

Church fellowship

Introduction:

This study will deal with some of the questions that arose on the field of the doctrine of church fellowship. There is no room for everything for we will concentrate on the most striking points that are relevant for us today. The study will further deal with the application of the biblical doctrine and it will also refute the most popular errors concerning this part of Christian doctrine. Things like a closer look on the doctrine of the church itself or on the history of the doctrine of fellowship are not part of this essay. Wherever it seemed necessary to point at them it is done briefly without intending to give a detailed study on these matters. The essay will focus on those points that had the largest impact on confessional Lutheranism in past and present.

Whenever necessary, the false doctrine is described as well, but the study will not bring up every argument that the followers of such doctrine brought up. A comparison of different beliefs can be done with the attached material that go more into detail concerning the statements of different church bodies.

As the foundation of this study we have the Bible as the inerrant, holy word of God. All doctrine has to come out of God's word and has to be seen in the light of God's word. A close look into your Bible is always the first thing to do when it comes to dealing with difficult problems. Church fellowship is often regarded as a difficult thing as well, but we will see that in all important points scripture speaks that clearly that we simply have to listen faithfully what is said. Church fellowship is no field where human ideas have to grow for we have scripture telling us what to do. We are to listen to our Lord carefully and we will see the great blessings that lie in faithful listening to Him.

The nature of Christian fellowship and Church fellowship:

The Bible uses very clear words to describe the Church as the community of believers. Every man who is sanctified through belief in Christ is part of the spiritual body of Christ, the Church. This spiritual church is invisible for man's eyes and only visible in God's eyes.

We have to distinguish between this invisible church and the different visible churches or church bodies. The visible churches are manifestations of the invisible church in the world, but no church body can be identified with the true, spiritual church. Every true believer belongs to the invisible church, but only God can see who belongs to this spiritual fellowship.

We have to distinguish further between true and false churches or orthodox and heterodox churches. Those church bodies that keep the whole doctrine of scripture purely and clearly are to be regarded as true churches, whereas other church bodies that deviate from the truth of the bible have to be regarded as heterodox churches. We as humans often try to test the intensiveness of errors in doctrine. This is not completely wrong, but we should see that every aberration is condemned by God's word. We also call those churches heterodox that officially adhere to truth, but that are tolerating error among them. It is decisive, what is really taught and not what is official position.

We have to admit that there are also true believers in heterodox churches and hypocrites in orthodox churches. We cannot look into one's heart, so we are to regard the confession of an individual or a group. If one church or group confesses the truth in words and deeds, he has to be regarded as orthodox. The Apostle John teaches us to look carefully on one's confession: Test every spirit.... This is the base for all doctrine of fellowship. In any way it is wrong to try to test one's heart by reasoning what he may believe or not.

It is obvious, that this can only apply to visible churches, for the spiritual church is invisible. The confession is decisive for the question of fellowship (1John 4,2: *Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God*). A pure and true confession is always the base for fellowship in its outward sense. A confession of error or of truth mixed up with error is a sign for termination of fellowship and a warning against establishing a fellowship. This is the main point for this study that focuses on fellowship in visible churches. The judgment of the hearts is in God's hands. He we judge everyone at the end of times. We are to regard the confession, this is what we are said to do by scripture. A christian confession has to be always a confession to the entire word of God. When the Lord speaks, the believer has to listen. When you have experienced the relieving power of the Gospel, you believe in everything that God says upon you in the Bible as Paul says (Acts 24:14): *...I believe all things that are written in the law and the prophets.*

Limitations of Church fellowship:

God's word limits the exercise of true Christian fellowship to those who confess the whole doctrine of the Bible correctly. All aberrations are condemned. Where this basic doctrine is not embraced, there we cannot recognize the true doctrine anymore. To look closer on this: There are always two points that have to come together in the confession of a church body or group: The proclamation of true doctrine and the refutation and exclusion of false doctrine. It is therefore not enough to confess (officially) the truth if at the same time error is tolerated or if the shadow of error in practice hangs over the true confession on the paper. Fellowship has to be limited to those who confess and practice the whole truth as it is available to us in God's word, the Bible.

Even small aberration destroys the base for fellowship. There can be no doctrine of some steps of more or less "unity" in doctrine that would allow more or less intensiveness of fellowship. This false doctrine came up in the LCMS and spread widely from this church bodies to other Lutheran churches around the world. This doctrine has no foundation in the Bible and relies therefore only on human ideas. There can only be the question of complete fellowship or no fellowship. Even if we would limit fellowship to one form or expression like for example prayer fellowship, as the Missouri-Synod practices also with non-Lutheran church bodies, in God's eyes it is real fellowship that is forbidden with errorists.

Further, it is not possible to be in fellowship with a church or group, because you think that these false teachers will return to true doctrine. There is also no base for other ideas that fellowship is possible as long as the errorists listen to admonition or as long as they do not refute the true doctrine. This teaching came up in the WELS in the 1950s and has to be further examined later. As the doctrine of fellowship found in the Missouri-Synod, it relies on human ideas and not on the Bible. We as believers listen to God's word and we recognize the blessings that listening brings rather than making up your own ideas.

Dangers of error:

We should not wonder about the strictness of the Bible in this point. If we look on Jesus how He shows great care for the sinners and at the same time harshly refutes the teaching of the Pharisees and legalists. He points out the danger of the leaven of the Jewish teachers. Authorized by our Lord, the Apostle Paul writes to the Christians in Rome (Romans 16:17): *Therefore I beseech you brethren: Mark them which cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which you have learned and avoid them.* This is a key passage when it comes to treating error in a church. Paul has written down every important doctrine of scripture in his epistle and now in the end, he warns the brethren: Error in doctrine is dangerous. It grows and destroys the saving faith bit by bit as Paul writes to the Galatians (Gal 5:9) *A little leaven leavens the whole lump.* This is the reason why he writes this

strict warning driven by the Holy Spirit.

The commandment of avoiding false teachers is very important for we know the author of every false teaching. It is the satan, the adversary of God who enters human hearts, also the hearts of believers with lies. Church history shows clearly that small portions of error are likely to grow further and further like the leaven that Paul uses to illustrate the growth. For example the LCMS¹ was first slowly and quietly invaded by error but it grew for it was not excluded until it finally affected all parts of doctrine. When the door is opened just a bit, error will enter and take his place and in the end it will overcome the truth.

Special attention has to be given to any aberration that has its base in rationalism or basically on the field of human reason. The elevation of human reason has destroyed the base of faith in many churches and also in many hearts. Human reason and judgment have overthrown the Bible as the foundation of doctrine, so that even the key teachings of salvation cannot be heard anymore. Historical criticism is the plague of many church bodies. It has to be regarded as the most dangerous error and the one that can most easily destroy saving faith. The bitter result is that many people cannot hear the word of God as Law and Gospel anymore. Instead there are human thoughts and theories taught in many church bodies. Human believes replaced the biblical teaching. Christianity has been thrown to the ground in nearly all the countries all over Europe by the evil influence of rationalism and the following worship for human reason since the 18th century. This should us make even more careful in distinguishing between error and truth. Whenever human reason wants us to believe in other things, we cannot give in when it comes to the teaching and admonishing and saving Word of God.

Doctrine and action:

The Bible does not only show the dangers of false doctrine and the importance of true doctrine -it show us also how we as Christians shall act in cases when true biblical doctrine is left or changed by a group or a church body. The main passage is again Romans 16:17: *Now I beseech you brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which you have learned and avoid them.* Here we have two important aspects at once. First we shall mark those who bring false doctrine. This means we are to recognize the false teachers by testing their confession in the light of the word of God. If one speaks according to Scripture in every matter, he is a true teacher. If he does not, he is a false teacher. When it is ascertained, that a group or an individual teaches other things than the Bible we are called by God's word to avoid them. This means we should suspend fellowship. This is the second step shown in Romans 16:17. We will focus on this more closely later in this study.

To establish fellowship with another group, it is necessary to be united in doctrine. This means that we shall have the same teaching concerning every part of Christian doctrine. Naturally, this teaching has to be according to the Bible in the same way. The Bible itself makes this limitation. We can read how Paul fights vigorously every sort of error that came up in the congregations (1 Cor 15). Even if fundamental teaching were not involved, Paul knew in the Holy Spirit that every aberration can destroy faith. That is why we shall never argue that non fundamental doctrines are not decisive in the case of establishing or terminating fellowship. The church tolerates no divisions, as Paul writes to the Corinthians (1Cor1:10): *...you shall all speak the same thing and that there be no divisions among you; but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and the same judgment.*

God's word shows further that all manifestations of fellowship are to be taken into account: Pulpit fellowship, altar fellowship, prayer fellowship and financial cooperation are spiritually all the same.

¹For this and neighboring questions take a look on the essay: *A closer look for those who are concerned* by A. Gullerud and D. Fleischer.

We cannot build up a half fellowship with an error inflicted church body for that would mean complete fellowship. We cannot view prayer fellowship as being no church fellowship as most churches do. This is a doctrine made by men and not by God.

As a conclusion: We shall have in mind that the Bible as the inerrant word of God makes us teach this doctrine of fellowship that is serious about every biblical teaching and that regards every manifestation of christian fellowship as form of church fellowship.

Application:

Now, having studied what the Bible teaches about fellowship and its manifestations and limitations we will go on the field of application of this biblical teaching. We should have a closer look on what the Bible tell us to do, which includes also the refutation of false teaching. The right doctrine on the paper alone does not help. We are asked by our gracious Lord to act accordingly. We have to focus on two main points: the establishment of fellowship and it dissolution. As an example of erring practice and doctrine in both cases, have a look on the attached paper on the WELS teaching and practice of church fellowship.

Establishment of fellowship:

We generally join together with every true believer in Christ as his Savior in the community of the invisible church. The Holy Spirit unites us and makes us parts of the communion of saints that we confess in the Apostle's creed. When it comes to visible churches and to the manifestation of fellowship, the Bible sets up the limitations mentioned in the foregoing parts of this study. We have to look on the open confession that an individual or a group makes. When this is in agreement with Scripture, we can and we are asked to make the true fellowship visible. We cannot establish fellowship until this agreement in every point is reached and confessed. We should give instructions to those who want to get to know the truth. We should promote and spread the true doctrine whenever it is possible. The word of God has the power to change hearts. One thing is there we cannot do: To establish church fellowship without doctrinal agreement. But whenever we teach the word of God clearly and purely, we bring people to saving faith and we build up the foundation of fellowship.

Dissolution of an established fellowship:

Let us now once more have a closer look on Romans 16:17: *Now I beseech you brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which you have learned and avoid them.* Scripture warns us of false teachers (mark) and tells the believers to separate from them (avoid them). This is a passage where scripture speaks very clearly. We are to break up fellowship with a group or church when it is ascertained that they teach contrary to the Bible. This is the only true way to handle a situation when a church body has been inflicted by error. The error and its followers have to be excluded. This is told us in God's great love: In love towards the errorist to bring him back to truth and in love towards the true believers for their faith shall not be endangered by the error (Gal 5:2).

Especially in this point, there has been much false teaching in the past and present. Most common among Lutherans is the doctrine that a human judgment is to be made if an errorist would change his mind or not. Then, as those people teach, when you have come to the conviction that further debates and discussion (often referred as admonition) would not lead to further results, you can break fellowship. Those people teach further not to break fellowship because of false doctrine (this alone would not be enough) but because one thinks that the false teachers would not change their mind in the future. You have to consider that this is humanistic doctrine with no base in the Bible.

There is no passage that call for fellowship with false teachers.

Often it was seen as a matter of time if you should break a fellowship sooner or later. This was never the real question brought up by the new doctrine of the WELS². It was the point that the dissolution of fellowship was not based on doctrine and confession but on a human judgment. This is clearly against God's word. Churches that adhere to such doctrine establish fellowship without real doctrinal agreement and they do not terminate fellowship until the error has grown strong and caused much damage. Also characteristic is a mixture of man-made and biblical doctrine. This makes it often hard to recognize these ideas as false doctrine along with unclear vocabulary that made the doctrine of fellowship even more obscure. For example they argued that fellowship with "normal" errorists would be right, whereas only "persistent" errorists were to avoid. We have to warn against this type of doctrine strongly and clearly. We have to be further careful in using the word *persistent* when it comes to false teachers. This expression caused too many difficulties and disorientation that we should not use it to make a general distinction between different sorts of false teachers that may come up in our minds.

Other forms of error on this field are easier to recognize:

- Those churches that fellowship each and every church body that calls itself christian (ecumenism).
- Those who make up strikingly false relationship with heathen religions and mix up christian ideas with political ideas (also on the level of ecumenism as in the World Council of Churches).
- Those who establish some sorts of fellowship with other church bodies without doctrinal agreement (level-system of LCMS and others).

Most mainline Churches belong to one or to both of the first groups whereas more conservative churches belong often to the last group. Confessional Lutheranism has been inflicted with the error of the last group since the 1950s as well as with the false teaching of the Wisconsin Synod that is mentioned above. It came up at around the same time. This keeps us among other things from establishing fellowship with these churches. We cannot trust in human ideas or human judgment but we trust in God's word.

Summary:

We focused on more or less practical matters in this study. Who missed more insights on the doctrine of the church will study the Epistle to the Ephesians. This is the part of scripture that shows us both the the glory of the church and its believers and nearly everything that has to do with questions concerning the church in general.

The Bible makes clear statements concerning christian fellowship. Faithful listening prevents us from repeating the mistakes of the past and of those that still adhere to false doctrine. In great faith to our Lord, we have to be silent with our ideas when scripture speaks clearly. This study tries to help testing the spirits that cross our way. We shall stand solidly on the rock Jesus Christ and on His word that is a light on my path. *Thy word is the truth.*

²For a closer study of the WELS position take a look on the essay *WELS and CLC – Yes, there is still a difference* by D.Fleischer.