the fellowship they have in Christ. Some relationships may be best established by churches, such as altar and pulpit fellowship. However, to imply that all activities that demonstrate our unity in Christ should be determined by church bodies is unsupportable. . . . Just as a denomination’s declaration of altar and pulpit fellowship with another denomination does not determine that all congregations in those two denominations must have altar and pulpit fellowship, so the lack of declaration of altar and pulpit fellowship should not determine that fellowship activities cannot be appropriate in certain instances.”

fellowship (Thesis 7).<sup>57</sup> Congregational decisions to engage in altar and pulpit fellowship despite differences in doctrine violate the divine mandate to confess the faith as it is taught in the Scriptures for the sake of the edification and extension of the church (Thesis 6). But in view of the general confusion surrounding the meaning of selective fellowship and taking into account the high mobility of both lay people and clergy in a time when the theological positions of pastors and congregations of even the same denomination vary so greatly, *all* forms of selective fellowship, including that which would base congregational altar and pulpit fellowship on agreement in doctrine, must be regarded today as falling short of fulfilling the law of Christian love which seeks the edification of Christ's body (Thesis 5). Selective fellowship not only provides an opportunity for offense by appearing to be indifferent to doctrine, but it is also inherently conducive to chaos, confusion, individualism, and even rebellion.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, as Hermann Sasse has emphasized, it is

---

<sup>57</sup>The view that church members at the local level are in a better position than national conventions to determine with whom they should give expression to their unity in the body of Christ falsely assumes that church fellowship is based on faith in the heart instead of on agreement in confession.

<sup>58</sup>Cf. Edward C. Fendt's comments on the ALC's 1946 adoption of selective fellowship. Dr. Fendt writes: "No amount of rationalization or interpretation could make the proposal of Selective Fellowship acceptable or workable. It was regarded as effrontery and audacity on the part of the ALC and rightly so. It encouraged individualism and 'rebellion' (at least breaking rank) in the other churches. But the most objectionable feature was the suggestion (requirement?) to agree with Sections 1, 2, 3, and 4 of Article II in the Constitution of the ALC (just a few steps short of applying for membership in the ALC). . . . Many years later . . . Dr. Franklin Clark Fry with his characteristic articulation and candor described the ALC's resolution of Selective Fellowship accurately. He regarded it as inept and offensive 'church politics.' He said with a bit of laughter: 'Every time I accept an invitation to speak under any kind of auspices I know that I do not qualify. I am neither in agreement with the Pittsburgh Agreement nor with Article II of the ALC Constitution. One of these days I shall never again accept an invitation from ALC sources until this business of Selective Fellowship is rescinded.'" *The Struggle for Lutheran Unity and Consolidation in the U.S.A. from the Late 1930's to the Early 1970's* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1980), pp. 42—43.



"impossible to separate the fellowship between local churches from the fellowship between the church bodies to which they belong."<sup>59</sup>

#### 4. Ecclesiastical Declaration of Altar and Pulpit Fellowship

From the very beginning of the Reformation Luther and his followers sought external unity in the church on the basis of agreement in the confession of the apostolic faith. Expressing the hope that they might be "united in one, true religion" with their opponents "even as we are all under one Christ," the Lutherans in 1530 in Augsburg presented "a confession of our pastors' and preachers' teaching and of our own faith, setting forth how and in what manner, on the basis of the Holy Scriptures, these things are preached, taught, communicated, and embraced in our lands" (Preface to the Augsburg Confession, 8-10). They also participated in a variety of doctrinal discussions with leaders of the Reformed Church, e. g., in Marburg in 1529. Their concern was not "that ceremonies, instituted by men, should

---

<sup>59</sup>Hermann Sasse, "Selective Fellowship," *The Australasian Theological Review* (September 1957), p. 55. As Sasse points out, selective fellowship with its excessive congregationalism betrays a deficient understanding of the doctrine of the church. Sasse writes: "From these biblical facts it must be understood that the Church in all ages up to the 17th century always has seen fellowship between Christians as fellowship between the churches to which the individuals belong. There was never such a thing as private practice of intercommunion, never something like 'selective fellowship,' which is an invention of modern Americans. Elert in his last book, mentioned above, gives a convincing proof of this for the Ancient Church." Cf. the results of a study project on local ecumenism carried out recently by the Strasbourg Institute of Ecumenical Research, *Lutheran World Information*, Dec. 18, 1980, pp. 12—14. This study concluded: "The transcending of old divisions means in many places the creation of new divisions. Congregationalism is often promoted at the cost of loyalty to individual confessional families and the whole church. Two congregations which belong to the same ecclesial family but find themselves in different geographical locations are in danger of estranging each other by their individual 'ecumenical efforts'—mostly made without reciprocal information. A local 'unity' with others can lead to separation from those congregations who belong to the same ecclesial family but live in other places."



be observed uniformly," but that "the Gospel be preached in conformity with a pure understanding of it and that the sacraments be administered in accordance with the divine Word" (AC, VII, 2-3). Altar and pulpit fellowship apart from agreement in doctrine was unthinkable for them.<sup>60</sup>

In the years following the settlement of the serious doctrinal disputes which arose in the wake of Luther's death, church fellowship among the various territorial churches (the European nations in which Lutherans lived were divided into territories, with each one having its own church) was achieved by agreement with the confessional writings in *The Book of Concord* (1580). Subscription to these confessions, understood by all to be a binding commitment to the entire doctrinal content of these writings, meant that pastors were allowed in each other's pulpits and that lay people were welcomed at each other's altars.<sup>61</sup>

With the passing of time and as a result of the coming of Lutherans to America, however, problems concerning church fellowship arose. In the absence of the territorial churches, ecclesiastical structures such as ministeria (organizations of ministers) and synods (organizations of congregations together with their pastors) were developed. Concerned about

---

<sup>60</sup>Cf. FC SD, VII, 33: "Dr. Luther, who understood the true intention of the Augsburg Confession better than any one else, remained by it steadfastly and defended it constantly until he died. Shortly before his death, in his last confession, he repeated his faith in this article with great fervor and wrote as follows: 'I reckon them all as belonging together (that is, as Sacramentarians and enthusiasts), for that is what they are who will not believe that the Lord's bread in the supper is his true, natural body, which the godless or Judas receive orally as well as St. Peter and all the saints. Whoever, I say, will not believe this, will please let me alone and expect no fellowship from me. This is final.'"

<sup>61</sup>Cf. "Theology of Fellowship," p. 18. "Though the subject of pulpit and altar fellowship is not discussed *expressis verbis* in the Lutheran Confessions, these confessions themselves became the effective limits for pulpit and altar fellowship for Lutherans. Those who subscribed to them were automatically in pulpit and altar fellowship with one another. Those who did not subscribe to them, but adhered to other confessions, were, according to the Preface to the *Book of Concord*, not condemned as heretics; the Lutherans could even 'have special sympathy with them.' However, church fellowship, *communicatio in sacris*, with them was impossible. This followed inevitably from the doctrine of the church as it is contained in the Lutheran Confessions."

external unity in the church, these new churches had to answer the question regarding church fellowship with one another as well as with the growing number of other denominations present on the American scene. Free conferences for the purpose of discussing doctrine were held.<sup>62</sup> These discussions revealed that many of these new churches were divided not only by language, national origin, and church polity but also by doctrinal differences resulting from the various rationalistic, pietistic, and confessional circles out of which they had originated in Europe. Moreover, it soon became quite obvious that Lutherans were no longer in agreement regarding the meaning of subscription to the Lutheran Confessions.<sup>63</sup> Altar and pulpit fellowship, therefore, could not be established among all of these young churches. But the very fact that doctrinal discussions were held and that there was a general consensus that some kind of identification with at least the Augsburg Confession was necessary for the celebration of church fellowship illustrates that 19th-century Lutherans in America generally followed the model of ecclesiastical declarations of altar and pulpit fellowship on the basis of agreement in doctrine at the church-body level.<sup>64</sup>

The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, in accordance with this historical Lutheran precedent, has consistently followed this model with respect to its official relationships with other church bodies. Desiring to avoid

---

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., p. 19: "Free conferences for members from all Lutheran groups who 'subscribed to the Augsburg Confession without reservation' were held for the purpose of discussion of doctrine at Columbus, Ohio, in 1856; at Pittsburgh, Pa., in 1857; at Cleveland, Ohio, in 1858; and at Ft. Wayne, Ind., in 1859."

<sup>63</sup>There was disagreement on the question as to whether pastors and congregations should subscribe to *The Book of Concord insofar as (quatenus)* or *because (quia)* it is a true and unadulterated statement and exposition of the Word of God.

<sup>64</sup>In 1872 President C. P. Krauth set forth the General Council's understanding of pulpit and altar fellowship: "I. The Rule is: Lutheran pulpits are for Lutheran ministers only. Lutheran altars are for Lutheran communicants only. II. The Exceptions belong to the sphere of privilege, not of right. III. The Determination of the exceptions is to be made in consonance with these principles, by the conscientious judgment of pastors, as the cases arise." This statement was amended by the addition after the word "Rule" of "which accords with the Word of God and with the Confessions of our Church" at an 1875 conference held in Galesburg, Ill.—hence the name "Galesburg Rule" (*The Encyclopedia of the Lutheran Church*, 1965 ed., s. v. "Galesburg Rule").

both sectarianism or separatism<sup>65</sup> as well as syncretism or unionism,<sup>66</sup> it has sought external unity in the church through the use of the model of ecclesiastical declarations of altar and pulpit fellowship based on agreement in doctrine and practice. From the time of its origin in 1847, the Synod has always insisted on formal doctrinal discussions with another church body prior to establishing altar and pulpit fellowship with it. Discussions between official representatives from each church body are carried out on the basis of the following principles:

1. That the Confessions must be subscribed to *quia*, not *quatenus*, i. e., because, not merely *insofar as*, they are correct expositions of the Scripture;
2. That all doctrines taught in the Confessions are binding;
3. That subscription to the Confessions must be implemented by corresponding public teaching (*publica doctrina*) in pulpit, instruction room, seminary, and in the church's publications, and that all who departed from this norm were to be disciplined.<sup>67</sup>

---

<sup>65</sup>Separatism, defined by Webster's *Third New International Dictionary* as "a disposition toward secession or schism," is an ecclesiastical term used to refer to a separation between Christians for unscriptural reasons. The constitution of the LCMS states in its first objective that the Synod shall "conserve and promote the unity of the true faith (Eph. 4:3-6; 1 Cor. 1:10), work through its official structure toward fellowship with other Christian church bodies, and provide a united defense against schism, sectarianism (Rom. 16:17), and heresy" (*Convention Proceedings*, 1979, p. 104).

<sup>66</sup>Unionism, defined by the Synod as "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" (see the "Brief Statement," par. 28), is a term which has come into use in connection with the efforts of King Friedrich Wilhelm III of Prussia to effect a union of the Lutheran and Reformed churches in his realm in 1817. The constitution of the LCMS lists as one of the conditions of membership the "renunciation of unionism and syncretism of every description" (Art. VI, 2).

<sup>67</sup>See "Theology of Fellowship," pp. 20 f. Cf. also C. F. W. Walther, "Why Should Our Pastors, Teachers, and Professors Subscribe Unconditionally to the Symbolical Writings of Our Church," *Concordia Theological Monthly* (April 1947), pp. 241-53.

It was on the basis of these principles that the Missouri Synod participated in the free conferences which took place during the last half of the 19th century and that it declared altar and pulpit fellowship with other Lutheran synods and was instrumental in organizing the Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference of North America in 1872.<sup>68</sup> These principles also manifest themselves in the long history of doctrinal discussions which took place with The American Lutheran Church (and its predecessor bodies) prior to the declaration of altar and pulpit fellowship with this church body by majority vote at the 1969 convention of the Synod.

The practical implications of a declaration of altar and pulpit fellowship with another church body are set forth in the resolution in which the LCMS declared altar and pulpit fellowship with The ALC.<sup>69</sup> First noting that “with the establishment of fellowship each church body retains its separate identity and organizational structure, procedures, and policies,” this resolution holds that “a congregation of one church body may call as its pastor a clergyman of the other church body, provided that prior consultation has resulted in mutual approval by the respective administrative officials of both church bodies involved in such a call.” This document then proceeds to state that altar and pulpit fellowship will express itself in the following ways:

1. Pastors in good standing in each church body may be invited to preach from the pulpits of congregations of the other church body.
2. Congregations of church bodies in fellowship may hold joint worship services.
3. Members of the congregations of each church body who are in good standing in their own congregation and do not violate principles regulating Communion practices in the host congregation shall be welcome guests at the altar of congregations of the other church body. In the interest of the pastoral care and responsibility of the congregation of which an individual is a member, there should not be an indiscriminate visiting of the altars of churches either within his own church body or at the altars of congregations of that church body with which his church is in fellowship.
4. Members in good standing may transfer their membership from a

---

<sup>68</sup>Charter members of this organization were six synods which had previously declared themselves to be in altar and pulpit fellowship with each other.

<sup>69</sup>Resolution 3-15, *Convention Proceedings*, 1969, pp. 96 ff. This understanding of the meaning of pulpit and altar fellowship had previously been accepted in substance by the national and District presidents of The American Lutheran Church and The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.



congregation of one church body to a congregation of the other church body in conformity with the practices of the receiving congregation.

These provisions make it clear that the Synod regards altar and pulpit fellowship to be an alternative to organic merger as an acceptable way of satisfying the divine mandate that the members of the body of Christ seek to manifest their unity externally.<sup>70</sup>

---

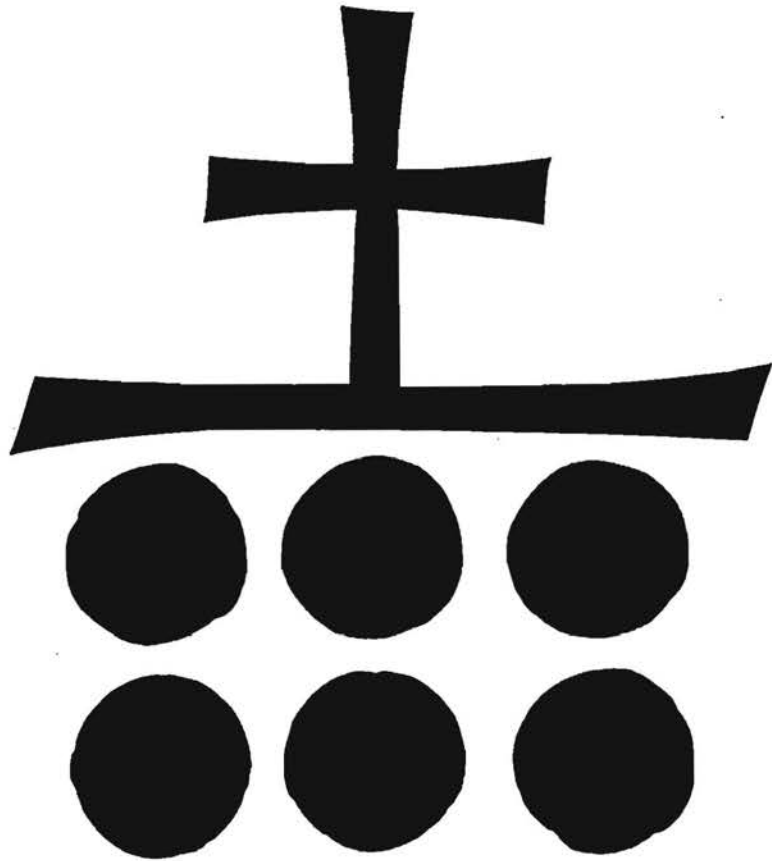
<sup>70</sup>Cf. *Toward Fellowship*, p. 13. This brochure was distributed throughout the LCMS by President Oliver Harms prior to 1969 in response to 1967 Resolution 3-23. This document states: "The same doctrinal requirements obtain for establishing church merger as for establishing altar and pulpit fellowship. The practice of fellowship would be essentially the same under either arrangement. Either arrangement offers the same demands and the same latitude with respect to fellowship. If church bodies wish to form a church merger or some other type of association, then it is assumed they are prepared to make the necessary structural or organizational adjustments. Under the altar and pulpit fellowship being proposed now, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod will be free to give full expression to its fraternal relations while maintaining simultaneously its operational and institutional autonomy." Cf. also 1971 Resolution 3-26, which states: "*Resolved*, That The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod restate its desire to initiate and work toward fellowship with those Lutheran churches with whom it is not in altar and pulpit fellowship, and continue to work toward a greater degree of unity with those with whom it is in altar and pulpit fellowship, and that the activity proceed as follows: 1) Multilevel discussion of the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions with those Lutheran churches with whom we are not in fellowship in order to seek agreement in doctrine and practice leading to a declaration of altar and pulpit fellowship. These discussions may serve to provide guidelines for additional cooperative activity; 2) Declaration of altar and pulpit fellowship by a majority vote of the church delegates assembled in church convention after the President of the Synod and the CTCR make a recommendation in the matter; 3) Continued negotiations to find the proper ensuing steps to implement additional forms of cooperative activity; and be it further *Resolved*, That The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod express the position that, at this time, it is primarily oriented toward altar and pulpit fellowship and further cooperative activities, rather than organic union" (*Convention Proceedings*, 1971, p. 139).

This model of ecclesiastical declaration of altar and pulpit fellowship does not in and of itself stand in conflict with any of the Scriptural principles of fellowship set forth in the first section of this report. On the contrary, with its insistence that external unity in the church be based on agreement in doctrine and practice, for example, this model allows for making a clear distinction between spiritual unity in the body of Christ, which is given with faith (Thesis 1), and external unity, which is constituted by agreement in the faith which is confessed for the sake of the unity of the church (Thesis 7).<sup>71</sup> By making the declaration of altar and pulpit fellowship dependent on the prior assurance that agreement in doctrine and practice actually exists between the church bodies involved, it takes seriously the divine mandate that the faith be confessed in accordance with the Scriptures for the sake of the edification and extension of Christ's body, the church (Thesis 6). It is in this way that this model seeks to guard against the loveless toleration of any compromising of the Gospel through which the spiritual unity of the church comes into being (Thesis 8). And by requiring that the declaration of church fellowship be a church-body decision rather than merely a congregational decision, it seeks to minimize the danger of being misled by a false witness of external unity where agreement in confession does not in fact exist (Thesis 5).

---

<sup>71</sup>Cf. "A Lutheran Stance Toward Ecumenism," p. 9: "Since the sphere of ecumenical endeavors is properly the *Una Sancta*, it is self-evident that the goal of such efforts is not to create the unity of the church (*unitas, Einigkeit der Kirche*). The *unitas* of the *Una Sancta* is given with the faith that joins all Christians to their one Head, Christ, and to each other in the little holy flock which is without sect or schism (LC, II, 51). The unity of the church is the presupposition, not the goal, of ecumenical endeavors (AC, Preface, 10)."

## CONCLUSION



## CONCLUSION

In the first part of this report the Commission on Theology and Church Relations has attempted to present the nature of fellowship on the basis of a review of what God's Word has to say about this concept. Our study has reached the conclusion that in the Scriptures fellowship is understood in the sense of its root meaning as having part in a common thing.<sup>72</sup> Contrary to the understanding of fellowship prevalent in Christendom today as relating to "matters about which men are free to make their own arrangements" and that "whether fellowship is granted or withheld depends on the good or ill will of those concerned,"<sup>73</sup> the writers of the New Testament use this term to refer both to spiritual unity in the body of Christ and to external unity in the church. Each of these relationships, therefore, may properly be referred to by the use of the English word "fellowship." But neither of them is the result of human achievement, nor "are they matters about which people are free to make their own arrangements."

Christians are not in spiritual fellowship with their Lord and with each other in the body of Christ because they have voluntarily decided to "get together." God's holy Word reveals that believers are brought into a spiritual relationship with Christ and with all fellow believers by virtue of their incorporation into the body of Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit working through the means of grace. Having been made one in Christ, members of His body are exhorted to be what they are. Christians therefore seek to be faithful to what the Scriptures teach about manifesting their unity in Christ

---

<sup>72</sup>Elert, *Eucharist and Church Fellowship in the First Four Centuries*, p. 4. Elert points out that Martin Luther also understood fellowship in this way. Says Elert: "Luther proceeded differently. He was uneasy about the theological use of the word fellowship (*Gemeinschaft*). Even in translating 1 Cor. 10:16 he hesitated to use it. In his *Large Confession of the Lord's Supper* (1528) he traced the misunderstanding of his opponents partially to this word. 'It is not the genuinely German equivalent as I would like to have it, for to have fellowship is ordinarily understood as meaning to have something to do with a person. Here (1 Cor. 10:16), however, it means, as I have explained earlier, many using, enjoying, or having part in a common thing. I have had to translate 'fellowship' because I simply could not find a better word.'"

<sup>73</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 3. Elert attributes this understanding of fellowship to the continuing influence of Friedrich Schleiermacher. Writes Elert (p. 2): "For him [Schleiermacher] the church is above all 'a fellowship' (*Gemeinschaft*). He says in his *Glaubenslehre*



externally. Forbearing one another in love, they are eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace on the basis of agreement in the confession of the faith through which they have already been made one in Christ.

The Scriptural Gospel is the voice of Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd who laid down His life for His sheep. Since this Gospel is the means through which Christ calls, gathers, and keeps His flock in the one true faith, God has commanded the church to preserve the truth of His Word. Error in doctrine threatens unity in the body of Christ. Christian love, therefore, requires members of Christ's body to admonish and even to separate themselves from those who compromise or distort the Scriptural Gospel. "Speaking the truth in love" (Eph. 4:15), members of the body of Christ seek external harmony in the church by following "the pattern of the sound words" which they have learned from the prophets and apostles and by guarding "the truth that has been entrusted" to them "by the Holy Spirit who dwells within" them (2 Tim. 1:13-14). They desire to be faithful to the apostolic injunction "that all of you agree and that there be no dissensions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgement" (1 Cor. 1:10).

In the second part of this report the Commission has discussed the implications of this understanding of the nature of fellowship for church-body-level relationships by reviewing four contemporary proposals for seeking to manifest external unity in the church. Three of these models have been shown to conflict in one way or another with certain aspects of the nature of fellowship as it is presented in the Holy Scriptures. Conciliarity, reconciled diversity, and selective fellowship all violate at least some of the

---

(Par. 2, 2) that in order to know what the Christian church is one must first establish 'the general concept of the church together with a right understanding of what is characteristically Christian.' He goes on to say, 'The general concept of the church, if there is to be such a thing, must be derived from ethics because the church at all events is a fellowship created by the voluntary actions of men, and only through these does it continue to exist.' That certainly fixes the idea of fellowship. Since a fellowship arises through the voluntary actions of men and continues to exist only through such actions, the church, since it is a fellowship, arises in the same way, that is, only through 'the voluntary actions of men.' . . . The concept of fellowship which is here said to characterize the church does not derive from the nature of the church, but the nature of the church is derived from the concept of fellowship. . . . Behind this procedure lies the idealist conception of man and a view of the church which already has a long history with the English Independents and in the German Enlightenment."

principles of fellowship and cannot therefore be regarded as viable models for interchurch relations at the church-body level today.

Of those models for external unity in the church which have been examined in this report, only ecclesiastical declarations of altar and pulpit fellowship offer at least the possibility for being able to take into account all of what the Scriptures have to say about the nature of fellowship. The Commission on Theology and Church Relations, therefore, while recognizing that this model is neither divinely ordained nor Scripturally mandated, is convinced that The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod should continue to seek to carry out the Scriptural principles of fellowship at the church-body level by means of ecclesiastical declarations of altar and pulpit fellowship based on agreement in doctrine and practice.<sup>74</sup>

In making this recommendation, however, the Commission also finds it necessary to point out that the adoption of ecclesiastical declarations of altar and pulpit fellowship is by itself no guarantee of a church body's automatic faithfulness to the Scriptural principles of fellowship. Two church bodies, for example, may formally agree in a confession of faith which compromises the Holy Scriptures as the only norm of the Gospel (Thesis 3). An overemphasis on the spiritual unity of the church can serve to obscure the Scriptural mandate to seek to manifest this unity externally (Thesis 9). A loveless "concern for the truth" and a pharisaical pride in the rightness of doctrine,

---

<sup>74</sup>In making this recommendation the CTCR is renewing a recommendation which it made in its 1966 report "Theology of Fellowship." See the "Suggested Guidelines for the Church in the Practice of Fellowship" (pp 29—30). In this report the Commission made several recommendations (referred to as "Scripturally sound, and in harmony with the Lutheran Confessions"), including the following: "Our Synod should treasure the fellowship in the Gospel and in the sacraments which it enjoys with its sister churches and which it expressed through what is usually called pulpit and altar fellowship, and it should foster this fellowship with all diligence. . . . Our Synod should work zealously for the extension of this fellowship by engaging in doctrinal discussions with other churches in the interest of achieving such fellowship where this can be done without compromising sound doctrine. . . . Our Synod will be well advised to retain the principle that Scriptural practice is important for church fellowship. When ecclesiastical practice is in harmony with Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions, the church is edified. On the other hand, when ecclesiastical practice constitutes a denial of the Gospel, the work of the church is undermined." This report was adopted by the Synod in 1967 (Res. 2-13).

which tears down rather than edifies the body of Christ, can develop (Thesis 5).

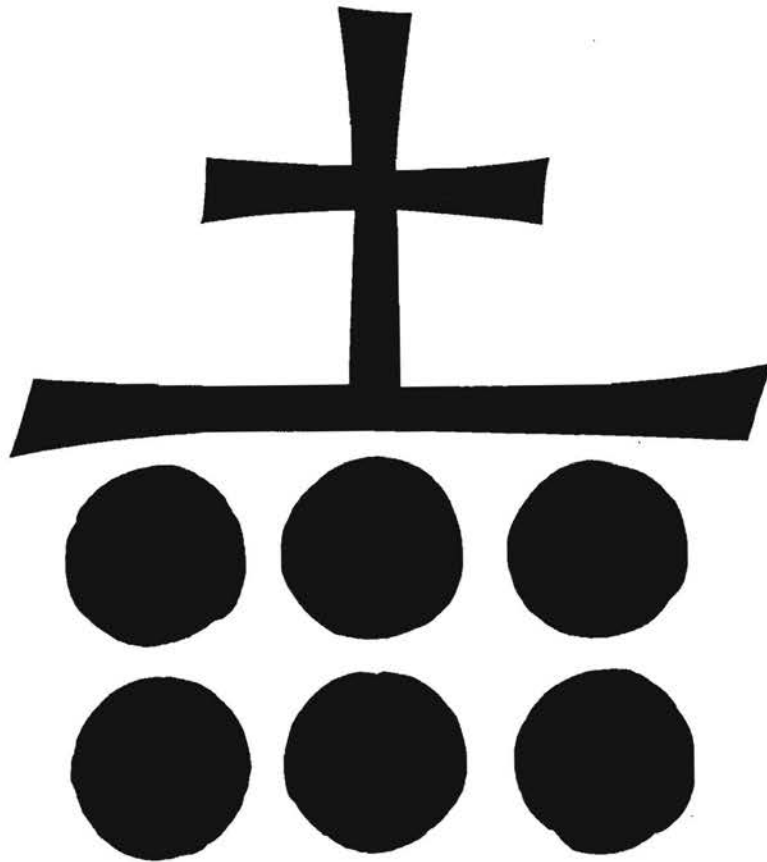
Moreover, the Commission is also aware that there are certain problems, such as fellowship triangles,<sup>75</sup> which can and do arise with the implementation of this model. It may even happen occasionally, in this age of “ambiguous denominationalism,” that an individual congregation may temporarily find itself to be in closer doctrinal agreement with a congregation belonging to a church body with which it is not in altar and pulpit fellowship than it is to a sister congregation in its own synod. It is also happening with increasing frequency (as a result of the high mobility that characterizes life in our society) that individual church members find themselves moving their membership back and forth between church bodies not in altar and pulpit fellowship with one another, with the result that any number of special problems arise. There is the problem of terminology and levels of agreement. Through the use of the word “fellowship” almost exclusively to refer to a formal altar and pulpit fellowship relationship established between two church bodies on the basis of agreement in the confession of the faith, some have been given the impression that no fellowship relationship other than spiritual unity in the body of Christ can or should exist among members of Christian churches not in altar and pulpit fellowship. The fact that the LCMS is closer doctrinally to a church body which at least formally accepts the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions than to those denominations which do not is often obscured by the “all or nothing” approach that frequently accompanies ecclesiastical declarations of altar and pulpit fellowship. Finally, it is sometimes overlooked that, although the Scriptural principles of fellowship remain constant, the specific results of their application at the individual level may differ from that at the church-body level. The principles of fellowship are not rules of casuistry.

Because of these factors the Commission recommends that the Synod continue to study the topic of fellowship during the coming biennium by giving special attention to the implications of the principles of fellowship presented in this report for relationships and activities between Christians at the congregational, pastoral, and individual levels. Although it is neither desirable nor even possible to develop guidelines which will answer every case of casuistry, it will be helpful if the Synod can develop greater understanding and consensus regarding the implications of the nature of fellowship also at these levels.

---

<sup>75</sup>Church body A is in altar and pulpit fellowship with church body B but not church body C, while church body B is in fellowship with both church body A and church body C.

# POSTSCRIPT





## POSTSCRIPT: A Plea for Responsible Freedom in the Context of Responsible Commitment

The Commission concludes this study with a pastoral word to the members of the Synod concerning our loving commitment to each other. This report has shown that, while the Scriptures present basic principles regarding the nature of fellowship, they do not provide the specific organizational structure and procedures for the implementation of these principles. This task is left for the church to carry out.

By virtue of our membership in the Synod, we in the LCMS have voluntarily agreed with one another regarding those activities and actions with fellow Christians in other church bodies which we understand the Scriptural principles of fellowship to permit and prohibit.<sup>76</sup> We have made certain decisions together regarding the specific meaning of altar and pulpit fellowship, as well as the way in which we go about declaring it and implementing it. We have also established procedures for revising previous decisions in this area. The loving commitment of the members of the Synod to each other requires that we submit ourselves to our joint decisions.<sup>77</sup>

---

<sup>76</sup>Article VI of the constitution of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, for example, requires the renunciation of “taking part in the services and sacramental rites of heterodox congregations or of congregations of mixed confession.”

<sup>77</sup>Cf. Roland Wiederaenders, *Circuit Counselor's Manual*, rev. ed., 1979, p. 5: “All the members of the Synod, congregations, pastors and teachers are to consider the rules and regulations of the Synod as applicable to them. Resolutions of the Synod are to be respected not because the Synod is a legislative body which legislates for its members, but because such resolutions are the expression of the majority and because Christian love asks that for the sake of peace and harmony we submit ourselves one to another in the fear of God. If a congregation or another member of the Synod is convinced that a resolution is not in harmony with the Word of God, such a member should seek to demonstrate that conviction from holy Scripture, not merely to assert that it is a conviction and ignore the resolutions of the Synod. Such resolutions of the Synod are adopted in order to carry out the objectives of the Synod—objectives to which members of the Synod pledge themselves when they sign the constitution of the Synod.”

The workability of ecclesiastical declarations of altar and pulpit fellowship is dependent upon the existence of mutual trust and confidence among the pastors, teachers, and congregations of the Synod. Such an atmosphere comes into being when the members of the Synod voluntarily demonstrate their *responsible commitment* not only to its doctrinal position but also to its mutually agreed-upon decisions. This means that from time to time responsibly committed members of the Synod may have to forego the practice of church fellowship with individuals and congregations with whom they find themselves in doctrinal agreement. It is not sufficient for responsibly committed members of the Synod to justify the violation of their mutual decisions with the claim that a certain activity can be engaged in without violating specific doctrines taught in the Scriptures and confessed in the Lutheran symbols. The love of Christ, which seeks the edification of *all* members of His body, will also constrain us to take seriously the commitments which we have made with our fellow members in the Synod.

At the same time, it must also be recognized that unusual and difficult situations can and do arise in this world. Responsible commitment to our mutually agreed-upon fellowship policies does not mean legalistic slavery to rules. Rather, this very commitment itself demands freedom for responsible pastoral ministry. When, in certain unusual circumstances, our regular ways of proceeding would get in the way of a ministry of Word and sacrament to a person in spiritual need, then an alternate way of proceeding must be sought. In such cases the advice and counsel of brothers in the ministry can be of inestimable value. It should also be recognized that individuals equally committed to the Scriptural principles of fellowship may not always come to identical conclusions regarding specific ways of proceeding in administering pastoral care in such exceptional cases. It is imperative that pastors show a mutual respect for one another's ministry. Uninformed and judgmental criticism of actions which appear to be violations of mutually agreed-upon ways of proceeding are destructive of the trust and confidence which fellow members of the Synod should have in one another. It should go without saying, however, that Christian love includes the exercise of loving admonition and doctrinal oversight, especially by those to whom this responsibility has been entrusted.

Freedom for responsible pastoral ministry goes hand in hand with responsible commitment to mutual decisions. It is impossible to have one without the other. A lack of responsible commitment invites the very suspicion and mistrust which inhibits responsible pastoral care. But genuine commitment to our agreed-upon procedures builds the atmosphere of confidence and trust in which freedom for pastoral ministry thrives.