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MISSOURI SYNOD'S PRACTICE OF FELLOWSHIP
WITH NON-LUTHERAN CHRISTIANS

A Thesis Presented to the Faculty
of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis,
Department of Practical Theology
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Sacred Theology

by

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In order to use the full implications of the recent statements on
 the subject, "Ecumenical Strivings in the Church of the Twentieth
 Century," see *Evangelical Quarterly*, XVII (Fall 1963), 22.

CHAPTER I

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

In the light of the contemporary ecumenical revival, interchurch fellowship or cooperation is an area of great concern. Currently the traditional concepts of the church and church unity are being studied and evaluated at an increasing rate. There are not many who would disagree with Kramer when he writes that, as a result of the ecumenical movement, "the doctrine of the Church occupies Christian theologians above all other doctrines."¹

The Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod also is assuming an active role in the study of the church. One cannot escape noticing the numerous amount of periodical articles, books, and convention memorials and resolutions which reflect this contemporary examination of traditional Missouri Synod views of the church or some aspect thereof.

It is the purpose of this paper to investigate the implications of recent Missouri Synod statements on the church for the practice of fellowship with non-Lutheran Christians. In this connection, it should be pointed out that the term, "Missouri Synod statements," does not refer only to the official pronouncements and resolutions of synod. The term is also used to denote books, printed essays, reports, and periodical articles written by various members of Missouri Synod.

In order to see the full implications of the recent statements on

1

Fred Kramer, "Ecumenical Strivings in the Church of the Twentieth Century," The Springfielder, XXVII (Fall 1963), 22.

the church it is first necessary to examine the traditional statements of the past. This enables one to have a basis for comparison--a basis for determining the differences between what was said in the past and what is being said today. It is at this point that one must determine the implications of these differences.

In discussing the traditional Missouri Synod statements on the church and the practice of fellowship, it would be impossible in this kind of paper to include every member of synod who has written on this subject. For this reason it has been decided to single out one of the most significant theologians of the past, and probe deeply into his insights on the fellowship question. Thus, when this paper uses the word "traditional" it is not using the word to refer to the traditional Lutheran view, but to the traditional Missouri Synod view, especially as this view is expressed in the writings of this one singled-out theologian, Franz August Otto Pieper.

Of all of the Missouri Synod statements on the church, some of the best known and most influential formulations were written by Pieper.² This Lutheran systematician died June 3, 1931, yet his theological thinking continues to exert a profound influence on the Missouri Synod today. Since Pieper had served as president of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, in 1887, and president of his synod from 1899 to 1911, his influence on his own contemporary church can easily be appreciated. A much more lasting influence, however, probably results from his three-volume dogmatics corpus, Christliche Dogmatik. An English translation

²Richard R. Caemmerer and Erwin L. Lueker, Church and Ministry in Transition (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1964), p. 50.

of this work is still used today as a basic dogmatics text in the two seminaries of the Missouri Synod. ✓

Since Pieper's view of church fellowship has had such a great influence on the Missouri Synod, it is necessary to examine thoroughly the views of this dogmatician in order to ascertain synod's traditional view of church fellowship. It must be noted, however, that others in the past also dealt with church fellowship in their writings. A few of these individuals disagreed with some of Pieper's views; but most of the men were in complete agreement with Pieper's statements. This, in essence, is the subject matter of Chapter Two.

After observing Missouri Synod's traditional view of church fellowship in Chapter Two, we will turn next to the recent Missouri Synod writings. If one were to look at the history of the Missouri Synod, especially Missouri's statements on the church, one might conclude that approximately one decade ago synod began to ask some questions about the traditional teachings on the church. It was at this time that the Common Confession was accepted in its entirety.³ This does not mean that there was a drastic change in Missouri regarding the doctrine of the church. It does, however, mean that with this document Missouri formally began to re-examine and evaluate some of its traditional views on this subject. Thus the term "recent" is used throughout this paper to include those writings which have been published within the last ten years.

In stating that Chapter Three will deal with recent Missouri Synod

³At the synodical convention in 1956 the Common Confession was officially recognized by the Missouri Synod as a statement which was in harmony with Scripture and the Confessions.

statements on the church, it must be understood that it would be extremely difficult to include every theological book and essay written by every minister in synod who, in the last ten years, wrote on this subject. The "recent statements" will thus include only the major periodical articles, books, and workshops dealing specifically with the doctrine of the church as it would relate to the practice of fellowship with non-Lutheran Christians. For this reason, Missouri Synod's practice of fellowship with other Lutherans, as well as with those who are not even Christian, will not be treated in this thesis. For this reason also, statements about the church which do not have a direct bearing on the practice of fellowship will not be treated.

The fourth chapter deals with a comparison of these two major outlooks--the past and the present, the traditional view and the "new consensus." What are the differences between the views contained in Chapter Two and those contained in Chapter Three? What are the differences between the points of view which were formerly expressed in synod, and those which are currently being promoted? In connection with this, the phrase "new consensus" will be used to describe those recent views which disagree, completely or in part with the more traditional view. Use of the word "new" does not mean that this consensus had never been expressed in synod prior to the last ten years; for it has been expressed several times in the past. Furthermore, use of the word "consensus" does not mean that all of those who are categorized in this "new consensus" agree with each other in every aspect of church fellowship; for even within this grouping there is much disagreement.

In Chapter Five the implications of these two different points of

view for the practice of fellowship with non-Lutheran Christians will be discussed. Here, the practice of prayer fellowship, pulpit and altar fellowship, and Missouri's participation in certain ecumenical organizations will be included.

Recognizing the danger of generalizing various trends in the church, and putting them into neatly labeled cubbyholes, the author of this paper nevertheless sees a value in using the terms, "traditional view" and "new consensus." These terms are used without any value judgment attached to them. They are used for the purpose of simplification and clarification of the basic issues, with the realization that one cannot apply the terms very literally or strictly.

There is a common fellowship among these Christians.

This consensus or unity of the church is a product of the Holy Spirit, just as faith is a product of the Holy Spirit. God is the subject and man is the object of this unity, and this is the only unity which exists.

It means, that unity which consists in the Holy Spirit's drawing my heart (or soul) [sic] to His word, the word of the Apostles and Scripture, is the only unity that actually exists and deserves the name of Christian unity. This is the unity that God would have in the Christian church and that is profitable to man.

It must be remembered that the Holy Spirit does not produce this unity automatically, not by means of God's word. Thus wherever the word is taught, there the Holy Spirit brings about faith in that word.

From August Otto Meyer, Christian Unity (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1954), 297.

A. A. Meyer, Unionism, translated from the German by J. A. Brauer and E. B. Grand (Chicago: City Press of Oregon City Publishing Co., 1907), p. 20. This study first appeared in the German as a chapter in "Die evangelische Kirche unter den Einwirkungen," Die evangelische Kirche in den Vereinigten Staaten, July 9-15, 1924 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1924), pp. 4-39.

CHAPTER II

THE TRADITIONAL VIEW OF THE CHURCH AND CHURCH FELLOWSHIP

The Dichotomy of Heterodox and Orthodox Church

In order to comprehend Pieper's view of the practice of church fellowship, it is necessary to understand first his view of the church. Essentially the Christian church "consists of all those, and only those, who believe in Christ."¹ This means that there are people throughout the world, in every Christian denomination, who truly believe, and who are thus Christians. In this sense the Christian church is one, for there is a common fellowship among these Christians.

This oneness or unity of the church is a product of the Holy Spirit, just as faith is a product of the Holy Spirit. God is the subject and man is the object of this unity, and this is the only unity which exists.

In short, that unity which consists in the Holy Spirit's drawing the hearts (of men) [sic] to His Word, the Word of the Apostles and Prophets, is the only unity that actually exists and deserves the name of Christian unity. This is the unity that God would have in the Christian Church and that is profitable to men.²

It must be remembered that the Holy Spirit does not produce this unity immediately, but by means of God's Word. Thus wherever the Word is taught, there the Holy Spirit brings about faith in that Word.

¹Franz August Otto Pieper, Christian Dogmatics (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1953), 397.

²F. A. O. Pieper, Unionism, translated from the German by J. A. Rimbach and E. H. Brandt (Oregon City: Press of Oregon City Enterprise, 1925), p. 35. This essay first appeared in the German as a district essay: "Einige Saetze ueber den Unionismus," Siebzehnter Synodal-Bericht des Oregon-und Washington-Distrikts der Ev.-lutherischen Synode von Missouri, Ohio und andern Staaten, July 9-15, 1924 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1924), pp. 4-39.

According to Pieper, "This, and this alone, is Christian unity."³

The above, however, does not mean that Pieper includes in the unity of the church those who accept the essence of the gospel, but who reject various aspects of that gospel. The contrary is true, for the unity of the church consists not so much in the oneness of faith in God's Word (Scripture). In other words, the unity of the church exists only among those who have a unity in doctrine. Pieper is quite clear about this when he states, "The unity of the Christian Church, Christian unity, is unity or oneness in doctrine and faith."⁴

If the above paragraph would seem to contradict Pieper's general definition of the church as quoted in the first paragraph of this chapter, Pieper sees no problem. That faith in Christ is the only requirement for membership in the church universal (the invisible church) is true, but this faith in Christ cannot be separated from faith in Holy Scriptures, according to Pieper. Denial of Scripture or any small part of Scripture is, in effect, denial of Christ himself. Thus those who accept any "false doctrine" are rejecting God insofar as they continue to err.⁵

This does not mean that anyone who fails to accept all of the true

³Ibid., p. 34.

⁴Ibid.

⁵F. A. O. Pieper, "The Difference between Orthodox and Heterodox Churches," unpublished translation from the German (translator not given), 1957, pp. 29-30. This essay originally appeared in the German as a district essay: "Ueber den Unterschied von rechtgläubiger und irrgläubiger Kirche," Verhandlungen der sechsten Jahresversammlung des Suedlichen Distrikts der deutschen evang.-lutherischen Synode von Missouri, Ohio und andern Staaten, February 6-12, 1889 (St. Louis: Luth. Concordia-Verlag, 1889), pp. 9-51.

Christian doctrine ceases to be a Christian, for "those who in their ignorance believe false doctrine are members of the Church."⁶ It is the invisible church, however, to which these erring Christians belong.

When Pieper speaks of church unity, on the other hand, he is referring to the visible church. This church unity does not apply to the entire visible church, but only to the true visible church, the orthodox church; for it is only in this church that one can find complete agreement in, and correct interpretation of all parts of Scripture. This is reflected in the following quote:

Die lutherische Kirche versteht unter Einigkeit im Glauben nicht mehr und nicht weniger als "die Uebereinstimmung in allen Artikeln der in der heiligen Schrift geoffenbarten christlichen Lehre."⁷

In discussing the universal Christian church (the invisible church), Pieper includes in this church all orthodox congregations (visible churches) and all individual believing Christians who are members of heterodox congregations, thus implying that heterodox congregations are not a part of the invisible church in the same way that orthodox congregations are a part of that church. Speaking of these orthodox congregations Pieper writes:

They are not something alongside or outside the universal Christian Church; but these local congregations, together with the individual believing souls who are cut off from all outward fellowship with others, make up the universal Christian Church.⁸

It must at this point be noted that a church body is orthodox only if it teaches the true Christian doctrine as that doctrine is contained

⁶ Pieper, Dogmatics, III, 399.

⁷ F. A. O. Pieper, "Von der Einigkeit in Glauben," Lehre und Wehre, XXXIV (October 1888), 289.

⁸ "Difference," p. 8.

in the Lutheran Confessions.⁹ To put it another way, in the orthodox church, and only in the orthodox church, can purity of doctrine be found. Pieper connects this purity of doctrine with a type of ecclesiastical infallibility when he writes, "Wir koennen nicht irren, oder sind in der Lehre unfahrlbar, insofern und weil wir auf Gottes Wort stehen, wie es lautet."¹⁰

The heterodox churches, by way of contrast, are those essentially Christian churches which are plagued with impure doctrine. Despite this false doctrine the heterodox churches have retained an essential part of the saving truth--the vicarious atonement, which enables any one member of these groups to come to faith. Thus, any congregation or church group which does not teach every doctrine contained in the Lutheran Confessions is labeled as a heterodox church. Contrasting this heterodox church with the orthodox church Pieper writes:

A congregation or church body which abides by God's order, in which therefore God's Word is taught, in its purity and the Sacraments administered according to the divine institution, is properly called an orthodox church (ecclesia orthodoxa, pura). But a congregation or church body which, in spite of the divine order, tolerates false doctrine in its midst is properly called a heterodox church (ecclesia heterodoxa, impura). All children of God should be earnestly concerned to see how real and serious this difference between the church bodies is. . . .¹¹

⁹Pieper, Dogmatics, III, 423.

¹⁰F. A. O. Pieper, Vortraege ueber die Evangelisch Lutherische Kirche die Wahre Sichtbare Kirche Gottes auf Erden (St. Louis: Seminary Press, 1916), p. 148.

¹¹Dogmatics, III, 422-423.

Pieper is extremely critical of the heterodox churches for a number of reasons. In the first place Pieper does not believe that the heterodox bodies respect God the way they should.¹² Secondly, the heterodox bodies "insult and persecute those who abide in God's Word."¹³ Then again, these bodies show an indifference towards Scripture,¹⁴ resulting in the falling away and possible damnation of many of the members of these bodies.¹⁵

"Proof Texts"

Seeing the great gulf that exists between the orthodox and heterodox churches, it is easy to see why Pieper would state emphatically, as will be demonstrated, that orthodox church members should practice no form of fellowship with the heterodox churches. Pieper's reasons for this conclusion are based primarily on Scripture, but he also believes that this view is not at all contrary to the position of Luther and the Lutheran Confessions. There are also, according to the Missouri Synod theologian, some very practical reasons why there should be no fellowship between the

¹²"Difference," p. 37.

¹³Ibid., p. 53.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 38.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 37. Cf. Pieper, "What is Christianity?" and Other Essays by the Rev. Prof. F. Pieper, translated from the German and edited by J. T. Mueller (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1933), p. 13, 269. The main essay in this book first appeared in the German separately as: Das Wesen Christenthums (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1903).

heterodox and orthodox churches.

In the first place any kind of fellowship with false doctrine is condemned as contrary to God's Word. In this respect Pieper writes, "Den Unionismus, das ist, die Gemeinschaft mit falscher Lehre, verwerfen wir als Ungehorsam gegen Gottes Wort. . . ." ¹⁶ In another place he writes:

"Die evangelisch-lutherische Kirche verwirft jede bruederliche und kirchliche Gemeinschaft mit denen, die ihr Bekenntnis, sei es ganz oder teilweise, verwerfen." . . . Das eine aeußerliche kirchliche Union ohne Einigkeit des Glaubens, der Lehre, und des Bekenntnisses wider Gottes Wort, sei, beweisen folgende Aussprueche des Heiligen Geistes: ¹⁷

In no place throughout Scripture is anyone ever permitted to deviate the least bit from God's Word. Thus it follows, according to Pieper, that no one is ever permitted to have fellowship with anyone who deviates from Scripture. God commands everyone to separate himself from error. ¹⁸ Those who practice some kind of fellowship with errorists are guilty of "unionism." In other words, according to Pieper's definition, unionism takes on a negative meaning, becoming synonymous with participation in church fellowship with anyone in the heterodox church. Pieper states that unionism is, "church-fellowship with false doctrine, that is, with doctrine which deviates from the Word of God, whether it be the doctrine of individual persons or of entire communions or churches." ¹⁹ In no uncertain

¹⁶ Was die Synode von Missouri, Ohio und andern Staaten waehrend ihres fuenfundsiebzigjaehrigen Bestehens gelehrt hat und noch lehrt (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1922), p. 3.

¹⁷ Pieper, Vortraege, p. 176.

¹⁸ Pieper, Unionism, p. 7.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 3.

terms Pieper condemns such fellowship as contrary to God's will and Word, as well as contrary to the Christian's calling. Pieper writes:

Should we so-called Missourians . . . suffer ourselves to be drawn into this same broad stream of Unionism, we would thereby violate God's will and command, would forsake the calling which we, as Christians, have in the world; we would turn traitors to the truth which God once restored in such marvelous clearness through the church of the Reformation and would help undermine the foundation of the Christian Church. Also God's blessings, with which He has blessed our labors so abundantly in the past, would be withdrawn in just punishment of our sins.²⁰

Pieper holds that unionism is contrary to Scripture. The passages that he uses to illustrate this point are numerous. Perhaps none is used more frequently than Romans 16:17-18:

I appeal to you, brethren, to take note of those who create dissensions and difficulties, in opposition to the doctrine which you have been taught; avoid them. For such persons do not serve our Lord Jesus Christ, but their own appetites. . . .²¹

Another major passage treated by the Lutheran theologian is II Corinthians 6:14-18 where Paul tells the Corinthians not to link themselves up with unbelievers, for light has no fellowship with darkness, and the believer has nothing in common with the unbeliever. "Therefore come out from them and be separate from them, says the Lord. . . ." It can be concluded from the above that Pieper associates the "unbeliever" in this passage with a member of the heterodox church.

Again, II John 10-11 indicates that anyone who brings false doctrine

²⁰ Ibid., p. 4.

²¹ All Bible passages quoted in this paper are from the Revised Standard Version (New York: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1953). Since reference to these passages can be found in almost all of the works of Pieper treated in this paper, there will normally be no reference to any specific work in which these passages are found. For example, in Vortraege, pp. 176-178 all of these major passages are discussed.

should not be received as a Christian brother, "for he who greets him shares his wicked work." Pieper writes concerning this passage:

Der Gruss ist der Glaubensbrudergruss, und das "zu Hause nehmen" ist das Aufnehmen als eines rechten Propheten. Dies soll nicht geschehen bei allen denen, welche nicht die in der heiligen Schrift geoffenbarte Lehre in allen Stuecken verkuendigen. Wer sich fuer einen christlichen Lehrer ausgibt, aber ein solcher nicht ist, das heisst, nicht bei der geoffenbarten Lehre bleibt, den sollen die Christen auch nicht als einen christlichen Lehrer an-und aufnehmen.²²

Titus 1:15 states that all things are pure to those who are pure.

To the corrupt, however, nothing is pure for they are corrupted. Pieper draws a parallel between this and the relationship of the orthodox church with heterodox churches. He then draws another parallel between Titus 1:15 and Titus 3:10: "As for a man who is factious, after admonishing him once or twice have nothing to do with him. . . ."

Similarly II Thessalonians 3:6-7 warns the church to keep away from anyone living in idleness, "and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us," while Matthew 7:15 warns the church about false prophets, and Matthew 24:4-11 about those who will come and seek to lead the people astray.

Pieper goes on to say that his interpretation of these Scriptural passages is in complete harmony with the Lutheran Confessions and Martin Luther. One of the passages in the Lutheran Confessions quoted frequently by Pieper to illustrate his view is from Article VIII of the Apology of the Augsburg Confession:

They have approved the entire eighth article. There we confess that hypocrites and evil men have been mingled with the church and that

²²Vortraege, pp. 177-178.

the sacraments are efficacious, even when evil men administer them, for ministers act in Christ's stead and do not represent their own persons, according to the Word (Luke 10:16), "He who hears you hears me." We should forsake wicked teachers because they no longer function in the place of Christ, but are antichrists. Christ says (Matt. 7:15), "Beware of false prophets"; Paul says (Gal. 1:9), "If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be accursed."²³

Pieper also frequently appeals to Article X of the Formula of

Concord:

Nor are such rites matters of indifference when these ceremonies are intended to create the illusion (or are demanded or agreed to with that intention) that these two opposing religions have been brought into agreement and become one body, or that a return to the papacy and an apostasy from the pure doctrine of the Gospel and from true religion has taken place or will allegedly result little by little from these ceremonies.

In this case the words of Paul must be heeded: "Do not be misdated with unbelievers. For what partnership have righteousness and iniquity, or what fellowship has light with darkness? Therefore come out from them and be separate from them, say the Lord" (II. Cor. 6: 14,17).²⁴

Pieper also refers to Luther's writings in order to lend support to his own views on unionism. One reference quotes Luther as stating that fellowship and unity can only be brought about by Word and doctrine.²⁵

In another place Luther writes, "No peace and unity for me which involves a loss of God's Word."²⁶

²³ Book of Concord, translated and edited by Theodore Tappert (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), p. 177. This citation from the confessions is quoted by Pieper in Vortraege, pp. 177-178.

²⁴ Book of Concord, p. 611.

²⁵ Pieper, Dogmatics, I, 178.

²⁶ Quoted in Pieper, Unionism, p. 39. It must be noted here that there are very few relevant passages from the Lutheran Confessions and Luther that Pieper is able to quote to support his views. It is probably for this reason that Pieper relies much more heavily on Scripture references than on the Confessions or Luther. The passages which seem most relevant to Pieper's views on unionism are cited above.

Pragmatic Considerations

Aside from the Scriptural and Confessional bases for Pieper's views on unionism, there are some very pragmatic considerations which influence his views. In the first place, members of the orthodox church should not practice any kind of church fellowship with the heterodox church bodies because in so doing these orthodox members depart from God's Word and become guilty of the sin of the heterodox. Pieper writes that anyone who practices church fellowship with "those who in their doctrine depart from God's Word becomes guilty of their sin."²⁷ Instead of participating in their sin with them, and thus encouraging them, orthodox members should seek to correct the errors of the heterodox, and deliver these heterodox from their sin.

It follows from this that one of the chief reasons, according to Pieper, for not practicing fellowship with those in error is that one who practices such fellowship endangers his own soul. Pieper calls union with error "seelengefaehrliche."²⁸ It is for our own good that God commands us to "avoid them," for "He does not want us to lose the salvation we already possess by faith."²⁹ Pieper asks the rhetorical questions:

What would become of our salvation if we should unite with the Unitarian communion, including the lodges, who deny so decidedly that faith in Christ crucified is the only way to heaven? What would become of our salvation if we should unite with the papacy and its "justification by works"? And what would become

²⁷ Dogmatics, I, 569.

²⁸ Pieper, Einige Saetze, p. 8. In English this is translated as "menace to the soul" (Pieper, Unionism, p. 7).

²⁹ Pieper, Unionism, p. 7.

of our salvation if we should unite with those who either deny the universal grace of God, the grace pertaining to all men, or who deny that we are converted and saved by the grace of God alone? We have seen that where these anti-Scriptural teachings are taught and enter the hearts of men faith in Christ cannot be kindled and preserved. All who have united with these errors, must pluck them out of their hearts again if they would be assured of the grace of God and salvation.³⁰

In the second place Pieper states that unionism in any form is harmful to the church at large. In addition to weakening God's Word, the heterodox church is also guilty of causing disunity in the church. In having fellowship with this heterodox church, the orthodox church is thus assisting in the formation of schisms.³¹ This is why Pieper says that unionism actually divides the church, and gives rise to the heterodox churches.³²

Fellowship with error is also harmful to the orthodox church because it brings error into a church which has purity of doctrine. To illustrate this Pieper tells a story. There were once three neighboring farmers, each of whom had a brook. One brook had pure, clear water; the second had muddy, cloudy, water; and the third had stagnant, diseased water. When the proposal was made to combine the three brooks and create one large, useful brook, the owner of the clear brook refused because he wanted to keep his brook clear. Thus, the orthodox church should refuse

³⁰Ibid., p. 35.

³¹F. A. O. Pieper, Ich Glaube, darim rede Ich (Zweite unveraenderte auflage; St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1903), p. 15.

³²Dogmatics, III, 425.

all forms of union with the heterodox churches "in order that the water of life may not be mixed with any deadly ingredients."³³

Closely related to the above is the fact that any form of church unionism abolishes the difference between truth and error, and when this takes place, the very foundation of the church is in danger. According to Pieper,

Unionism in principle abolishes the difference between truth and error, so that only through a "happy consistency" can the erring retain their hold on the essential truth. For this reason unionism is a grave threat to the Christian Church.³⁴

The Meaning of "Avoid Them"

Having seen Pieper's reasons for rejecting fellowship with anyone in error, one must now ask how this view affects the relationship of the orthodox church to the heterodox churches? What are the practical implications of the Lutheran theologian's views of fellowship? What does fellowship involve?

In the first place, when God tells orthodox church members to "avoid them," God is forbidding these members to engage in any kind of relationship that will strengthen the work of the heterodox church. This means that orthodox members will refrain from joining a heterodox congregation even if there is no orthodox church in that area. It also means that under no condition should a Christian give any money to a heterodox congregation, directly or indirectly. Pieper's views on the relationship

³³Pieper, "Difference," p. 47.

³⁴Dogmatics, III, 426.

a member of the orthodox church must maintain with the heterodox churches can be illustrated by the following:

By the command of God which forbids fellowship with the heterodox, everything is forbidden whereby we strengthen the evil work of the heterodox body. Christians should therefore not become members of heterodox bodies, indeed under no circumstances. If in a certain place no orthodox church is found, the Christian must be content with private, home worship, for God has nowhere given release from this word: . . . "mark them which cause divisions" ³⁵

After Pieper had finished delivering the above section of his paper at a pastoral conference, some questions were asked from the floor. One of the pastors asked if it were a sin for a Christian to occasionally attend the services of a heterodox church. The Lutheran dogmatician responded that it was not a sin under all circumstances for a Christian simply to be present at a service. Pieper hastened to add, however, that the Christian must always remain an observer and never go beyond that point. A person should not even seek his own edification, or give others the impressions that he is seeking this. This meant that this orthodox church member could not under any condition join in the singing or praying, nor give anyone else the idea that he was thus participating, for really, it is impossible for a Christian to participate in the service of a heterodox congregation. ³⁶

Another question was raised at this same conference. A pastor was wondering if it were a sin to join the heterodox church in carrying out works of Christian charity. Pieper's answer was that as citizens orthodox Christians are permitted to cooperate with unbelievers or the erring

³⁵ Pieper, "Difference," p. 33.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 34.

in, for example, the building of a city hospital, as long as that hospital is a civic institution. If it were reported, however, that a minister from one of the heterodox churches were going to be appointed as chaplain, then it would be a sin as an orthodox Christian to have a part in the building of such a hospital. Pieper continues:

But this dare not happen when the question is one of church or Christian endeavors, for example, missions, and, in general, when it involves works of Christian love. Christian love proceeds from Christian faith. With whom we are not in fellowship of faith, with him we cannot join to carry on works of Christian love.³⁷

When asked the question of whether a Christian could be a sponsor for a baptism in a heterodox church, Pieper replied that a Christian should not accept the invitation to be a sponsor under such conditions. If a Christian accepts the position of sponsor, for example, in a Reformed Church, that Christian is sanctioning the false doctrine of Baptism of the Reformed Church. Also, under no condition should a heterodox member ever be allowed to become a sponsor for a baptism in an orthodox church.³⁸

In general, Christians are commanded by God to avoid all teachers and pastors who cause divisions, or who deviate the slightest bit from the doctrine of Scripture.³⁹ This means that the Christian must first realize that whoever departs from the true Word is a false teacher.⁴⁰

³⁷ Ibid., pp. 34-35.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 35.

³⁹ Pieper, Dogmatics, I, 264.

⁴⁰ Ibid., I, 50.

The Christian then must seek to disprove his teaching. Finally, the false teacher must be isolated, and if he still persists in his false doctrine, if he does not leave the church on his own, he must be formally excommunicated. Thus, according to Pieper, if an orthodox church body tolerates error, or lets its errorists go unchallenged, or refuses to excommunicate such errorists, this orthodox body has committed the sin of "Schriftwidriger Unionismus."⁴¹

Anticipated Objections Answered

It should, at this time, be noted that Pieper realized his views on fellowship and unionism would be extremely unpopular among the heterodox members, as well as among a few orthodox members. Anticipating these objections, he then proceeds to answer them.

The first objection Pieper answers is one which, states that the strong must have patience with the weak. This is true, Pieper replies; but true patience does not mean one can permit the weakness of another to dictate how doctrine must be taught. To do this would involve changing Matthew 28:20 to read, "Do not teach everything that Jesus commanded, but teach only those things to which the weak brethren give their consent." There is a point when the weak cease to be weak any longer, and become false teachers and must be treated as such. Thus, regard for the weak does not involve the surrender of any part of God's truth. This could only serve to make the weak still weaker, and would substitute weakness for the Word of God as the source and norm of Christian doctrine.⁴²

⁴¹Pieper, Einige Saetze, p. 38.

⁴²Pieper, Unionism, p. 28.

A second objection claims that separatism is contrary to Christian love. Pieper's answer to this is similar to the above answer. Love involves keeping God's law; thus part of God's Word cannot be abrogated on the grounds of love. On the contrary, it is Christian love which motivates a person to reprove and seek to help an erring person.⁴³

The third objection reads as follows: "Since there are still children of God in heterodox bodies, you condemn these children of God when you separate yourselves from them. Therefore, would it not be better to practice fellowship with the heterodox?" Once again Pieper's answer is "No." God forbids fellowship with them. Furthermore the orthodox church is not the one which separated itself from the heterodox. It is the other way around. It must also be remembered that refusal to practice fellowship with heterodox bodies may actually help these bodies to realize their error.⁴⁴

In the fourth place there are those who say, "If everyone felt the way you in the orthodox church feel then there would never be any unity in the church and the church would cast a bad image in the world, so that it could never command the respect of the world." In reply Pieper says that one does not sacrifice the principles of Scripture for the sake of casting a better image. God desires complete unity of the church, but this unity can only exist as a result of a perfect unity in doctrine.⁴⁵

⁴³Ibid., p. 29.

⁴⁴Pieper, "Difference," pp. 31-32.

⁴⁵Pieper, Unionism, pp. 33-34.

The last objection is possibly one of the most important. Pieper anticipates opposition to many of the Bible passages he uses to defend his doctrine. Several of the passages such as II Corinthians 6:14-18 are clearly speaking of unbelievers and not of the heterodox church, claim Pieper's opponents. How then can the Lutheran theologian state that these passages imply that one should not have fellowship with other Christians. Pieper answers that erring churches are unbelieving churches insofar as they err; thus II Corinthians 6:14-18 and other passages such as Matthew 7:15; 24:4-11 can easily be applied to heterodox churches. Pieper states:

Word for word 2 Cor. 6 applies to the erring churches insofar as they are such. It says: "What fellowship hath righteousness with un-righteousness?" To preach false doctrine and to believe false doctrine is the greatest wickedness there is: a sin against the First Commandment. Luther stresses this so frequently. He always repeats: "False doctrine is sin against the First Commandment." Whoever sets God's Word aside, twists God's Word around, puts his own meaning into God's Word--he does not permit God to be his God; he acts wickedly. God often says in His Word: "Thou shalt not steal." But just as clearly and even more often we find it said in Scripture: You shall not believe false doctrine; you shall not preach flase doctrine; you shall not hear false doctrine. Now just as he is wicked who transgresses God's Word by stealing, so he is especially wicked who, contrary to the equally clear commandment of God, preaches, accepts, or promotes false doctrine, no matter in what measure or form. When God says that you must not steal, then you shall not steal even a little bit. The same applies to the matter of hearing and preaching false doctrine. Herein you already become a partaker of wickedness by spreading and advancing only one doctrinal error. The first part of Christian righteousness and Christian life is the trusting acceptance of all of the Word of God.

Pieper furthermore points out:

"What agreement hath the temple of God with idols?" The church is God's temple, and it is this for the very reason that God's Word resounds in it. Insofar as man's doctrine--error--is preached in the church, you teach the worship of a different god than the true One who has revealed Himself in Scripture. Yes, insofar as a different doctrine than God's Word is proclaimed in the church, you really make a temple of idols out of God's house.⁴⁶

⁴⁶"Difference," pp. 30-31.

Thus far an attempt has been made to examine Pieper's ideas on the practice of fellowship with members of the heterodox church. For many reasons the Lutheran theologian opposes any practice of fellowship without unity of doctrine. Any practice of fellowship with those in error (no matter how slight the error) constitutes the sin of unionism which is expressly forbidden by God's Word, according to Pieper.

The Minority Which Took Exception to Pieper's View

Although Franz Pieper's voice on the church has stood out strong throughout a good part of Missouri Synod's history, one must be careful to remember that his was not the only voice. Many others in the past wrote about the church and church fellowship. A few of these men took exception to some of Pieper's views on the church. Most of them agreed with the former president of this synod.

One man who was criticized rather severely for his untraditional views was Missionary Adolph Brux, "one of the ablest men the Missouri Synod ever sent abroad."⁴⁷ Brux was convinced that the traditional Missouri Synod position on prayer fellowship with non-Lutheran Christians was not the result of specific Scriptural and confessional prohibitions against such fellowship, but was the result of "logical reasoning and deduction from the Scriptures and the Confessional Writings."⁴⁸

Brux examines the Bible passages cited by Pieper and others to support their argument against fellowship with those of the "heterodox" church.

⁴⁷ Dean F. Lueking, Mission in the Making (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1964), p. 271.

⁴⁸ Adolph A. Brux, Christian Prayer-Fellowship and Unionism (n.p., 1935), p. 5.

The missionary's conclusion is that the synodical position is based on the assumption that all of these Scriptural references are applicable to Christians of other denominations who differ from the Missouri Synod in some point of doctrine or practice, and that these passages thus prohibit any kind of religious relationship with these other Christians. This is a false assumption. Not only does this assumption lack proof, but it also, by its very nature, "condemns Christ for fellowshipping with the Scribes and Pharisees in the synagogues." As a matter of fact, it would seem as if all of these passages are speaking of people who are definitely not Christian at all.⁴⁹

The basis for Christian prayer and worship fellowship, Brux continues, is the unity which already exists between all believing Christians--all members of the body of Christ. This is not a perfect unity in all points of doctrinal confession, but it is a unity or fellowship created by Christ among all who confess him as Lord.⁵⁰ Brux writes:

If unity of confession in every particular of doctrine really marks the limits of religious fellowship in the one, it must do so in the other. We have no right to set up a different basis for religious fellowship in the visible church from that which obtains in the invisible church; for both are one. But if universal Christian fellowship obtains in the invisible church, and if it is there based on fundamental faith in Christ as Redeemer and not on unity of confession in every particular of doctrine, then universal Christian fellowship should obtain also in the visible church to the extent that it does not violate the confessional conscience, and should there rest on the same basis as in the invisible church; for the two are one. And what God has joined together, man has no right to put asunder.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 7.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 73.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 79.

It was more than a decade later, on September 7, 1945, that a group of forty-four Missouri Synod clergymen signed "A Statement" which called for a greater liberality in Missouri Synod's attitude toward prayer fellowship. This document condemned the practice of synod's impugning the motives of heterodox church members, and of applying Romans 16:17-18 to other Christians. The signers of the document also believed that the local congregation should have more authority in matters of determining questions of fellowship. Furthermore, Christians, regardless of denominational affiliation, "may pray together to the Triune God in the name of Jesus Christ if the purpose for which they meet and pray is right according to the Word of God." Thus these clergymen believed that the practice of fellowship is possible without total agreement in the details of practice and doctrine, which is in agreement with the historic Lutheran tradition.⁵²

Another individual in the past who took exception to some of Pieper's views on the church is F. E. Mayer. Mayer believed that the contrast frequently made between a visible and invisible church is a false antithesis, "since the word Church has an entirely different connotation in each term." In the one term the church is defined as the communion of saints, while in the other the church is a corpus mixtum. Thus the contrast of the visible and invisible church is foreign to Lutheran theological thinking.⁵³ When Luther uses the term invisibilis or spiritualis to

⁵²"A Statement," Moving Frontiers, edited by Carl S. Meyer (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1965), pp. 423-424.

⁵³F. E. Mayer, "The Proper Distinction between Law and Gospel and the Terminology Visible and Invisible Church," Concordia Theological Monthly, XXV (March 1954), 185-186.

apply to the church he is not using the adjectives the way they are frequently used today. Primarily he is using these two words in contrast to the Roman Catholic institutionalization of the church. The church then is "invisible" not because establishing its membership statistically is impossible, but because this church cannot be "experienced by the ordinary means of perception employed in such areas as philosophy, science, history, where empirical data are the standard of cognition."⁵⁴

Mayer goes on to point out that there are three major dangers in the tendency to contrast a visible and invisible church. In the first place there is the danger of externalizing the church, and of failing to distinguish between the church in the proper and improper sense. This leads to the point where one ascribes to the visible church functions which are really in the realm of the Law. Secondly, there is the danger of externalizing the church to the point where one views it chiefly from the institutional, synodical, statistical, and organizational viewpoint. Then finally, "the false antithesis of visible and invisible leads to an unscriptural isolationism and to a legalistic separatism."⁵⁵

Three other men, in articles written over a decade ago, criticize this contrast of an invisible and visible church. Theodore Graebner writes that this contrast is neither Scriptural nor confessional, but it is based on Calvin. Use of this contrast can have some rather negative results. One of these is that frequently the relationship to Christians in other bodies is made an abstraction which does not need to be manifest

⁵⁴Ibid., p. 190.

⁵⁵Ibid., pp. 196-196, 198.

to others.⁵⁶ Both Pelikan and Piepkorn would seem to be in agreement with Graebner and Mayer when the latter writes that the Lutheran Confessions know of no antithesis between a visible and an invisible church. As a matter of fact nowhere do the Confessions describe the church as visibilis, sichtlich, invisibilis, or unsichtlich; neither do the Confessions make the antithesis of the church proprie dicta and impropria dicta.⁵⁷ Furthermore one should remember that the Lutheran Symbols do not use the word "church" to denote a denomination.⁵⁸ Thus one cannot link up the Lutheran Church with the true visible church, or, on the other hand, to so spiritualize the unity of the church that it becomes a Platonic abstraction.⁵⁹

In still another periodical article written prior to 1956 F. E. Mayer discusses "The New Testament Concept of Fellowship." Every Christian, no matter what his denominational affiliation is, has a complete fellowship with Christ. This fellowship crosses all denominational barriers, for it is a gift of God to man. Thus, "Every Christian shares his blessings with the Christians in every denomination and in every part of the world."⁶⁰

⁵⁶Theodore Graebner, "Kirche und die Kirchen," World Lutheranism Today: A Tribute to Anders Nygren (Rock Island, Ill.: Augustana Book Concern, 1950), pp. 116-117, 119.

⁵⁷Arthur Carl Piepkorn, "What the Symbols have to Say About the Church," Concordia Theological Monthly, XXVI (October 1955), 722.

⁵⁸A. C. Piepkorn, "The Significance of the Lutheran Symbols for Today," Seminarian, VI (June 2, 1954), 39.

⁵⁹Jaroslav Pelikan, "Church and Church History in the Confessions," Concordia Theological Monthly, XXII (May 1951), 315.

⁶⁰F. E. Mayer, "The New Testament Concept of Fellowship," Concordia Theological Monthly, XXIII (September 1952), 636.

In applying this to prayer fellowship Mayer writes, "Under given circumstances a Christian not only may, but also must pray with all Christians." This prayer is a manifestation of the common fellowship which includes Christians of all Christian denominations.⁶¹

Mayer goes on to state that since this fellowship is a sacred relationship to be treasured, Christians must do everything within their power to deepen it, and must avoid anything that might hurt or endanger it.⁶² For example, a person may still be an integral part of this fellowship despite the fact that he may deny the real presence. When this denial, however, is based on rationalistic arguments or "Nestorian aberrations," it may eventually lead to a denial of Christ's redemptive work. This is where the danger lies.⁶³ Nevertheless, just as threatening a danger lies at the other extreme:

Nevertheless, every Christian teacher in the Church as well as the layman in the pew has the old Adam, who leans toward doctrinal complacency, toward a flase doctrinal security, and at times toward doctrinal arrogance. There is always a danger of falling into a Lehrgerechtigkeit which is equally as ugly and equally as disastrous as Werkerechtigkeit. True humility will say with Dr. Walther: "We do not belong to those who believe that their knowledge requires no expansion nor correction."⁶⁴

The Majority Which Shared Pieper's View

Despite the fact that there were always some men in Missouri Synod

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 634.

⁶² Ibid., p. 637.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 641.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 643.

who were hesitant to accept all of Pieper's views regarding the church and church fellowship, there were many more men who subscribed to Pieper's views, or, to put it the other way around, who espoused views which were similar or identical to those views embraced by Pieper.

One Lutheran theologian of the past who has written almost as much about the church as Pieper wrote is C. F. W. Walther, the father of the Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod. Walther believed that the church in the proper sense was invisible--the sum total of all who have been regenerated by the Holy Spirit. It is only in the improper sense that the church can be designated as visible--the sum total of all who claim allegiance to the Word of God. In this visible church there are not only believers, but also hypocrites. The visible churches are divided into two groups. First there is the true visible church (orthodox) in which God's pure Word is proclaimed and the unadulterated sacraments are administered according to the gospel. Then there are also heterodox churches in which error is taught. These heterodox churches are to be distinguished from the Evangelical Lutheran Church which is to be regarded as the "true visible church of God on earth."⁶⁵

Walther maintains the same practice of separatism from the heterodox church as does Pieper. All forms of fellowship with heterodox churches are to be avoided. Walther writes:

Everyone is obliged, for the sake of his salvation, to flee from all false teachers and to avoid all heterodox churches, or sects and, on the other hand, to profess allegiance, and adhere, to orthodox

⁶⁵C. F. W. Walther, The True Visible Church, translated from the German by John T. Mueller (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1961), pp. 1-50.

congregations and their orthodox preachers wherever he finds such.⁶⁶

Unlike Pieper, however, Walther states that even an error against the clear statement of the Word of God, does not deprive an individual of church fellowship. As a matter of fact:

Even an error conflicting with the Word of God and arising and manifesting itself in an entire church-body does not in itself make a church-body a false church with which an orthodox Christian, or the orthodox church, would have to break off fellowship.⁶⁷

J. T. Mueller is another Lutheran theologian who is sympathetic to Pieper's distinction between the heterodox and orthodox church, and the practice of separatistic fellowship between the two divisions. He writes:

One thing is certain: If we give up the Scriptural distinction of the ecclesia visibilis and invisibilis and of orthodox visible churches and heterodox visible churches, which we must avoid, then the entire doctrine of the Church becomes uncertain and confused. Then, too, there will be nothing to oppose to the prevailing unionism of today, and rationalism will reign and destroy without hindrance.⁶⁸

Further proof that Pieper's doctrine of the church and church fellowship was the dominant view of the church throughout the past history of the Missouri Synod is seen in the fact that in 1932 synod adopted the Brief Statement of the Doctrinal Position of the Missouri Synod which was, in part, written by Pieper. This document required all Christians to discriminate between orthodox and heterodox church bodies, and have fellowship only with the orthodox. Any kind of fellowship with adherents of false doctrine was considered disobedience to God's command and sinful

⁶⁶C. F. W. Walther, "Walther's Theses on the Church," Moving Frontiers, p. 165.

⁶⁷Quoted in Ronald F. Blaess, "The Problem of Christian and Church Fellowship" (unpublished Bachelor's Thesis, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, 1961), p. 72.

⁶⁸J[ohn] T. M[ueller], "The New Testament Conception of the Church," Concordia Theological Monthly, X (June 1939), 466.

unionism which might ultimately lead to the loss of God's entire Word.⁶⁹

In 1947 J. W. Behnken wrote an article severely condemning any form of fellowship with other Lutherans. What he has to say about this kind of fellowship, would apply even more strongly to fellowship with non-Lutheran Christians. Behnken writes as follows:

Today efforts are being put forth toward fellowship via co-operation. Co-operative efforts have been proclaimed and heralded as harbingers of Lutheran fellowship and Lutheran union. Let me speak very frankly. If such co-operation involves joint work in missions, in Christian education, in student welfare work, in joint services celebrating great events, then co-operation is just another name for pulpit, altar, and prayer fellowship. Without doctrinal agreement, this spells compromise. It means yielding in doctrinal positions. Such fellowship will not stand in the light of Scripture.⁷⁰

In summary therefore it would seem that although there were several men throughout the history of the Missouri Synod who disagreed with the view of the church and church fellowship maintained by Pieper, the dominant view which persisted, at least up until this decade, was a view which would be similar to Pieper's view in almost every respect. Many other sources could be cited to illustrate this. For example most of the Synodical conventions from the early part of the twentieth century up through 1953 had at least one resolution which in one way or another reflected Pieper's doctrine of the church or church fellowship.⁷¹ Suffice it to say that, to a greater or lesser degree, Pieper's views on this subject dominated synodical thinking for many decades.

⁶⁹"Brief Statement of the Doctrinal Position of the Missouri Synod," in the supplement to the Reports and Memorials of the Forty-Fifth Regular Convention of the Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod, June 20-30, 1962 [St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1962], p. 6, Par. 28.

⁷⁰"Fellowship among Lutherans," Concordia Theological Monthly, XVIII (February 1947), 122.

⁷¹Fred W. Meuser, "Pulpit and Altar Fellowship among Lutherans in America," Church in Fellowship, edited by Vilmos Vajta (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1963), pp. 60-63.

CHAPTER III

RECENT STATEMENTS ON THE CHURCH AND CHURCH FELLOWSHIP

The Present Existence of the Traditional View

That the traditional view of the church and church fellowship-- the view expounded by Franz Pieper--is still quite popular in the Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod is evidenced by the memorials and resolutions of synodical conventions of the last decade, as well as by many periodical articles which have been published.

In the first place, the present existence of the traditional view of the church can still be evidenced by the conventions of the Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod. At the 1956 convention this traditional view is reflected in the report, as well as the resolution accepting this report, of the committee which was appointed by the praesidium to investigate the possibilities of membership in the Lutheran World Federation. Quoting the Brief Statement the report states that all Christians are required to discriminate between orthodox and heterodox churches, avoiding all forms of fellowship with the heterodox. Since the Federation promotes cooperation in actual church work such as joint missions, educational endeavors, and a witness to the world of the gospel of Christ, therefore, continues the report, joining such an organization would involve the Missouri Synod in a union with heterodox church groups. Furthermore, member churches not only surrender their confessional autonomy, but also fail to distinguish between truth and error, orthodoxy and heterodoxy. Thus it would be impossible for an orthodox church to entrust certain of its ministries to men whom it feels constrained to call to repentance

for tolerating error. In accepting the report of the committee, and in refusing to join the Federation, the 1956 synodical convention answered an overwhelming negative to the following question posed by the committee:

Can an orthodox church body be a party to spiritual aid in which orthodox and heterodox bodies unite, to an action in which the critical question of the Scriptural and confessional quality of that aid is left unanswered?¹

In the 1959 convention of the Missouri Synod it was resolved to subscribe to the Brief Statement as well as all other doctrinal statements adopted by Synod. These statements, according to Resolution Nine, are to be binding as publica doctrina in Synod, and thus are to be taught by all ministers and teachers.² The Brief Statement distinguishes between the visible (improperly speaking) and the invisible (properly speaking) church, the former being divided into heterodox and orthodox bodies. It goes on to state:

All Christians are required by God to discriminate between orthodox and heterodox church-bodies, Matt. 7:15, to have church-fellowship only with orthodox church-bodies, and, in case they have strayed into heterodox church-bodies, to leave them, Rom. 16:17. We repudiate unionism, that is, church-fellowship with the adherents of false doctrine as disobedience to God's command, as causing divisions in the Church, Rom. 16:17; 2 Jn. 9:10, and as involving the constant danger of losing the Word of God entirely, 2 Tim. 2:17-21.³

¹Proceedings of the Forty-Third Regular Convention of the Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod, June 20-29, 1956 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1956), pp. 528-532. It is interesting to note that in adopting this resolution--Resolution 11--there were only twelve negative votes (p. 538).

²Proceedings of the Forty-Fourth Regular Convention of the Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod, June 17-26, 1959 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), p. 191.

³"Brief Statement of the Doctrinal Position of the Missouri Synod," Reports and Memorials of the Forty-Fifth Regular Convention of the Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod, June 20-30, 1962 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1962), Supplement, p. 6.

The idea that the Missouri Synod was the orthodox church, with purity of doctrine and practice, was still present in the 1962 Synodical convention where it was resolved, "That we thank God for the blessing of purity of doctrine and practice He has granted to our Synod without any merit on our part."⁴

There were also at this convention, as well as at the 1965 convention, many memorials, consistently proposed by some of the more conservative elements in synod. For the most part Synod either rejected these resolutions, or voted to take no action on them, for one reason or another. For example, in Memorial 312 it was proposed that synod limit contact with heterodox church bodies, especially with regard to military chaplaincies, social agencies, and campus work. This resolution was stimulated by the belief that "the line of demarcation between truth and error for a number of years has been blurred by unionistic and syncretistic tendencies and activities;"⁵ Since there were other resolutions which alluded in some way to this memorial, synod voted to take no further action on this memorial. Similar memorials were proposed and defeated in both this 1962 convention and in the 1965 convention.⁶

⁴Resolution 3-10, Proceedings of the Forty-Fifth Regular Convention of the Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod, June 20-29, 1962, [St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1962], p. 103.

⁵Reports and Memorials, 1962, pp. 151-152.

⁶Cf. ibid., pp. 163-164 (Memorials 332, 333, and 349). Also, Memorials 2-24 and 3-19, Convention Workbook (Reports and Overtures), 46th Regular Convention, The Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod, June 16-26, 1965 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, [1965]), pp. 72-73, 98.

Article VI of the Constitution of the Missouri Synod would seem to provide further indication of the existence of the traditional view of the church and church fellowship. This particular article of the constitution deals with the conditions for holding membership in Synod. The second paragraph reads as follows:

2. Renunciation of unionism and syncretism of every description, such as:
 - a. Serving congregations of mixed confession, as such, by ministers of the church;
 - b. Taking part in the services and sacramental rites of heterodox congregations or of congregations of mixed confession;
 - c. Participating in heterodox tract and missionary activities.⁷

Various periodical articles and conference papers also witness to the fact that the traditional view of the church and church fellowship was still present in the Missouri Synod throughout this last decade. There are still many individuals, for example, who hold to the distinction of the visible and invisible church. Both Otte⁸ and Burgdorf⁹ refer to the church as an invisible company or body, while Sauer links up the Lutheran denomination with the "true visible church," although he admits that this title does not imply that this body is free from error.¹⁰

⁷ Handbook of the Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod, 1963 edition [St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1963].

⁸ Gilbert T. Otte, "The Distinctive Marks of the Christian Church," The Lutheran Witness, LXXVII (November 18, 1958), p. 537.

⁹ P[aul] H. B[urgdorf], "The False Claims of the Roman Catholic Church and the Great Protestant Reaction," The Confessional Lutheran, XVIII (April 1957), p. 41.

¹⁰ Alfred von Rohr Sauer, "The Doctrine of the Church," The Abiding Word (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1960), III, 323.

It follows from the visible-invisible distinction that the heterodox-orthodox differentiation will also be made. Eberhard states that a church is orthodox if it teaches Scripture in its purity, and administers the sacraments as Christ instituted them. The heterodox church, on the other hand, refers to any church which tolerates false doctrine in its midst.¹¹ Burgdorf goes so far as to question as to whether these heterodox bodies could be considered churches:

It is only because of the believers among them who do not realize their actual situation that we still speak of such heterodox bodies as "Christian" or indeed as "churches" at all while at the same time their error stamps them as sects and demands that we reject them as such and refuse them the hand of fellowship.¹²

Out of the visible-invisible, heterodox-orthodox dichotomy of the church flows a concept of an invisible unity of the invisible church. This results in a unity of the visible church based on an agreement in doctrine which closely resembles Pieper's views on church unity. For example, the unity of the church described in Article VII of the Augsburg Confession is interpreted by some as a platonic, spiritual unity which exists among all Christians, but which man can do nothing to outwardly manifest.¹³ "As little as we can show the one body of Christ, so little

¹¹Carl A. Eberhard, "We Believe, teach, and confess The Church," The Lutheran Witness, LXXIX (July 26, 1960), 379. It is interesting to note that not one of these men precisely defines "pure doctrine." It can only be implied from the antithesis (i.e. heterodox church) that "pure doctrine" refers not just to the gospel (Cf. Augsburg Confession VII), but also to all of the doctrinal statements of Scripture, and the interpretation of those statements.

¹²Burgdorf, p. 42.

¹³"The Proper Understanding of Article VII of the Augsburg Confession," The Confessional Lutheran, XIX (September 1958), 95.

can we show the oneness of the church."¹⁴ The unity for which the church does work is a unity of the visible church. This unity is based on complete agreement in all of the doctrines of Scripture; and it is accomplished when all in the church "speak the same thing."¹⁵ Disagreements regarding the truths of Scripture bring about a disunity of the visible church, while agreement concerning these truths means unity. This shows the need for what Naumann calls "indoctrination," since "our efforts to bring the knowledge of the truth to the highest possible level, are all needed to keep us faithful to the one truth."¹⁶ Thus unity will not really be achieved until the church bodies "agree in all doctrines of Holy Scripture. No more! No less!"¹⁷

The converse of this is also true according to the current traditional views. When church bodies unite in fellowship without complete agreement in the doctrines of Scripture, or when ministers join in religious services despite disagreement in doctrine, then these bodies are engaging in sinful unionism.¹⁸ In a volume of The Abiding Word published in 1960 Sauer writes regarding this subject:

¹⁴ Martin J. Naumann, "To Keep the Unity of the Spirit in the Bond of Peace," The Lutheran Witness, LXXV (August 14, 1956), 307.

¹⁵ Frederic Niedner, "What's the Meaning? Unionism," The Lutheran Witness, LXXVIII (October 20, 1959), 491.

¹⁶ Naumann, p. 308.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Niedner, p. 491.

Perhaps someone will say: If we Lutherans of the Missouri Synod are in fellowship with believing Christians in other church bodies, then why can't we practice this fellowship? The answer is this: While the fellowship is there which unites Christians in the una sancta, in the congregation of believers, yet we cannot practice fellowship with the Christians in these other church bodies as long as some difference of doctrine separates them from us. According to the Word of God we can practice fellowship only with those Christians with whom we are united in doctrine and practice. Therefore, while we recognize that there are Christians in other church bodies, we cannot practice fellowship with them because the Word of God forbids this.¹⁹

Thus, the practice of fellowship with members of the heterodox church is sinful because it is forbidden by Scripture. In support of this view Sauer quotes the traditionally quoted Scripture passages: Matthew 7:15; Romans 16:17; I Timothy 6:3-5; Titus 3:10; and II John 10:11.²⁰ These and similar passages are used by most of the other clergymen who would maintain this view of the practice of selective fellowship.²¹

Fellowship with heterodox church bodies, however, must not only be avoided because Scripture forbids it, but also because a certain amount of danger is involved in such fellowship. Sohn writes that joining in prayer with those of other faiths implies doctrinal indifference which is "always a serious menace to the true health" of the church.²²

¹⁹Sauer, p. 325.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹E.g., Carl A. Gieseler, "Counterfeit Christianity," The Lutheran Witness, LXXIX (August 9, 1960), 404; Eberhard, p. 379; George J. Meyer, "The Church and the Churches," The Lutheran Witness, LXXVII (December 16, 1958), 585; Otto E. Sohn, "What's the Answer," The Lutheran Witness, LXXVI (March 12, 1957), 137.

²²Sohn, p. 137.

George Meyer also points out the danger in what might seem to be the slightest error. He writes as follows:

The Bible is very emphatic in forbidding fellowship with those who teach error. . . . Keep your distance and stay aloof from them. They look innocent, but . . . that danger lurks even in one "little error. . . . Even one false doctrine if it is adhered to and defended, may affect all that one believes and confesses."²³

It would thus seem from most of the writing cited above that even the slightest error in interpreting the Bible could mean that all fellowship should be avoided. In none of the above writings is there any clear definition of what is meant by a doctrine. One of the more conservative journals distributed among many members of synod, however, lists some of these "clear doctrines of Scripture": the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, the six day creation, the historicity of Adam and Eve, the fall of man, the flood, and Jonah (as these stories are described in Scripture). Anyone who teaches otherwise is a false teacher; and, the implication would be any church which tolerates such error is a heterodox church.²⁴ Now it is true that this does not mean to imply that the other authors of this section, cited above, would necessarily agree with this particular list. George Meyer, for example, says that the church must permit differences where Scripture has not spoken clearly.²⁵

One more question needs to be asked in this section. Exactly what form of the practice of fellowship is being condemned by these traditional views? The answer to this, however, is not spelled out in any detail.

²³George Meyer, p. 585.

²⁴"Division in the Missouri Synod," The Confessional Lutheran, XXV (September 1964), 82.

²⁵George Meyer, p. 585.

Most of the works cited condemn any form of fellowship with heterodox church bodies, be it prayer, pulpit, or altar fellowship. C. S. Meyer condemns pulpit and altar fellowship but allows for the possibility in certain circumstances that the church may, by its very nature, be required to join with others in prayer fellowship.²⁶ On the other hand, P. H. Burgdorf repudiates any form of fellowship with adherents of false doctrine,

Whether such fellowship is practiced within or without a formal organization really makes no difference. And we may add that when it is practiced as "cooperation in externals" this merely adds the offense of deception to the offense of unionism.²⁷

It is thus clear that there are many members of the Missouri Synod today whose views on the church and church fellowship are quite similar to the traditional views of synod--those views maintained by Franz Pieper. Despite the fact that within this group there is variety and debate, the essence of this traditional view remains the same.

The Emergence of a New Consensus

Regarding the Theology of the Church

Although the traditional view of the church is still reflected today in the writings of many members of synod, a new consensus of opinion regarding the doctrine of the church and church fellowship seems to be emerging. This consensus can be seen in three aspects of the church: a theology of the church, a theology of the unity of the church, and a theology of fellowship.

²⁶ "Prayer Fellowship," Proceedings of the Seventy-Third Convention of the Western District of the Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod, June 17-21, 1957 [St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1957], p. 84.

²⁷ "The St. Louis Lutheran Questions Missouri's Practice," The Confessional Lutheran, XVII (October 1956), 99.

Many images are used to describe the church, but one of the most dominant ones is the body of Christ. It is important to note, as Martin Kretzmann points out, that the body of Christ includes all Christians--the whole church, and not just one part of it. Those who are a part of this body share a threefold relationship: they are related to the head of that body, to each other, and to the world.²⁸

In the first place those who are a part of the body of Christ are related to the triune God. It is God who has created the community, writes Coiner, by "redeeming and claiming His people in Christ."²⁹ This is an important factor to keep in mind, for if the church is the work of God, then the forms and structures with which men operate today are only secondary and temporary. Because of this fact, the church cannot be placed within denominational walls, for denominations are the creation of men.³⁰

Thomas Coates maintains this when he writes that the church cannot be "compressed within any organizational framework; the una sancta ecclesia is not coterminous with any ecclesiastical institution."³¹

Being united to Christ, however, describes a relationship to the

²⁸ Martin Kretzmann, "How in the World?," The Lutheran Witness, LXXVIII (August 4, 1964), 389.

²⁹ Harry Coiner, "Affirming the Holy Christian Church, the Communion of Saints," Convention Proceedings, The Southern Nebraska District, The Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod, Thirty-Fifth Convention, June 19-21, 1961 [St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1961], p. 118.

³⁰ Roy Blumhorst, "Death and Birth of the Parish--In the Suburbs," Death and Birth of the Parish, edited by Martin Marty (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1964), p. 113.

³¹ Thomas Coates, "One Body in Christ: Theory or Practice?" The Cresset, XX (June 1957), 8.

euaggelion. This relationship constrains members to confess their total dependence on the revelation of God in Word and Sacrament. It is in this sense that the church can be defined as people who are gathered around the means of grace. But this perspective also has the other advantages of guarding against any "institutionalization of faith." Thus faith can never become simply an assent to certain doctrinal principles. Seen in this light faith is a "living active thing because it draws its vitality from Jesus Christ, the living head of the living body."³²

In the second place, those who are a part of the body of Christ stand in a relationship to each other. Through baptism all have been equally incorporated into this body. Since membership in this body is the work of God and not of man, and since the Holy Spirit dwells in all who have been incorporated in this body, "there can be no distinction of rank or importance among the members of the body."³³ All members are one, regardless of what denominational label they may bear. Frederick Danker emphasizes the fact that a Christian is in fellowship with every other Christian in the world, a reality which each Christian must reflect in his daily life. Thus, continues Danker,

When I meet a stranger I am not primarily or even secondarily concerned whether he is a member of a church. I enquire first of all whether he is a Christian. If he tells me he belongs to such and such a church, I tell him that I didn't ask that question. I want to know whether he is a Christian. Too much of our church canvassing is done in terms of denominational slots; this is the result of equating church fellowship with sectarian identity. But if I

³²Herbert T. Mayer, "And He Shall Reign Forever and Ever," produced by the Faith Forward Committee of the Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod (St. Louis: [Concordia Publishing House], 1963), p. 29.

³³Martin L. Kretzmann, "Report of Mission Self-Study and Survey," Convention Workbook, p. 116.

ask whether a man is a Christian I rise above social, racial, cultural, or historical distinctiveness of my own group. If I discover he is not a Christian, I seek to share the fellowship of Christ with him; if he is a Christian, I have found another person with whom I can enter into a partnership of giving and receiving the gifts of the Spirit.³⁴

Since the relationship we have with other Christians is based on the act of God, uniting all Christians in the body of Christ, this relationship does not depend on the degree of sanctification in knowledge or in action attained by any of the other Christians. The relationship which we have with other Christians is based on the act of God by which he creates faith. This faith cannot be measured by degrees in various Christians, for the communio sanctorum is always the communio peccatorum, and Christians stand in the same relationship to each other regardless of their sin, since their relationship does not depend on their own action but on God's. Thus, according to Martin Kretzmann, Christians will always be willing to listen to those who differ from them. Christians will want to enter into relationships which will enable this listening, so that all who have been called by God will help one another.³⁵

In the third place the members of the body of Christ, the church, are related to each other in their mission to the world. Thus not only are local Christian congregations and denominations in mission to each other, seeking to build each other up into a stronger body, but they are also in mission to the world.³⁶ In this connection, each denominational

³⁴"What is the Church to You?" Advance, XI (June 1964), 20.

³⁵Kretzmann, "Report," Convention Workbook, p. 120. Cf. William Backus, Paul Malte, and Wayne Saffen, Adventuring in the Church (Medford, Oregon: Morse Press, 1960), p. 130.

³⁶Kretzmann, "Report," Convention Workbook, p. 120.

group of Christians must realize that it has a share in the overall mission of the whole church to the whole world. This means that no denominational grouping can act as if it alone has "received this mission from the Lord of the church."³⁷

Since the members of the church have a mission to each other and to the world, and since they are one in the body of Christ, they must therefore seek ways to recognize and practice the unity which they already have. They must be willing to carry out an active mission to the other denominational groupings, as well as be willing to become the object of mission from other parts of that body.³⁸ Kretzmann writes:

Since the body of Christ is one, the local community of believers has the responsibility of carrying the Word of faith to similar local communities of believers in the continuing task of mutual edification within the body of Christ. This obligation rests on every part of the church because of its oneness, which rests in, grows out of, and is created by faith in Christ, which God has given through the work of the Holy Spirit. This obligation of being in mission to one another does not grow out of organizational oneness, which is not the substantive basis of unity, but out of the common relation which all believers bear to Christ and which has been created by the Holy Spirit. As this obligation is fulfilled in the power of the Holy Spirit, the church will be lead to express its oneness also in organizational structures in order that this oneness may be deepened and enlarged.³⁹

It is quite clear, then, that in order to carry out their responsibility to each other, the members of the church have to get close enough to each other so that they can bring God's forgiveness in Christ to each other; but, according to Caemmerer, they have to forgive each other

³⁷Kretzmann, "How in the World?," The Lutheran Witness, LXXXIII, 389.

³⁸Kretzmann, "Report," Convention Workbook, p. 120.

³⁹Ibid.

in order to do this. "They have to look like people who want each other's good. They have to overcome every ill feeling and stifle every rejection of each other."⁴⁰ One of the chief resources for this unity is the sacrament of Holy Communion which is indeed "the holy sharing." Together Christians take the body and blood of Jesus and give it to one another. Thus Christians themselves are one body together--the body of Christ.⁴¹ All of this refers to the maintenance of the unity of Christ's body. Caemmerer then concludes:

Christ builds His church and preserves its unity through the people of His church, as they remind each other of Christ's saving work, remain close to each other in love, and sustain each other's faith through Christ's forgiveness--till He comes again.⁴²

Regarding the Unity of the Church

The key to the unity of the church is that the atoning work of Christ has made his people to be one with one another. This atonement removes the barriers between man and God and also between God's own children in the body of Christ (which is the term used to picture the unity in the church).⁴³ This is why Caemmerer can say that the unity of the church does not exist in the fact that the members are together, or that they are equal to each other or that they share the same doctrinal formulations, "but by virtue of their membership in Jesus Christ, and by virtue of their

⁴⁰ Richard R. Caemmerer, Christ Builds His Church (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1963), p. 56.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 90.

⁴² Ibid., p. 94.

⁴³ Richard R. Caemmerer and Erwin L. Lueker, Church and Ministry in Transition (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1964), p. 28.

activities in supporting one another, they are literally one body."⁴⁴

Regarding this unity of the church James W. Mayer, in an article entitled "The Church as the People of God United in the Word of God," writes that one cannot guarantee or create unity by doctrinal formulations. One can only bear witness to the unity which already exists. As a matter of fact, it would seem to be Schwaermerei to say that you cannot know that any group of Christians is one until it first agrees on all points of doctrine. Mayer then illustrates this. "A" constantly upholds "pure" doctrine, but tends to be rather haughty and contemptuous of others who differ with him. "B" on the other hand does not hold to the inerrancy of Scripture, yet he gives evidence in word and deed of being bound to Scripture and Christ in a way that "A" does not. Both "A" and "B" are Christians who come into close contact with each other. Furthermore, the "unity in the Word" is thereby an act of God, apart from any denominational affiliation. "B's" response to the Word is no more divisive of unity than is "A's." Both need renewal and growth through word and sacrament. In conclusion Mayer asks if "A" and "B" are not "'united in the Word' in a way that is somehow more significant, more crucial than the fellowship either 'A' or 'B' has with his synodical brethren 300 miles away?"⁴⁵

⁴⁴Richard R. Caemmerer, "The Body of Christ," Concordia Theological Monthly, XXXV (May 1964), 264. Hereafter this periodical will be referred to as CTM.

⁴⁵James W. Mayer, "The Church as the People of God United in the word of God," CTM, XXXIII (November 1962), 663-664.

This essentially is the opinion of Richard Caemmerer who, discussing Article VII of the Augsburg Confession, says that agreement in doctrinal formulations is not what is necessary to perceive the unity of the church. Rather, you must get Christians to work together for the teaching of the gospel, and the administering of the sacraments. This is sufficient to have and perceive the true unity of the church. In explaining this Caemmerer writes:

The gospel is not so much a "doctrine" or a bundle of doctrines as a message to be promulgated and applied to men. The sacraments are ceremonies which serve their purpose not so much when people agree as to what they are but when they are actually administered to people.⁴⁶

Two factors, however, are frequently pointed out regarding this unity of the church. In the first place it is noted that this unity is not a goal towards which the church must constantly strive. The church is the body of Christ, and this, in itself, indicates that the unity already exists as a gift of God. It thus remains for the church to seek ways of making this unity manifest to the world.⁴⁷ This, in essence, would seem to be the gist of one part of the Common Confession which reads:

The oneness of the Church is not a goal to be achieved or a task to be completed. It is a unity that belongs to the essence of the Church because the one Christ, the Lord of heaven and earth, is its Head. Either a man belongs to this one Church, or he does not. Either the Church is the one Church, or it is not the Church. This union with Christ as the Head also brings about the union of believers with one another. The uniting power of the Gospel becomes

⁴⁶Richard R. Caemmerer, "Church Unity and Communication," The Christian Century, LXXIII (April 4, 1956), 417.

⁴⁷H. Mayer, p. 30.

manifest both in local congregations and groups of congregations throughout Christendom.⁴⁸

A second aspect of the unity of the Church is that this unity is not an invisible, mystical, platonic kind of unity. Nor is it a unity of the "invisible" church. To the contrary, it is a dynamic unity, a "living, functioning, organic unity like that of the human body, in which no part or member is expendable and none is solitary."⁴⁹ "Caemmerer and Lueker refer to this spiritualized unity of the church when they discuss two common perversions of the church:

As the church through the ages developed organizational and political structures, the tendency emerged to lose sight of the basic spiritual quality of this unity and to replace it with secular counterparts of government or wealth. This tendency was paralleled by another--to spiritualize the unity of the church until it had no actual and concrete existence, to claim a unity between Christians who feuded and refused in practice to care for each other's spiritual life. The New Testament steers clear of both of these extremes.⁵⁰

Despite the fact that this unity of the church is a gift of God, the unity is nevertheless threatened when the church fails to recognize it and

⁴⁸"The Common Confession," Reports and Memorials of the Twenty-Eighth Delegate Convention of the Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod, June 20-30, 1956 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1956), p. 584-585.

⁴⁹Martin H. Franzmann, "A Lutheran Study of Church Unity," Essays on the Lutheran Confessions Basic to Lutheran Cooperation (St. Louis and New York: Published jointly by the Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod and the National Lutheran Council, 1961), p. 21. Cf. Caemmerer, "Body of Christ," CTM, p. 266. The validity of this statement could be reflected in a passage such as John 17:23, where Christ prays that the church may be perfectly one, so that the world might know that God sent Jesus, and that God loves the church. If the unity of the church were abstract or invisible, this statement would be impossible.

⁵⁰Caemmerer and Lueker, p. 28.

put it into practice. When the church fails to put this unity into practice, it ceases to be the church. For, according to Caemmerer, the church must constantly recognize and preserve the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace, and must never abstract this unity from the actions of the people.⁵¹ This is the problem to which James Mayer is addressing himself when he writes the following:

When we stop the process, when we no longer live in the Word with one another, we are in danger of losing the unity also, because we have prevented exposure to the means whereby the unity is given, and are ignoring the process by which it is experienced and expressed.⁵²

The church will be torn by dissensions and divisions, but the unity can nevertheless be preserved by the exercise of self-sacrificial love--love which, according to Caemmerer, breaks every other barrier down.⁵³ The unity is further preserved by sharing the word of God with one another, thus protecting one another from falling away.⁵⁴ Furthermore the unity of the church is preserved simply by holding out the meaning of Holy Communion; for it is in Holy Communion that Christ offers the church His body and blood which make the church one. Thus it is through the word of

⁵¹R. R. Caemmerer, "Let the Church be the Church," Proceedings of the 40th Convention of the Texas District of The Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod, March 30-April 3, 1964 [St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1964], p. 46. Caemmerer says that the Apology (Tappert, p. 171: 20) warns against the tendency to think of the universal church in this kind of philosophical way. Cf. James Mayer, "Practical Implications of the Theology of the Church," unpublished essay delivered at the Workshop of the Church and Ministry at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Plenary Session, July 26, 1963.

⁵²J. Mayer, "The Church as the People," CTM, XXXIII, 663.

⁵³Caemmerer, "Body of Christ," CTM, XXXV, 264.

⁵⁴Caemmerer, "Let the Church," Proceedings of Texas District, p. 56.

God's redeeming mercy, spoken to each other, and reinforced by the Sacrament of Holy Communion, that the Holy Spirit absolves dissensions, bringing the people of God together in one closely-knit body. This is the only way to repair the "breakdown of unity, the bickering and quarrelsomeness, that makes the church an unholy club with a religious sign-board."⁵⁵ It must be noted, however, as Caemmerer points out, that the church cannot do this unless individual Christian groups are close enough to each other to speak freely to each other. In explaining this

Caemmerer writes:

If I am content to teach my gospel and administer my sacraments just to a consciously singled-out segment of the church, I am in danger of becoming a secretary; I do not foster the unity of the church. Together with my "right" gospel and sacraments I need the outreach, the lines of communication, to bring them to others. Furthermore, all over the world there are men and women who have a word of the true gospel to speak to me. I must let down the drawbridge, tune in on their channel, so that the church of Christ may become the one body He envisioned.⁵⁶

Regarding the Theology of Fellowship

Closely related to an understanding of the unity of the church is the theology of fellowship. Two of the major documents of this past decade would seem to be the 1962 and the 1965 versions of the Theology of Fellowship. It would first seem necessary to understand the Common Confession, which could be considered an important transition to the theology of fellowship as expressed in the document, The Theology of Fellowship.

⁵⁵ Ibid., pp. 72-74.

⁵⁶ Caemmerer, "Church Unity," Christian Century, LXXIII, 418.

✓ According to the Common Confession fidelity to Scriptures is required of all Christians. If a person, through the power of the Holy Spirit, recognizes the Scriptures as his only authority in all issues of life and faith, and then conforms to these Scriptures, refusing to deny or ignore them, that person is to be regarded as a brother in the Lord and fellow worker of the kingdom. "Not to recognize him as such constitutes a denial of Christ's work in the brother and leads to schism in the Church."⁵⁷

On the other hand, teaching other than Scripture teaches, maintaining dogma that is contrary to Scripture, or omitting any part of the Word of God, creates dissensions in the church, disrupting its unity. The unity of the church is also disrupted when the church tolerates false teaching and practice contrary to Scripture; or such unity is disrupted when the church remains silent in the presence of such denials of the word of God. It is thus the duty of the church to expose all error, and seek to win back the errorist by love. If love fails, then as a final endeavor of love, separation becomes inevitable; but even this will be used only with the hope of eventually getting the errorist back into the fellowship.⁵⁸

According to the Common Confession each church grouping must be most careful that it is not the one which is in error. Fellowship or refusal to practice fellowship must at all times be motivated by the teachings of Scripture. One can validate neither unionism nor separatism by quoting

⁵⁷"The Common Confession," Reports and Memorials, 1956, p. 585.

⁵⁸Ibid., pp. 585-587.

certain Scriptural passages out of context, and by ignoring other applicable passages. Each denomination or grouping must listen to and respect the other's testimony, and no one group can mistake this for some kind of forbidden form of fellowship. The Common Confession goes on to state:

It would be a misreading or a misunderstanding of the Gospel to insist that each Christian or each group of Christians must work entirely alone or that each Christian serve the Lord in his own self-chosen way. Such an attitude results in confusion, suspicion, and poor stewardship. One of the purposes of the Gospel is to bring Christians to serve the Lord together in the Lord's way.

This fellowship of work can become a reality only when a fellowship of faith, confession, and love exists. It is only when Christians confess the same faith and are agreed to let the Word of God be authoritative and normative in all matters of faith and life that a real fellowship of work can result.⁵⁹

It is in this light that the opening part of Section Nine of the Common Confession must be understood. It is the constant duty of the church to confess God in all His truth, and to avoid and denounce error. Because the church must conform itself to God's commands, it does not follow that the church can condone error or have pulpit and altar fellowship with erring individuals or church bodies which "refuse to be corrected by God's Word." For this reason,

We must also be alert and susceptible to the Lord's leading to establish and maintain fellowship with those whom He has made one with us in the faith and to seek to win the erring and wayward for unity in the true faith.⁶⁰

The next major statement dealing with the theology of fellowship was originally written as a joint report of faculties of Concordia

⁵⁹Ibid., pp. 587-588.

⁶⁰Ibid., p. 574.

Seminary in St. Louis and Concordia Seminary in Springfield, and accepted by synod's Doctrinal Unity Committee. Entitled "The Theology of Fellowship," the document was first presented to the Missouri Synod at the synodical convention in 1962, where it was sent back to committee for further study and revision.

According to the 1962 draft of The Theology of Fellowship man was created for fellowship with God and with his fellow man. Sin however destroyed both aspects of this fellowship which was later restored in Christ. In creating faith in the individual, God gives the blessing of fellowship to that individual--fellowship with God in Christ, and fellowship with all other believers in Christ. Thus through faith all Christians are brothers in Christ, and are, as a result, in fellowship with each other. This fellowship "transcends every barrier created by God or set up by man and brings about the highest unity possible among men, the unity in Christ Jesus." It must be remembered, however, that in granting this fellowship to His children, God is claiming the whole life of man for the exercise, extension, and protection of this fellowship.⁶¹

Part Two of the 1962 draft of The Theology of Fellowship deals with the principles governing the exercise of this fellowship. The fellowship

⁶¹"The Theology of Fellowship: A Report of the Faculties of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, and Concordia Seminary, Springfield, to the Praesidium of the Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod," reprinted in the supplement to Reports and Memorials, 1962, pp. 9-13. Having been agreed upon by both seminaries, this document was also approved by synod's Doctrinal Unity Committee. Because this draft was presented to the 1962 synodical convention the document is referred to as the "1962 draft," as opposed to the "1965 draft" which was formally presented to synod at the 1965 convention.

which exists in all Christians is expressed not only in joint worship, but in every other way motivated by Christian love. At this point, the document examines numerous Bible passages, trying to discover when the church, out of obedience to Christ, must refuse to practice this fellowship. The conclusion is that the apostolic conditions cannot automatically be transferred to today, thus applying the apostolic imperatives and indicatives to the current confessional and organizational situations. To the contrary, by the grace of God the gospel is preached in these various Christian groupings, and the Holy Spirit is leading men to Christian groupings, and the Holy Spirit is leading men to Christ. Thus, in spite of denominational affiliation, all of the Christians in these divided groups are brothers in Christ, and are thus in fellowship with each other. Nevertheless, the toleration and presence of error in these groupings endanger both the fellowship itself and the practice of this fellowship. The document referring to the Scriptural "proof texts," continues:

They must not, however, be applied mechanically to fellow Christians in a confessional-organizational fellowship other than one's own. It would be incongruous if a Christian who has the misfortune of being in a body afflicted with some doctrinal error would now have to be branded a wolf in sheep's clothing or a belly servant, when in fact he is a beloved child of God.⁶²

According to this 1962 draft of The Theology of Fellowship, two opposite dangers confront the church—separatism and unionism. Unionists refuse to face confessional differences in the practice of fellowship. These people overtly deny some parts of Scripture, treating others as unimportant. These unionists thus hurt the church by not being able to

⁶²Ibid., pp. 18-19.

call people to repentance for their sin, and by refusing to exercise any kind of salutary discipline. Separatists, on the other hand, set up false standards for fellowship, excluding all who do not conform to these standards. In such a way separatism seeks to create a "pure" church.

The danger and the temptation are that they create a caricature of the pure church. Their church tends to become so "pure" that it can no longer forgive until seventy times seven. This "pure" church has no room and no help for the weak in its own midst, nor can it exercise an effective ministry to the weak and erring outside its own organizational limits, because it shrinks from those contacts which would give an opportunity for such ministry. The end and aim of its discipline becomes exclusion rather than that gaining of the brother which our Lord intended. . . . Moreover, such a "pure" church is in danger of impoverishing itself by refusing to benefit by the spiritual gifts which the Lord of the whole church has bestowed on men in other confessional-organizational groups.⁶³

In connection with this, the church must be careful that it does not set up a false unscriptural cleavage between doctrine and practice. The church can never substitute mere knowledge of a doctrine for the living faith which manifests itself in a Christian life.⁶⁴

In the last section *The Theology of Fellowship* discusses the application of principles for the practice of fellowship. Regarding prayer fellowship, no flat universal rule can be given to determine the propriety or impropriety of joint prayer fellowship. Several factors are involved: the situation, character, purpose, and effect. The situation in which the joint prayer is offered must be one in which Christian prayer is appropriate, and in which the people involved are the type that could pray in Christ's name. Concerning the character of the prayer, it must be realized that

⁶³ Ibid., pp. 19-20.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 20.

every Christian prayer is a confession and witness to Christ; "it need therefore be no more unionistic in itself than in any other form of witness." By the same token, the purpose of the prayer can never be to smooth over real differences, but rather to build up the Body of Christ. Finally, the effect of the joint prayer must be considered. It is questionable as to whether the doctrinal differences would really be minimized by others who see Missouri Synod in joint prayer with other denominations. On the other hand, synod must also consider how other groups would interpret a refusal to pray with them:

Must we not face the fact that such a refusal may in fact be understood as a harsh rebuff, where no rebuff is called for, as a calling into question of the faith of the one who (whatever his weakness) does call Jesus Lord and believes that God has raised Him from the dead? Must we not weigh the possibility that the refusal of joint prayer may prove an inseparable barrier to what we as a confessional-organizational group are seeking to attain, namely, the full confession in word and deed to the whole Lord Jesus Christ? May we not by too facile and too simple a rule concerning joint prayer make the names "confessional" and "orthodox" names which connote lovelessness?⁶⁵

The 1962 document concludes that it is one thing to refuse prayer fellowship to heretics and persistent errorists, but it is quite different to refuse the practice of prayer fellowship to those who are seeking with us to strengthen the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.⁶⁶

As was mentioned above, the 1962 draft of The Theology of Fellowship was sent to the Commission on Theology and Church Relations for restudy and revision. The part that seemed most objectionable to many at the 1962 convention was Part Two. In the draft submitted by the commission to the 1965 convention, Part One of the earlier document was left in tact. A

⁶⁵ Ibid., pp. 20-21.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 21.

new second part, giving the historical background of the issues, was then added; while the original Part Two was drastically changed and then added as the new Part Three. The Detroit convention then adopted to recommend the revised document for use as a guide and study, to be put up for adoption at the next convention.⁶⁷

After examining the same passages studied in the original version of The Theology of Fellowship, the revised version concludes that the church will use these passages properly when it learns from them to avoid men who by false teaching or schismatic activities attack the gospel and the faith of Christians. The church, on the other hand, misuses the passages when she uses them to hinder the church's ongoing attempts to heal the divisions and promote the unity of the Spirit.⁶⁸

In the next section of this revised document, unionism and separatism are discussed in terms entirely different from the terms discussed in the previous version. Unionism here is described as any kind of religious fellowship with errorists. In support of this, the Brief Statement and the 1927 edition of Concordia Encyclopedia are cited. Thus, "Unionism is

⁶⁷Resolution 2-18, Proceedings of the 46th Regular Convention of the Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod, June 16-26, 1965 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, [1965]), p. 98. It must be noted that much of the openness of the 1962 draft toward new practices of fellowship with non-Missourians was rescinded in the 1965 draft. Due to the fact that Part III of The Theology of Fellowship, dealing with the historical aspects of this problem, does not directly relate to the purpose of this chapter, this part of the document will not be discussed here.

⁶⁸"Theology of Fellowship" revised edition, Proceedings, 1965, p. 287. A total change in tone can be seen in this revised edition. Whereas the summary in the first version stressed the impossibility of any legalistic use of Scripture for today's situation, no mention of this anti-legalism is found here.

attempted union when separation is in order, and separatism is separatism when union is in order." Both extremes must be avoided because unionism overlooks real differences in doctrine and treats those differences as unimportant, whereas separatism violates love and divides the church.⁶⁹

In conclusion the revised version of The Theology of Fellowship summarizes several principles for the practice of fellowship. In the first place, Missouri should foster its fellowship with sister churches. This fellowship is expressed in pulpit and altar fellowship. Secondly, synod should work to extend this fellowship so that it can be practiced where it will not compromise pure doctrine. Thirdly, in any kind of Christian doctrinal discussions Christians "should" join in fervent prayer that God would bless the discussions. In the fourth place, Missouri Synod should cooperate on the national and international level "to the extent that the Word of God and conscience will allow," as long as "the faith and confession of the church [denomination] are not compromised." Finally, in matters not referred to in the above points, one should act from faith according to conscience; while others should be reminded not to pass judgment on their brother. It must be remembered, then, that Scriptural practice is important and can never deny the gospel. "However, Christians ought not apply this principle legalistically or employ doubtful logic and labor-ed conclusions to prove that a certain practice is against the Gospel."⁷⁰

In contrast to the idea of unionism expressed in this amended version of The Theology of Fellowship is the idea of unionism expressed in a paper

⁶⁹The 1965 draft of "The Theology of Fellowship," Proceedings, 1965, p. 288.

⁷⁰Ibid., pp. 288-289.

delivered to the 1962 synodical convention by Herbert J. A. Bouman. Entitled "Unionism and Proper Practice," the paper expresses the opinion that since "unionism" is not a Scriptural word, and since the word has been given so many different meanings at different times, it is impossible to give a "simple, umbrella definition of unionism that may be automatically applied to any given concrete situation." Furthermore, in using a non-biblical term there is the "ever-present danger of giving it an arbitrary content and then ransacking the Bible for passages that will support that content."⁷¹

Concerning the practice of fellowship with others Professor Bouman states that many questions have yet to be answered. For example, if one prays, or cooperates in some form of worship with his fellow Christian, does this automatically violate God's claim on that first Christian? Does this automatically deny God's name and depart from His word? Or will a fellow-believer automatically suffer some kind of injury or loss of faith from this? Does this prevent that Christian from hallowing God's name and letting God's kingdom come? Or does it automatically involve some kind of indifference to the "purity of the Gospel"? Does this assist the enemies of the cross, or does it promote some kind of legalistic perfectionism? These are the questions which must be asked in order to determine the rightness or wrongness of religious contacts with other denominations. Bouman summarizes this section:

In this light I must perhaps conclude that a specific activity will stand condemned as unionistic. But can this be determined in

⁷¹Herbert J. A. Bouman, "Unionism and Proper Practice," The Lutheran Witness, LXXXI (August 21, 1962), 404.

advance? Can it ever be settled automatically by quoting a church father or by referring to an alleged historic position? Must not our judgment be made anew at each concrete occasion on the basis of our disciple relationship as clearly stated for us in the Word of the Lord?⁷²

The Dominance of This "New Consensus"

One must be careful in applying the term, "new consensus," to the view of the church described above. This term is not used to imply that this concept of the church has been expanded only in the last decade. It has already been demonstrated that there were several members of synod, prior to this decade, who maintained many of these views. There is, however, a difference. Prior to this decade this "new" view of church fellowship was quite unpopular, being expressed only by an infinitesimal minority of those synodical theologians whose views were being published. Recently, however, this view, as it was described in the previous section, seems to be gaining an increasing number of adherents among those who are publishing their views. As a matter of fact, it is very seldom, today, that one finds in a Missouri Synod journal or book, a representation of the traditional Missouri Synod concept of the church or church fellowship.

As implied above, it cannot be concluded that, if a vote were taken among all of the clergy and laity in the Missouri Synod, a majority would cast its ballot in favor of this new consensus. But it does imply that most of the journal articles and books being written today, a majority of the recent resolutions being passed synod, to a greater or lesser degree, reflect this new view.

⁷²Ibid.

This is not meant to imply that everyone whose views are reflected in this new consensus would agree in matters pertaining to the church and the theology of fellowship. The contrary is true. There is much variance concerning the church and church fellowship even among those whose views could be included in the new consensus. Both editions of the Theology of Fellowship, for example, reflect this new consensus regarding the fellowship question, and yet each of these is vastly different from the other.⁷³

In looking at the synodical resolutions of the last ten years one cannot help but note the extreme variety of views expressed; yet the increasing popularity of the new consensus can also be noted. For example, the 1956 synodical convention adopted the Common Confession as a statement which was in harmony with the Bible and the Lutheran Confessions.⁷⁴ Yet, another resolution declined membership in the Lutheran World Federation because it would involve Missouri in a cooperation with the aims and purposes of the federation, and "such cooperation would involve us in a union in spiritual matters with groups not in doctrinal agreement with us."⁷⁵ This resolution was based on the report of a committee chosen by

~~would have to indicate that the views expressed in this report, as differ-~~

⁷³It must be remembered that the above is speaking of the doctrine of the church and the theology of fellowship, and not the practice of fellowship.

⁷⁴Resolution 13, Proceedings, 1956, p. 504. It is quite clear from the above discussion of the Common Confession that the approach of this document to the question of the church and church fellowship is quite different from the traditional Missouri Synod approach to this issue.

⁷⁵Resolution 11, ibid., p. 538. This was adopted with only twelve negative votes.

~~Resolution 3-26, Proceedings, 1962, p. 109-111.~~

synod's praesidium. Advising the delegates against joining the federation, the report quotes the Brief Statement in support of this advice: "All Christians are required by God to discriminate between orthodox and heterodox church-bodies, and in case they have strayed into heterodox church-bodies, to leave them."⁷⁶

The same could be said of the 1959 synodical convention. One resolution was adopted which stated that the Brief Statement, as well as all other doctrinal statements adopted by synod, should be "binding as public doctrine" in synod.⁷⁷ On the other hand, another resolution in this same convention resolved, for the first time, to send official observers to the Assembly of World Council of Churches.⁷⁸

It is true that the 1962 convention resolved to command The Theology of Fellowship to synod for restudy, in order that various groups may discuss and comment on the document, and that the Commission on Theology and Church Relations might study the recommendations and make the necessary changes.⁷⁹ The mere fact, however, that this document was submitted as an official report of the faculties of both the synodical seminaries, would seem to indicate that the views expressed in this report, as different, as they might be from the traditional views on this subject, would be

⁷⁶ Memorial 624, ibid., p. 528.

⁷⁷ Resolution 9 (Committee 3), Proceedings, 1959, p. 191. It was already ascertained that the Brief Statement represents the traditional view on matters of the church and church fellowship.

⁷⁸ Resolution 21 (Committee 3), ibid., p. 197.

⁷⁹ Resolution 3-28, Proceedings, 1962, p. 109-111.

the consensus of at least a majority of the theological professors of synod. On the other hand, it was also at this convention that the delegates voted to thank God for the "purity of doctrine and practice" which he has given synod.⁸⁰

In an editorial in The Lutheran Witness, evaluating the 1962 convention, Martin W. Mueller believes that the convention represented a "turning point" for the Missouri Synod. According to this editorial not all the restraints were lifted but there was a certain evangelical spirit which was vastly different from the prior legalism. Regarding synod's relation to other denominations, this turning point reversed a trend which reached the point where its "accent seemed to fall on 'avoid them' rather than on 'endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.'" This represented a new "spirit of readiness and willingness to labor unceasingly for God pleasing unity. . . ."⁸¹

This would also seem to be the opinion of Henry Reimann, for it is not too long after the convention that he writes, apparently reflecting the opinion of the 1962 statement of the Theology of Fellowship:

Recently [italics added], however, we have become more aware that the pitfall of sectarianism is just as evil as that of religious unionism. To label other Lutherans or other Christians as "belly servers" (Rom. 16:18), who have to be avoided at all costs, simply denies the unity that still exists among baptized Christians. To label the modern ecumenical movement or cooperative church agencies as inherently unionistic ignores the doctrinal concerns that have increasingly been motivating the leaders and participants in ecumenical endeavors.⁸²

⁸⁰Resolution 3-10, ibid., p. 103.

⁸¹[Martin W. Mueller], "Turning Point," The Lutheran Witness, LXXXI (August 21, 1962), 406-407.

⁸²Henry Reimann, Let's Study Theology (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1964), pp. 67-68.

If Reimann and Mueller thought that the 1962 synodical convention was a turning point, Richard Neuhaus was convinced that the Detroit convention in 1965 was even more of a turning point for synod. Describing the apparent dissatisfaction with the traditional Missouri view of the invisible church, and referring to a few of the resolutions on church unity, Neuhaus writes that Missouri said for the first time "in an official and unequivocal way that the emperical Christian community is, in fact, the Body of Christ, the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church."⁸³

The basis for this statement can be seen in one of the resolutions adopted by the 1965 synodical convention. The resolution stated that every Christian is in a real and living unity with every other member of the Christian church. It is for this reason that the church is in constant mission to itself. This means that every Christian must always be ready to listen and witness to every other Christian. Furthermore, Missouri Synod must be regarded chiefly as a confessional movement rather than a denomination which tends to emphasize institutional barriers. For this reason the Confessions must not be a barrier to stop communication with other denominations. Thus it was resolved,

That we affirm that by virtue of our unity with other Christians in the body of Christ, we should work together when it will edify Christ's body and advance His mission, refusing cooperation, however, on such occasions when it would deny God's Word.⁸⁴

In another resolution adopted in that convention it was resolved that the Missouri Synod affirm the whole church is Christ's mission. Thus anything which seeks to divide what God has joined together must be deplored. "The divisions in the institutional church are as real as the

⁸³Richard John Neuhaus, "The Song of the Three Synods: Detroit, 1965," Una Sancta, XXII (Trinity 1965), 37.

⁸⁴Resolution 1-01C, Proceedings, 1965, p. 80.

unity in Christ's body which joins all Christians together." It must therefore be realized that the Christian lives in a tension between his own erroneous understanding of God's truth and his knowledge that he is joined together with all other Christians in the Body of Christ, despite the error and divisions among these Christians. The Christian therefore rejoices over the existence of every fellow believer, "because thereby Christ is preached and His mission is implemented."⁸⁵

Probably the most radical departure from the past, however, was maintained in an adopted resolution which deals with the theological principles guiding the development of missions. Drawn up and recommended for adoption by the Commission on Theology and Church Relations, this resolution refers mostly to relations with other Lutheran synods. According to this resolution, the New Testament stresses the unity which all baptized believers have in Christ. It is the Christian's duty to manifest this oneness to all of those inside and outside the Body of Christ. As the Augsburg Confession states, it is enough for this unity that there be essential agreement on the doctrine of the Gospel, and that the sacraments be administered as they were first instituted by Christ. It is then left up to the congregations in a given area as to how they will carry out their God-given responsibilities toward those other Christian groups with whom they are united "under their common Lord by a common faith and a united confession." Thus concludes the resolution:

⁸⁵Resolution 1-OLF, ibid., p. 81.

The responsibility of working toward the establishing of pulpit and altar fellowship within the limits of these principles, and of publicly declaring it when the necessary conditions have been fulfilled rests primarily on the churches in a given area. The unity must be established on the basis of Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions.⁸⁶

Richard Neuhaus writes that some of the delegates at this convention regarded this resolution as an approval of a practice long condemned by synod--the practice of selective fellowship. This resulted in an amendment to clarify the fact that congregations in the United States and Canada should not practice fellowship with those with whom the whole synod has not declared fellowship. It was quite clear to all, however, reports Neuhaus that "Missouri's position on selective fellowship is no longer understood in terms of doctrine, but simply as a matter of expediency and synodical loyalty."⁸⁷

⁸⁶Resolution 3-04, *ibid.*, pp. 104-105. Although this speaks primarily to the practice of fellowship with other Lutheran synods, it would seem that its implications for the practice of fellowship with non-Lutherans would be even stronger.

⁸⁷Neuhaus, p. 37. Cf. Resolution 2-16, Proceedings, 1965, p. 97.

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CHAPTER IV

A COMPARISON OF THE TWO DIFFERENT POINTS OF VIEW

The Disappearance of the Orthodox-Heterodox Dichotomy

Essentially both the traditional and the more recent views of the church are similar in that both define the church as the body of believers in Jesus Christ and His work of redemption. By the same token both views of the church agree in stating that it is God who establishes the unity and fellowship among Christian brothers. Here, however, most of the similarity would seem to end.

The traditional view stressed a distinction between the visible and the invisible church. This does not mean that the proponents of this idea implied there were two churches. To the contrary, there was still only one church; for the visible church could be considered the church only improperly speaking. Despite this fact the original dichotomy played an important role in the rejection of the exercise of fellowship with other groupings. Thus those who adhere to this view can say that the Missouri Synod is the "true visible church on earth," as opposed to the other denominations which are "false churches."¹

On the other hand, most of the contemporary Missouri Synod theologians, discussing the church, maintain that the former visible-invisible distinction is neither Scriptural nor Confessional, for never do the Confessions or Scripture distinguish between a visible church or an

¹Supra, p. 29.

invisible church.² Thus the distinction between a visible and invisible church is a false dichotomy,³ since the church can be spoken of either as "an invisible something from somebody's imagination like Disney's 'Fantasyland,'"⁴ nor as a "visible church organization, composed of visible local congregations and perhaps an over-arching synodical or supervisory structure, which proudly bears the name 'Lutheran.'"⁵ Furthermore, according to Thomas Coates, the visible-invisible dichotomy can be dangerous for the following reason:

Ultimately, the false antithesis between the invisible and the visible Church leads to legalistic separatism and unscriptural isolationism. It is high time that as much emphasis be placed upon these dangerous tendencies as upon the liberalistic unionism against which we were so often--and rightly--warned. The alarm should be sounded in both directions.⁶

In this connection Caemmerer describes two modern day distortions of the church. The first distortion views the church as an outward organization or institution in which believers and unbelievers are mixed. The

²E.g., James W. Mayer, "The Church as the People of God United in the Word of God," Concordia Theological Monthly, XXXIII (November 1962), 658. Also, Richard R. Caemmerer and Erwin L. Lueker, Church and Ministry in Transition (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1964), p. 40. Hereafter Concordia Theological Monthly will be referred to as CTM.

³Thomas Coates, "One Body in Christ: Theory or Practice?," The Cresset, XX (June 1957), p. 9.

⁴William Backus, Paul Malte, and Wayne Saffen, Adventuring in the Church (Medford, Oregon: Morse Press, 1960), p. 130. Cf. Jaroslav Pelikan, Obedient Rebels: Catholic Substance and Protestant Principle in Luther's Reformation (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), pp. 13-14.

⁵C. T. Spitz, Jr., "The Readiness of the Church for the Mission," Study Conference on the Christian World Mission, conducted under the auspices of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Mo., October 11-13, 1961 [St. Louis: Lutheran Laymen's League, 1961], p. 21.

⁶Coates, p. 11.

second distortion is described as follows:

The other distortion is that the church is regarded as a figment of the imagination, an abstraction without counterpart in fact. . . . Today this distortion becomes apparent in that view of "the invisible church" which assumes that Christian unity is basically perfect and there is no need of human nurture.⁷

A second distinction that many Missouri Synod theologians have traditionally made is the dichotomy between the heterodox and orthodox church. It will be remembered that the heterodox church applied to those congregations or denominations in which there was impure doctrine, while in the orthodox church, and only in the orthodox church, can purity of doctrine be found. When the proponents of this view say that there is impure doctrine in the heterodox church they hasten to add that the heterodox churches have retained an essential part of the gospel. This means it is possible for many people to come to the faith in these other denominations. What makes these bodies heterodox is that they do not accept all of Scripture--some doctrines are omitted from their teaching, other doctrines are denied outright.⁸ It must be clear therefore that when Pieper and most of his synodical contemporaries use the term "pure doctrine," they do not use it to designate that which pertains to the gospel alone, but rather to every statement, clearly stated or implied, in Scripture. Thus a rejection of the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, rejection of the institution of the papacy as the antichrist, or the practice of church fellowship with those who reject these teachings, would make a

⁷Richard R. Caemmerer, "The Body of Christ," CTM, XXV (May 1964), 261. Cf. Henry Reimann, Let's Study Theology (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1964), pp. 65-66.

⁸Supra, p. 9.

congregation or denomination heterodox.⁹

Since there can be no unity of the church without unity of doctrine (by which is meant doctrinal formulations), this unity can be applied only to the orthodox church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church as a denomination. Every other church grouping is heterodox. Any practice of fellowship with a group which does not completely agree with this orthodox body in all articles of Christian doctrine revealed in Scripture is sinful unionism.¹⁰

This view, which connects the unity of the church with unity of doctrine, is based on the idea that there is a "perfect and inerrant unity" in Scripture.¹¹ Unity of doctrine in Scripture is of such a nature that, using the proper methods, the church can remove this doctrine, and reorganize it into meaningful systematic categories, thus transferring Scripture's purity of doctrine to another document. The secondary document then becomes a presentation of the pure truth of Scripture, for behind the document is Scripture "with a single theological point of view, a uniform doctrinal system."¹²

⁹Franz Pieper, Unsere Stellung in Lehre und Praxis (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1896), pp. 6-7, 9-12, 36-37.

¹⁰Supra, pp. 8-9.

¹¹Franz A. C. Pieper, Christian Dogmatics (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950), I, 142.

¹²Richard J. Gotsch, "New Testament Theology and Church Unity," American Lutheran, XLVIII (December 1965), 322. Gotsch does not cite this as his own opinion, but he describes this as the traditional synodical view.

Referring to this proper method of systematizing the truths of Scripture, Franz Pieper writes,

This uniform method results in a uniform product, scil., unity of doctrine. God has given Holy Scripture such a form that the knowledge of the truth is not only possible, but that straying from the truth is impossible as long as we continue in the words of Scripture.¹³

There are many Missouri Synod theologians who would disagree with this traditional Missouri Synod dichotomy of the heterodox and orthodox, as well as the concept of church unity which is connected with this dichotomy. There are several reasons for the disagreement.

The first objection is directed against the institutionalization of the church. In identifying a particular denomination with the orthodox church--with the "true visible church on earth"--one is identifying that denomination with a church which "cannot be encased within denominational walls."¹⁴ Thomas Coates writes that the una sancta is not "coterminous with any ecclesiastical institution," for the church is always people.¹⁵ Similarly, F. W. Loose questions the identification of the Evangelical Lutheran Church with the "true visible church on earth":

Is there really such a VISIBLE, WHOLE NUMBER? If there is, we could count them and gather them together in one place--since they are

¹³Dogmatics, I, 160.

¹⁴Coates, p. 8. Cf. William H. Hillmer, "Let the Church be the Church," Advance, XI (June 1964), 5-6; and Martin Kretzmann, "Report of Mission Self-Study and Survey," Convention Workbook, 46th Regular Convention, The Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod, June 16-26, 1965 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, [1965]), p. 116.

¹⁵Coates, p. 8.

"visible." But Elijah tried it; and failed by over seven thousand; and came with "himself alone"; and in strict logic withdrew from the fellowship, but not rightfully! Logic teaches that a proposition is false if it can be reduced to the absurd. Could it be that a false concept of a true visible Church has created for us an absurd dilemma in the area of Fellowship?¹⁶

It is impossible to distinguish between church members, calling some heterodox. When one speaks of the church he must include all of its members since all of its members--that is, all Christians--have been equally brought into Christ's body.¹⁷ When the Confessions use the words "true church" they do not mean an orthodox as opposed to a false church, for there is no such thing as a false church. "True church" simply refers to the congregation of true believers as opposed to those who are hypocrites and unbelievers.¹⁸

The second objection of many contemporary Missouri Synod scholars is directed against the very idea of the orthodox church. This idea is based on the belief that it is possible to have purity of doctrine (in the sense that this term is used by the fathers of Missouri Synod). In this connection, many of the recent statements indicate that purity of doctrine is a goal toward which the whole church must strive together, rather than a "conditional precedent, which must be met before fellowship can be acknowledged."¹⁹ Pointing out the dangers of Missouri's insistence on purity

¹⁶F. W. Loose, "The Challenge: Let's Take a Look at Ourselves," The Seminarian, LII (May 1961), 7.

¹⁷Kretzmann, "Report," Convention Workbook, p. 115.

¹⁸Caemmerer and Lueker, p. 40.

¹⁹Loose, p. 5.

of doctrine, F. W. Loose writes that it could make "us" a sect:

But this very insistence on purity in doctrine and life, laudable as it may be, has tended to make us separate from everyone who does not fully agree with us. Inability to grasp the truth has often been suspiciously viewed as willful resistance to the workings of the Spirit. Involvement in even non-fundamental error seems to have become justifiable grounds for refusing the exercise of Christian fellowship.²⁰

If by "purity of doctrine" and "unity of doctrine" one means complete agreement in all of the truths of Scripture, if one means the single "correct" interpretation of all clear parts of Scripture, then it is to be questioned by many whether there was or ever will be in this life a purity or unity of doctrine. According to Martin Kretzmann, it is clear from the New Testament and post-apostolic literature that there were many Christians in the New Testament church who had "deficient and at times wrong views on matters of doctrine." Although the early church was persistent in its refusal to permit any deviation from the preaching of the gospel it is also clear that the church "did not exclude from its fellowship many whose understanding of truth was different from that which we hold today."²¹ F. W. Loose cites, for example, the fact that the disciples themselves were guilty of a most crass form of messianic perversion²² after years of instruction from Christ Himself. This was doctrinal error of the worst sort, and involved further instruction, but not by any means, the lifting of fellowship.²³

²⁰ Ibid., p. 6.

²¹ Martin Kretzmann, "Lutherans and the Church of South India," American Lutheran, XXXIX (December 1956), 323.

²² Acts 1:6.

²³ Loose, p. 6.

If this is true, then even the disciples did not constitute an orthodox church, according to Pieper's own use of the term "orthodox." Recent theologians of synod have pointed to the fact that, in this sense of the term "orthodox," there could be no truly orthodox church today either, for, as Strietelmeier points out, there is not even agreement in Missouri Synod regarding essentials and nonessentials.²⁴ As long as man is man, and a sinful man at that, there will always be imperfections and limitations in his understanding of the gospel.²⁵ This means that one cannot look at "heterodox" Christians and say, "They are Christians, yes, but what kind of Christians?" They are always the same kind of Christians as every other Christian--Christians by the grace of God alone.²⁶

It is further pointed out that it is impossible to require this kind of purity of doctrine, since it simply does not exist, as a prerequisite for the practice of fellowship with others. John Strietelmeier points out that it is a traditional Lutheran teaching that not all disagreement in doctrine and practice need be divisive of church fellowship.²⁷ In this connection Herbert Lindemann writes:

In other words, to require an ideal situation as a condition of joining hands is utterly unrealistic in this world of sin. If this were

²⁴ John Strietelmeier, "Symposium Re Lutheran World Federation," American Lutheran, XLI (August 1958), 206.

²⁵ Martin Kretzmann, "Letter to the Editor," The Lutheran Layman, August 1, 1957, p. 7.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Strietelmeier, p. 232.

so, nobody would ever get married! Nor could any two Christians ever come together in Christ. Perfect union always remains a state to be striven for, not an entrance requirement. Individuals who come together in congregations have very diverse backgrounds--and some of these are not at all commendable. The same is true of church bodies; these too have a history and an environment. And just as no pastor in his right mind would insist that before a prospective member can be admitted, all his peculiar quirks must be straightened out, so no church body ought to require that complete agreement must be reached with another church body before there can be a sharing of insights and an establishment of some sort of fellowship. There can be no growing up together into the Head, which is Christ, if one remains aloof from the other.²⁸

Thus the third major objection which many contemporary Missouri Synod scholars put forth against the traditional synodical views of the church is directed against the traditional concept of the unity of the church. This objection is a reaction to two major extremes. In the first place there is the extreme which states that the unity of the church is a spiritual unity of an invisible church, thus the church does not need to worry about the expression of this unity in its "external" life. But the unity for which Christ prays (John 17) is an outward unity according to Fred Kramer; for this unity is to be observed by the world, and the world is to learn something from it. This of course would be impossible if the unity were a spiritualized, invisible unity of an invisible church.²⁹

The other extreme which many scholars warn the church to avoid is the extreme of making the unity dependent on an agreement in all doctrinal

²⁸ Herbert Lindemann, "Symposium Re Lutheran World Federation," American Lutheran, XLI (August 1958), 206.

²⁹ Fred Kramer, "Ecumenical Strivings in the Church of the Twentieth Century," The Springfielder, XXVII (Fall 1963), 26-27. Cf. Kramer, "The Ecumenical Spirit in Protestantism and Roman Catholicism," Proceedings of the Thirty-Seventh Convention of the Central Illinois District of the Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod, August 20-23 [St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1963], p. 20.

statements. This perversion implies that the unity is dependent on man's response. As it has already been pointed out, the unity of the church is a gift of God which involves everyone who has been incorporated into the Body of Christ through baptism.³⁰ This is a "oneness which no human organization can minimize or maximize"³¹ This means that no one can question the faith of a man who confesses Christ as his Lord and Savior. It is faith which enables this Christian to make such a confession, and this Christian faith makes him a brother of every other Christian in the Body of Christ regardless of "doctrinal" differences. Thus the unity which that Christian shares with the rest of the church is a unity of faith in Christ. This unity must be recognized by all the rest of the church. "Anything less than that makes us guilty of the sin of schism which the Scripture condemns very strongly."³²

Martin Marty is extremely critical of the "truth first" segment of American Christianity which states that there can be little or no cooperation between Christians of different denominations until the organizations and denominations can produce committees which will write documents which in turn can be agreed upon by the various members of the Christian groups. Such an insistence implies that one becomes ecumenical by belonging to the particular organization which establishes the dialog. This results in the paralyzation of the ecumenical movement. According

³⁰ Supra, pp. 45-46.

³¹ Kretzmann, "Letter," The Lutheran Layman, August 1, 1957, p. 7.

³² Ibid. Cf. Hillmer, Advance, XI, 7.

to Marty, "this is an absurd if not blasphemous twist on the New Testament's injunctions to seek unity in the Church."³³ In this connection Marty emphasizes the fact that the unity already exists. It simply needs to be discovered by many. The "truth first" stress, however, is absolutely fruitless.

It divides what the Scriptures unite. It sets theologically and psychologically unrealistic goals. It takes a quality of the life of the Church which belongs only to God and His last Word, and wants it to become the Church's first word.³⁴

Thus Marty writes that there can be no love or communication across denominational lines unless there is a "prior commitment to the oneness of the Church." If this is not the first word spoken, then there will be as many confessions in the church as there are individuals.³⁵

One of the more significant recent essays dealing with the traditional view of unity of doctrine is an American Lutheran article entitled "New Testament Theology and Church Unity," written by Richard Gotsch. Gotsch believes that Missouri's traditional idea of unity through total doctrinal agreement is based on the presupposition that in Scripture there is a single theological point of view, a uniform doctrinal system.³⁶ All depends on this one presupposition which, according to Gotsch, is false; for within Scripture itself the church is confronted with a "rich variety of theological systems and viewpoints." Several times the essayist points to the significance of the fact that the Holy Spirit used more than one

³³Martin E. Marty, Church Unity and Church Mission (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1964), pp. 58-59.

³⁴Ibid., pp. 60-61.

³⁵Ibid., p. 66.

³⁶Supra, p. 70.

human author. Even within a single book, such as the Gospel of Luke, there are a variety of viewpoints. Often one particular story may be permeated simultaneously with the teaching of Jesus, the theology of the early church, and the theological viewpoint of the inspired evangelist. Furthermore, frequently in the New Testament there is a "variety of theological interpretations which draw out the significance of an event." Gotsch cites as an example the "several theologies" of the Lord's Supper; yet there is still only one Lord's Supper.³⁷

Not only is there a variety of theologies in the New Testament, but there are also several Christian communities whose doctrinal viewpoints did not at all agree. Compare the Jewish Christianity of Peter with the Gentile Christianity of Paul, to mention only two. This diversity both in doctrine and in the various communities is reflected in every source, states Gotsch who continues:

It is a New Testament, which, in many ways, resembles an art gallery. Each artist has taken his own materials. On canvas or in stone he has labored to produce a portrait of Jesus Christ, but not one of the pictures is identical. The colors, the lines, the tones, the forms are all different. Should we take a piece from each painting and paste them together into one picture of Jesus? Certainly not. Each must be seen on its own terms. The fact that they do not all look alike is the very secret of the power of their art. The strength of the New Testament is its theological diversity. For no single author can exhaust the miracle of Jesus Christ as God for us and in us.³⁸

Gotsch goes on to state that a rejection of this traditional Missouri Synod concept of Scriptural unity has several implications. For one thing Missouri should not think that it has the "reservoir of pure

³⁷Gotsch, p. 322.

³⁸Ibid.

truth." Since the Holy Spirit inspired more than one writer, it is unlikely that this same Holy Spirit has deposited all truth with one synod or denomination. Rather, synod should see its theology as "conditioned theology," theology which is subject to the limitations of human beings. Viewing its own theology as partial, synod will realize that, since all denominations have received the fullness of Christ, no one group has encompassed his totality. If this is true then the church will be forced to question its theory of unity through doctrinal agreement. Regarding this Gotsch writes:

It is significant that at the end of the first century there was not a gathering of religious leaders or theological leaders or theological professors to take the witness of the New Testament and recast it into a single orthodox theological system. The theologies of the early church lived side by side. The various Christian churches proclaimed the Gospel to each other and heard the good news from each other in all of its many-sidedness. . . . If there was unity amid theological diversity in the New Testament, must we not manifest that same oneness in spite of our doctrinal differences?³⁹

A Rejection of the Former Use of "Proof Texts"

The new contemporary consensus, however, has not only challenged the traditional distinction of orthodox and heterodox, and all of the aspects of that dichotomy, but it also challenges the traditional use of "proof texts" against the practice of fellowship with members of other synods and Christian denominations.

One of the passages most frequently cited as a "proof text is

³⁹Ibid., pp. 322-323.

Romans 16:17-18.⁴⁰ Recently, many articles have been written which reflect the belief that this passage cannot be used against the practice of fellowship with other Christians. The two drafts of the Theology of Fellowship treat the passage slightly differently. The 1962 edition of the document states that it is not possible to ascertain whether those who are creating dissensions are in the church or outside of it.⁴¹ The 1965 draft states that one cannot know for sure the people to whom Paul is referring. More than likely, however, these people are in the church at Rome. Furthermore, the phrase, "in opposition to the doctrine," refers to the gospel,⁴² and not to any formal system of doctrine, or to any one unity within such a system.⁴³ This passage therefore cannot be applied to erring Christians who need instruction, but rather to those who "attack the church's very foundation, namely, the Gospel."⁴⁴ Among other references

⁴⁰ Supra, p. 12.

⁴¹ "The Theology of Fellowship," Reports and Memorials of the Forty-Fifth Regular Convention of the Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod, June 20-30, 1962 [St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1962], Supplement, p. 18.

⁴² "Theology of Fellowship," revised edition, Proceedings of the 46th Regular Convention of the Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod, June 16-26, 1965 [St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1965], p. 286. Hereafter the two editions will be distinguished by "Theology of Fellowship--1962" and "Theology of Fellowship--1965."

⁴³ "Theology of Fellowship--1962," Reports and Memorials, 1962, p. 18.

⁴⁴ "Theology of Fellowship--1965," Proceedings, 1965, p. 286. It is interesting to note that this passage was not applied to other Christians until 1645 when it was used to counter the Roman Catholic claims that Lutherans were not Christians (Ibid., p. 284).

to this passage, an editorial in the American Lutheran states that the passage cannot be applied to other Christians because verse eighteen implies "diabolical intent."⁴⁵ Henry Reimann writes that Missouri Synod recently has become aware of the dangers of applying this passage to other Christians. Such a misuse of the passage labels these other Christians as "belly servers," and denies the unity which Christ has already given to the entire Christian Church.⁴⁶

Another passage which has traditionally been cited against the exercise of fellowship with other Christians is II Corinthians 6:14-18.⁴⁷ According to the Theology of Fellowship, however, this cannot possibly be applied to other Christians, and those who do apply this passage in such a manner have "gone beyond the clear words of the text."⁴⁸

Again, II John 10-11 is eliminated as a proof text. In the context of the whole book of II John it is quite clear that the author is speaking of traveling teachers who deny the incarnation of Christ. Thus it is impossible to apply this passage to other Christians, in which case this passage also must be eliminated as a proof text against the practice of fellowship with "heterodox church bodies."⁴⁹

⁴⁵"The Answer Need not Be 'No'!" American Lutheran, XXXIX (February 1956), 31. Cf. Adolph Brux, Christian Prayer-Fellowship and Unionism (n.p., 1935), pp. 12-20.

⁴⁶Reimann, p. 67.

⁴⁷Supra, p. 12.

⁴⁸"Theology of Fellowship--1965," Proceedings, 1965, p. 287. Cf. Fred Kramer, "The Ecumenical Spirit," Proceedings of Central Illinois District, p. 25; and Brux, p. 24.

⁴⁹"Theology of Fellowship--1965," Proceedings, 1965, p. 286; Theology of Fellowship--1962, Reports and Memorials, 1962," p. 18; Brux, p. 40.

"Beware of false prophets" ⁵⁰ has also been listed as evidence that the Missouri Synod should refrain from the practice of fellowship with members of other Christian denominations. According to the Theology of Fellowship, however, this passage, in the light of verses 22-23, could only be speaking of people who were not Christians. Using this passage to apply to erring Christians and erring Christian denominations "would be a serious error against the doctrine of the church, because also erring Christians are Christians, and members of the Body of Christ."⁵¹

The same could be said for many other passages traditionally cited as proof for "avoiding" those Christians who taught error; yet today most of the scholars who are writing on this subject state that the passages cannot be used to refer to other Christians, but only to non-Christians.⁵² In connection with all of these passages Kramer writes that the church must be careful in applying these passages to other synods and denominations, since the passages originally spoke only of individual teachers, and not of larger groupings.⁵³

Traditionally one or two passages from the Confessions have been cited by members of Missouri Synod as "proof texts" that Missouri should not exercise any form of fellowship with other synods or denominations.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Matt. 7:15.

⁵¹ "Theology of Fellowship--1965," Proceedings, 1965, p. 285; "Theology of Fellowship--1962," Reports and Memorials, 1962, p. 18; Brux, pp. 9-10.

⁵² E.g., Gal. 1:6-9 treated in "Theology of Fellowship--1962," Reports and Memorials, 1962, p. 18; and Titus 3:10 treated in "Theology of Fellowship--1965," Proceedings, 1965, p. 287.

⁵³ Kramer, "Ecumenical Strivings," The Springfielder, XXVII, 31. Cf. "Theology of Fellowship--1962," Reports and Memorials, 1962, p. 19.

⁵⁴ Supra, p. 14.

Conspicuous by its absence from recent statements on church fellowship, on the other hand, is any reference to the Confessions, proving or disproving this practice of fellowship.

There are, however, several references in recent literature to the Confessions. These references have some bearing on the whole issue of fellowship with non-Lutheran Christians. One very relevant aspect deals with the meaning of the word "doctrine" in the Confessions. According to the 1965 version of the Theology of Fellowship, the terms doctrina and evangelium are synonymous.⁵⁵ In this connection, Pelikan points out that pura doctrina appears only twice,⁵⁶ and then the term is linked both times with the gospel, as one of the notae Ecclesiae.⁵⁷ The 1965 version of the Theology of Fellowship points out that the two marks of the church--gospel and sacraments--have served throughout the history of orthodox Lutheranism to "establish the limits of pulpit and altar fellowship, and to distinguish the Lutheran Church from other churches."⁵⁸

⁵⁵"Theology of Fellowship--1965," Proceedings, 1965, p. 279. Apology VII-VII:8 reads: "the assembly of saints who share the association of the same Gospel or teaching . . ." The Book of Concord, translated and edited by Theodore G. Tappert (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), p. 169. Cf. Paul M. Bretscher, "Take Heed Unto the Doctrine," Proceedings of the Forty-Fourth Regular Convention of the Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod, June 17-26, 1959 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), 14-18, 30-33, 37. Also, Jaroslav Pelikan, "Some Word Studies in the Apology," Concordia Theological Monthly, XXIV (August 1953), p. 584.

⁵⁶Book of Concord, pp. 169, 171 (Apology VII:5, 20).

⁵⁷Pelikan, "Word Studies," CTM, XXIV, 584.

⁵⁸"Theology of Fellowship--1965," Proceedings, 1965, p. 278.

Richard Caemmerer, however, would seem to agree with Pelikan in interpreting pura doctrina more in a qualitative than in a quantitative sense. In other words the doctrine is pure, not because it is free from error, but because it is an effective instrument for the Holy Spirit.⁵⁹

The Theology of Fellowship points out that pulpit and altar fellowship is never directly referred to in the Confessions. Those who subscribed to the Confessions, however, were automatically in pulpit and altar fellowship with each other. Those who did not subscribe were not condemned as heretics, but "communicatio in sacris" was not practiced with them. Nevertheless, the "Lutherans" still had a responsibility towards those who did not subscribe, and both groups did, for the most part, consent to pray together.⁶⁰

Regarding the usage of the word "church" in the Confessions, Piepkorn makes it quite clear that "true church" can have no denomination implication. It is true that unbelievers and hypocrites are associated with the church according to its external rites, but these people can in no sense be understood as members of the church, the Body of Christ. Thus there can be no identification of the much used terms, visibilis, invisibilis, sichtbar, and unsichtbar, with any confessional usage of the word "church"⁶¹

⁵⁹Richard R. Caemmerer, "Church Unity and Communication," The Christian Century, LXXIII (April 4, 1956), 417.

⁶⁰"Theology of Fellowship--1965," Proceedings, 1965, p. 279. It must be remembered, however, that this was the practice of many who signed the Confessions, and is not based on what the Confessions themselves state.

⁶¹Arthur Carl Piepkorn, "What the Symbols have to Say About the Church," Concordia Theological Monthly, XXVI (October 1955), 722, 749.

Thus, unlike former Missouri statements which cite certain passages from the Confessions as "proof texts" against the practice of fellowship with "heterodox church-bodies," recent statements have admitted that the Confessions do not speak directly to this problem of the practice of fellowship. This would explain the absence of references to the Confessions in so many of the recent articles dealing with this general subject matter.

A Rejection of the Former Pragmatic Reasons

In the second chapter many practical reasons were cited for the refusal of Missouri Synod to practice fellowship with other denominations. Several recent statements on the church and church fellowship deal, in one form or another, with these practical considerations.

In the first place it had formerly been believed that the practice of fellowship with Christian errorists was a departure from God's Word, which involved the "orthodox" believer in the sin of the errorist.⁶² It has already been demonstrated, however, that many of the contemporary synodical theologians believe that such a practice of fellowship is not forbidden in Holy Scripture. Furthermore there are some who feel that preaching the gospel and administering the sacraments to a "consciously singled out segment of the church" involves one in a sectarianism which fails to promote the unity of the church.⁶³ If, as Heinicke states, "Our fellowship with one another is an expression of our fellowship with Him," then the practice of fellowship with Christians of all denominations is not an option

⁶² Supra, p. 15.

⁶³ Caemmerer, "Church Unity," The Christian Century, LXXIII, 418.

for the Christian. Rather, it is the will of God.⁶⁴

A second major objection to the practice of fellowship with other Christians is based on the traditional belief that such a practice is dangerous to the individual and to the church group which exercises this fellowship.⁶⁵ Many contemporaries writing on the church and church fellowship would agree with the traditionalists in saying that such a practice might be dangerous, although none of them state, as did Pieper, that such a practice endangers the very salvation of those who practice such a fellowship. James Mayer writes that practicing this fellowship which God has already given all Christians is so dangerous that the church is forced to "trust the Holy Spirit to get through with it."⁶⁶ Furthermore, there is the distinct possibility that the Holy Spirit will grant the manifestation of the unity of the church only to those who assume this risk.⁶⁷ In this connection Martin Kretzmann writes:

No one will think, I hope, that I am advocating the easy road in the above. It is not easy; it is dangerous. The easy way is to rest securely on a fixed formulation of Christian truth and to retreat into a fortress where we are safe from contact with our fellowmen and relieved of the necessity of searching the Scriptures again and again to learn what God has to say to our day and age.⁶⁸

A third traditional objection to the practice of fellowship with

⁶⁴ Paul T. Heinicke, "Fellowship in the Ministry and Mission of the Church" (Unpublished essay delivered at the Workshop on Church and Ministry, July 23, 1963), p. 1. (included in the mimeographed Workshop minutes).

⁶⁵ Supra, p. 16.

⁶⁶ James Mayer, "Practical Implications of the Theology of the Church" (Unpublished essay delivered at the Workshop on Church and Ministry, Plenary Session, Minutes, July 26, 1963), p. 5.

⁶⁷ Gotsch, p. 332.

⁶⁸ "Letter," The Lutheran Layman, August 1, 1957, p. 7.

Christians adhering to different doctrinal formulations is closely related to the other two. In practicing such a fellowship with an "impure church" a doctrinally "pure" church brings error into its own body, thus making it "impure" or "heterodox." In such a manner schism is introduced into the church; so that practicing this fellowship with Christian "errorists" does not promote church unity, but serves to hinder it.⁶⁹

It has already been pointed out, however, that many of the more recent Missouri Synod statements reflect the idea that this dichotomy of heterodox and orthodox is not only unscriptural but also invalid. As Gotsch writes, "other theologies, like ours, are conditioned and partial."⁷⁰ In this sense, the theologies of all denominations are "impure" already. It is for this reason that John Tietjen can write, "No individual organ can claim to have no need of the rest of Christ's body." The individual weaknesses of each denominational grouping are complemented by the individual strengths of the other denominational groupings. Thus, as each denomination works together with the others, each one ministering to the other, the Body of Christ is strengthened and edified.⁷¹ A slightly different approach is taken by Thomas Coates who arrives at a conclusion similar to those of Tietjen and Gotsch:

⁶⁹Supra, p. 16.

⁷⁰Gotsch, p. 323.

⁷¹John Tietjen, "Administration: Structuring the Local Congregation for Maximum Mission and Ministry" (Unpublished essay delivered at the Workshop on Church and Ministry as a part of the Panel Discussion, July 23, 1963), p. 1. (mimeographed minutes)

If our doctrine is true, we need not be afraid to thrust it into the arena to do combat with falsehood. And if our doctrine is pure, the way to retain its purity is not to pack it into an airtight compartment, to prevent it from being contaminated by exposure to the world. If pure doctrine is not used, it will stagnate.⁷²

Whereas, in the past, there were many who were convinced that the practice of fellowship with non-Lutheran Christians was harmful to the church, there are many in synod today who believe just the opposite: refusal to practice at least some sort of fellowship with all other Christians is harmful to the church-at-large. John Strietelmeier points out that Christ's illustration of the servant who buried his talent for fear of losing it should serve as a "warning to the confessional church which thinks that it can conserve the truth by refusing to risk it."⁷³ Again, Martin Marty points out what he considers to be the fallacy of the traditional views in this matter:

Denominations are defended as a means of safeguarding Christian truth; in actual effect, however, they serve to advertise Christian differences. They place truth on a cafeteria line. They call the world's attention to the relativity and competitive character of the truth. They render trivial difference permanent and major. Denominationalism works against itself theologically, however practically inevitable it may now be.⁷⁴

A fourth and final objection to the practice of fellowship with other Christian groupings was described as the belief that, in exercising such a practice, Christians erase the distinction between truth and error, and compromise truth.⁷⁵ In refuting this objection, however, many recent

⁷²Coates, p. 10.

⁷³Strietelmeier, p. 232.

⁷⁴Marty, p. 72.

⁷⁵Supra, p. 17.

statements point out that Christ himself practiced a form of fellowship with publicans and sinners.⁷⁶ Furthermore, as Caemmerer points out "redemption is bigger than any doctrinal formulation of it."⁷⁷ In other words, Christ, as the truth which unites all Christian groups, is greater than any of the differences which may divide these groups. This is what Martin Kretzmann means when he writes that, when he meets a man who confesses Christ as Lord, even though that man belongs to a different denomination, he is still obligated to extend the hand of fellowship to that man as a sign of their oneness in Christ. They must still speak the gospel to each other so that they both may be strengthened. Kretzmann continues:

We do this, conscious of the fact that in both of us there is still much sin which prevents and beclouds our understanding, and yet conscious also, that, if we speak the truth to each other, the Holy Spirit is in that truth and is working through and in both of us. But we dare not, while we are doing this, let go of the right hand of fellowship. That is the all-important thing.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Frederick W. Danker, "What is the Church to You?" Advance, XI (June 1964), p. 21. To this it might be added that there are numerous references to Christ's active participation in the synagogue worship (e.g., Matt. 13:54-58; Mark 6:1-6; Luke 4:14-30).

⁷⁷ Caemmerer, "Church Unity," The Christian Century, LXXIII, 418.

⁷⁸ Kretzmann, "Letter," The Lutheran Layman, August 1, 1957, p. 7.

CHAPTER V

THE IMPLICATIONS OF THESE DIFFERENT POINTS OF VIEW FOR THE
PRACTICE OF FELLOWSHIP WITH NON-LUTHERAN CHRISTIANS

Assuming that there has been a change of thinking on the doctrine of the church and the theology of fellowship, one must next ask about the implications of this change for the practice of fellowship with non-Lutheran Christians. For the most part these implications are reflected in the recent documents themselves, and to a lesser degree they are reflected in what is actually being practiced in the Missouri Synod.

A Condemnation of Two Extremes

One aspect of the fellowship question which most of the recent documents on the subject seem to share in common, is a condemnation of the two extremes: unionism and isolationism.

The unionism which is condemned is, for the most part, a type of organic union which ignores all differences in doctrinal formulations, stating that these differences are unimportant. This results in an "ecumenicity that faultily seeks a faulty unity," for it says, "We are all together already; let's look that way."¹ This is similar to what Coiner regards as the temptation to yield to a "slow process of assimilation by which God's people lose their sense of calling and identity"²

¹Richard R. Caemmerer, "Church Unity and Communication," The Christian Century, LXXIII (April 4, 1956), 417.

²Harry Coiner, "Affirming the Holy Christian Church, the Communion of Saints," Convention Proceedings, The Southern Nebraska District, The

There is another temptation, however. As Scripture requires all individual Christians to live in community, so Scripture also requires that there be a definite relationship between these various communities.³ Failure to acknowledge or to practice this relationship results in isolationism or separatism--just as serious a threat to the church as the extreme of unionism. This separatism is a form of "anti-ecumenicity that seeks no unity at all," which says, "We shall be one with you when you subscribe to our statements of doctrinal principle."⁴ This too, as unionism, is severely condemned by a good many of the scholars who are presently writing about the church and church fellowship. One of these scholars, Wayne Saffen, is extremely critical of what he considers to be Missouri's former separatistic habits. Referring to this isolationism he writes in the American Lutheran:

Yet religious isolationism is intolerable--for it can be maintained only if we are sectarian (which we claim we are not), or if we claim to be alone "The True Visible Church of Christ on Earth" (which we have claimed to be). Then we could rationalize our isolation and separation from inter-Christian fellowship by dubbing all those in disagreement with us "false prophets" and "apostates." We would read them out of the Church, and we alone would be the Church--exclusive and inclusive. We are not prepared to go that far. Since we are bound to recognize fellow Christians in other denominations . . . , we are bound to seek to establish communication and Christian

Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod, Thirty-Fifth Convention, June 19-21, 1961
 [St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1961], p. 126. Cf. John Tietjen, "Administration: Structuring the Local Congregation for Maximum Mission and Ministry" (Unpublished essay delivered at the Workshop on Church and Ministry as a part of the Panel Discussion, July 23, 1963), p. 1. (mimeographed minutes)

³Tietjen, p. 57.

⁴Caemmerer, "Church Unity," The Christian Century, LXXIII, 418.

fellowship with them. We cannot maintain Christian fellowship in isolation from fellow Christians. What kind of "Communion of Saints" is that where the saints do not commune or have fellowship with one another?

We have found ourselves stuck on the horns of a dilemma--isolation or unionism. The logic is that if you seek unity and fellowship and fraternize with differing Christians, you are betraying your true doctrine and are guilty of "Unionism." The logic works in reverse: if you seek to maintain pure doctrine, you must limit your fellowship to those only in complete agreement with you. We have chosen to live on the horn of religious isolation. We invite those who live on the other side to come over and live with us. When they all come over to our side, we will no longer be isolationistic, and our very isolationism will have become the method of reuniting the Church. In the meantime we "witness" to them from our horn of the dilemma--and they invite us to come over and "converse" with them. We talk. But do they listen? And should they listen, if we are unwilling to come to the center, and seek--not a compromise--but a third way, another solution?⁵

It must be noted, however, that within these two extremes there is a certain freedom, a certain lack of legalism, which was not discoverable in the past. This can be illustrated in the answer given to a question sent in to The Lutheran Witness. The writer of the question desired to know if it was permissible for a Missouri Synod pastor to be a member of a ministerial union that was made up of pastors from all major denominations. The reply to this question states that no definite answer can be given. A lot depends on the nature of the organization, its constitution and purposes. Only if membership necessarily involves unionistic practices would it be wrong. If, on the other hand, no compromise of conscience is necessarily involved, "identification with the spiritual concerns of the whole community (as such membership might imply) could be wise and beneficial."⁶

⁵Wayne Saffen, "A Challenge to our Church Body," American Lutheran, XL (January 1957), 13, 25.

⁶"Ask the Witness," The Lutheran Witness, LXXXIII (August 4, 1964), 385.

Now the above reference may not indicate as drastic a shift from the traditional Missouri views as some of the other references cited in this paper. Yet, when one compares this answer with, for example, an answer given by Pieper in reply to a similar question,⁷ one immediately sees the radical difference of this "new" approach. That there actually was some kind of a change in Missouri's relations with other denominations was admitted by The Lutheran Witness just two months prior to the asking of that question regarding pastors and ministerial unions.⁸ According to Richard Neuhaus, however, the recent change in Synod's dealing with other denominations is even more drastic. He writes that, with the 1965 synodical convention, it became clear to all that "Missouri's position on selective fellowship is no longer understood in terms of doctrine, but simply as a matter of expediency and synodical loyalty."⁹

The Encouragement of Cooperation with Other Denominations

Although the two extremes of unionism and separatism are severely condemned, there is still a large undefined area between those two extremes, within which a member of the Missouri Synod could function, according to the recent statements on church fellowship. Some kind of practice of fellowship with members of other denominations is strongly encouraged. It is not always clear, however, what forms this exercise of fellowship may or must take. Caemmerer, for example, writes that it is only as various

⁷Supra, pp. 18-19.

⁸"We Must all Grow . . . Theologically," The Lutheran Witness, LXXXIII (June 23, 1964), 313.

⁹Richard John Neuhaus, "The Song of the Three Synods: Detroit, 1965," Una Sancta, XXII (Trinity 1965), 37.

Christians work at constantly reminding each other of the redeeming mercy of Christ, that the Holy Spirit works among these Christians to repair the schisms and disagreements among these Christians.¹⁰ This, however, involves the necessity of getting close enough to Christians of other denominations to be able to speak to them and help them, as well as be spoken to and helped by them.¹¹ Now the way in which this sharing is to be carried out is not discussed by Caemmerer. He does say, however, that preaching the gospel and administering the sacraments only to a select group puts one in danger of becoming sectarian, since the only way the church can be edified is through the sharing of the gospel and the administering of the sacraments to each other.¹² Although this would seem to suggest some sort of interdenominational practice of pulpit and altar fellowship, there is no direct mention of this in the essay.

It is imperative, according to James Mayer, that Christians of all denominations witness to the oneness that they possess in Christ Jesus. No two congregations, for example, in the inner city "can afford to be without the insights the other has to offer and neither is able to do it alone."¹³ What forms this witness or cooperation must take, however, is

¹⁰ Richard R. Caemmerer, "Let the Church be the Church," Proceedings of the 40th Convention of the Texas District of the Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod, March 30-April 3, 1964 [St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1964], p. 74.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 55.

¹² Caemmerer, "Church Unity," The Christian Century, LXXIII, 418. Cf. R. R. Caemmerer, "The Body of Christ," Concordia Theological Monthly, XXV (May 1964), 268. Hereafter Concordia Theological Monthly will be referred to as CTM.

¹³ James Mayer, "Practical Implications of the Theology of the Church" (Unpublished essay delivered at the Workshop on Church and Ministry, Plenary Session, Minutes, July 26, 1963), p. 5.

not always mentioned. One thing is certain--whatever form this cooperation may take, the cooperation is not dependent on "full doctrinal agreement," but simply on the fact that the two groups are "facing the same direction with respect to the given realities--the objective acts of God's mercy."¹⁴ Criticizing a former attitude which many in the Missouri Synod maintained, William Danker stresses the importance of establishing certain relationships with Christians of other denominations:

We must get rid of any lingering guilt feelings about having contact with Christians of other denominations. Having contact and interchange with other members is the business of anything that belongs to the body. When circulation in any limb stops, gangrene results. Even in the case of snake bite a tourniquet can be kept on an arm only a brief period of time and then it has to be loosened from time to time, so that one does not lose the arm.¹⁵

Participation in Certain Ecumenical Organizations

Not all of the recent statements dealing with inter-denominational cooperation and fellowship are vague. To the contrary, the implications of recent statements on the church and fellowship can be seen in the tendency of many of these statements to encourage Missouri Synod to join certain more ecumenically minded organizations and church federations.

Referring to the National Council of Churches of Christ, the Lutheran World Federation, and the World Council of Churches Martin Kretzmann states that all who participate in these organizations have to

¹⁴James W. Mayer, "The Church as the People of God United in the Word of God," *CTM*, XXXIII (November 1962), 663.

¹⁵William J. Danker, "Form and Function in the Christian Witness," Study Conference on the Christian World Mission, conducted under the auspices of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, October 11-13, 1961 [St. Louis: Lutheran Laymen's League, 1961], pp. 38-39. Cf. Martin Kretzmann, "The Lutheran Confessional Obligation toward Church Union Movements in the Younger Church" (Unpublished essay dated November 1963).

confess that Jesus is their Lord and Savior according to the Bible. Thus, by this confession, these members acknowledge that it is the Holy Spirit who created faith in their hearts. The very fact that they come together in such organizations implies two basic things. In the first place they acknowledge the oneness which the Holy Spirit gave them when he created faith in their hearts (fides qua). Secondly they are aware of the fact that they are still separate organs "because they have not yet grown together completely in the doctrines which they profess (fides quae)."¹⁶

Because these groups are not yet united in the fides quae, continues Kretzmann, the Missouri Synod has stayed out of these organizations. This attitude has tended to deny the very character of that unity which God creates in all who are Christians. The failure to recognize the God-given oneness of the church can only serve to inhibit the active ministry to and from every other member of the church--a ministry which God requires of all in the church. This does not, by any means, deny the doctrinal differences of those who belong to these federations. Kretzmann's view does, however, represent a vast change of thinking from the traditional Missouri Synod view. Kretzmann continues,

We must, however, be obedient to the guiding of the Holy Spirit in our time. When once we have acknowledged the validity of the principle that membership in these organizations is not a denial of the truth but rather an affirmation of our belief that it is God who creates the oneness among Christians, then we should not take our membership lightly or casually but be deeply concerned that our ministry to and from one another is fulfilled within the framework of the gifts which God the Holy Spirit has bestowed upon different parts and members of the body of Christ.¹⁷

¹⁶ Martin Kretzmann, "Report of Mission Self-Study and Survey," Convention Workbook, 46th Regular Convention, The Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod, June 16-26, 1965 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, [1965]), p. 120.

¹⁷Ibid., pp. 120-121.

This same view is expressed by others. James Mayer writes that it is only within the context of groups such as the World Council of Churches that the church can work for a more perfect unity and for the edification of the Body of Christ. Refusal to join such organizations is a refusal to recognize the basic unity which God has already given the church.¹⁸ It is for this reason that Wayne Saffen is rather critical of past practices in the Missouri Synod:

The time is long past where we can play the reluctant virgin (or old maid) among the churches. We have not only turned down proposals of marriage. We have turned down dates--because they might have led to marriage. We are always invited. We seldom accept. We are invited to join the Lutheran World Federation. We demur--no, thanks! We are invited to join the National Lutheran Council. We decline--no, thanks! We are invited to join the World Council of Churches. We refuse--no, thanks!¹⁹

Regarding this matter Saffen asks the following questions, implying the urgency of joining such organizations:

Do we trust our doctrine enough to permit it to be exposed in contact as members of Federations and Councils of Churches? Can we say more, or say it more effectively, outside of such Church Federations than we can inside? Will our fellow Christians be more apt to listen to us as critics from the outside or as discerning friends from the inside? Outside the use of force, where has there ever been a genuine reunion of the Church without free and open conversation between divided Christians--not only on the official committee level, but throughout the Churches involved?²⁰

By refusing to join such organizations because of the lack of sufficient doctrinal unity, the Missouri Synod is denying that essential unity which God has already given to all within the Christian Church.²¹

¹⁸J. Mayer, "Church as the People," CTM, XXXIII, 667-668.

¹⁹Saffen, p. 25.

²⁰Ibid., p. 26.

²¹Kretzmann, "Report," Convention Workbook, p. 120; Cf. Kretzmann, "Letter to the Editor," The Lutheran Layman, August 1, 1957, p. 7.

John Strietelmeier points out, "It seems unfair to demand of a federation of churches a uniformity in these matters that does not exist within our own Synod."²² Furthermore the church must not underestimate the power of the saving truth upon which all Christians are agreed, for this power welcomes free and open discussion.²³ Thus Gotsch can conclude that since the theology of all denominational groupings is only partial and imperfect because of the human element, the church needs more "Jerusalem conferences" like that first one in which the gospel is given the chance to build up the body. "If there was unity amid theological diversity in the New Testament, must we not manifest that same oneness in spite of our doctrinal differences."²⁴

Prayer Fellowship

It might automatically be assumed that many who are in favor of joining inter-denominational church federations would also be in favor of praying with the members of these groups. Very few of the essayists quoted above refer specifically to open prayer fellowship with Christians of other denominations. The principles, however, used for arriving at the conclusion that synod should join such federations assume that such a prayer fellowship would not only be permissible but, may also be required,

²²"Symposium Re Lutheran World Federation," American Lutheran, XLI (September 1958), 232.

²³Ibid.

²⁴Richard J. Gotsch, "New Testament Theology and Church Unity," American Lutheran, XLVIII (December 1965), 323. Cf. Caemmerer and Lueker, Church and Ministry in Transition (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1965), p. 15. The first major step in this direction was taken in the 1965 synodical convention when Missouri voted to join the Lutheran Council in the United States of America (Resolution 3-12).

in order to reflect the essential unity which God has given to the church, and in order to promote the over all edification of the Body of Christ. Furthermore, membership in these church federations would be inconceivable if one grants the precept that prayer fellowship with "errorists" is inadvisable or wrong.²⁵ There are, however, several references in recent statements on the church which actually recommend some kind of prayer fellowship with other Christians.

In a more tradition-oriented essay delivered to the Western District C. S. Meyer states that any form of joint prayer with unbelievers is, of course, prohibited. Meyer goes on to affirm that synod will not, "under most circumstances," participate in the services of "heterodox congregations," for fear of perpetuating the error of these congregations. Prayer fellowship, however, cannot be made tantamount to pulpit and altar fellowship. Thus the only agreement that is necessary for two people to pray together is agreement that Christ is their Lord and Savior, and agreement on the substance of their prayer. For this reason,

Circumstances may be conceived in which the service is designated for a specific purpose, e.g., a patriotic service of thanksgiving, in which we could join with others who will pray in the name of Jesus. A service of that kind might even require of us a readiness to join others in prayer fellowship.²⁶

Essentially this view is reflected in the minutes of the Workshop on Church and Ministry. One statement was made that refusal to pray with other Christians is in itself, a confession which could be a poor witness

²⁵Cf. Caemmerer, "Church Unity," The Christian Century, LXXIII, 417-418; Gotsch, pp. 323, 332; Kretzmann, "Letter," The Lutheran Layman, August 1, 1957, p. 7; J. Mayer, "Church as People," CTM, XXXIII, 666-668.

²⁶Carl S. Meyer, "Prayer Fellowship," Proceedings of the Seventy-Third Convention of the Western District of the Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod, June 17-21, 1957 [St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1957], pp. 71, 83-84.

to Christ's Body. Thus Missouri Synod should engage in prayer with those of other denominations as long as such prayer does not compromise the doctrine of synod.²⁷ In another part of these minutes it is questioned as to whether it is possible for a person to be confessional without contact with the "heterodox" church bodies. Furthermore,

We Lutherans, even in this room, cannot reach total agreement. If the disagreement is Lutheran, I can pray with him. If disagreement is labeled Episcopalian, etc., I can't pray with fellow Christian [sic].²⁸

In the Lutheran Witness an editorial states that joint prayer with Lutherans of other bodies is permissible, especially when these Lutherans are gathered for the purpose of seeking doctrinal agreement.²⁹ A similar editorial in the American Lutheran, however, carries this one step further. Questioning the insistence of some members of synod that a Christian commits a sin against God when he unites in prayer with Christians of another denomination, the editorial continues:

As for ourselves the matter has been settled long ago, for we trust the Master's Word, "Where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them." If He is present at a meeting, we, His servants, may be there also. And if those who are there with Him, and with us, speak to Him in prayer, imploring His help and blessing, then it is only natural and Christian for us to join them in their petitions, ever mindful of His promise, "If two of you agree on earth as touching anything that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of My Father which is in heaven."³⁰

²⁷"Workshop on Church and Ministry," July 22-26, 1963 (St. Louis: School for Graduate Studies, Concordia Seminary, 1963), Minutes, Sectional Study A-2, July 24, p. 3. It is extremely difficult to determine the precise definition of "compromise of doctrine," since this term is not defined in any of the above writings.

²⁸"Workshop," Section A-1, July 23, 1963 (minutes), p. 1.

²⁹"One Dissenting Vote," The Lutheran Witness, LXXXII (July 23, 1964), 348.

³⁰"Pray For and With One Another?," American Lutheran, XLI (December 1958), 312.

The Conflict Over Pulpit and Altar Fellowship

If, at least in part, the question of prayer fellowship has been resolved in most of the recent Missouri Synod statements on the church, these same statements would seem to reflect the fact that synod is only beginning to wrestle with the problem of pulpit and altar fellowship.

Officially, Missouri Synod has always been against any form of pulpit and altar fellowship with non-Lutheran Christians, (as well as with those who are not members of the Synodical Conference) as is evidenced by the constitution of synod which in no uncertain terms condemns any form of participation in the services of "heterodox congregations."³¹ Added to this, there are repeated statements of synodical officials warning members of synod to avoid such unionistic practices. In the 1956 convention J. W. Behnken emphasized the fact that there could be no pulpit and altar fellowship with the Augustana Synod until there was complete doctrinal unity.³² If this held true for another Lutheran body, it would be even more applicable to a Christian group which was not Lutheran. Similarly, speaking of pulpit and altar fellowship with other Lutherans Oliver Harms pleaded in 1964:

Specifically, I would plead with all men in the Synod to avoid practicing unionism in any form. Occasionally pastors and congregations are tempted to forget that there are still unresolved differences among Lutherans. We have not yet agreed that the Reformation services

³¹ Article VI, cited supra, p. 35.

³² "President's Triennial Report," Proceedings of the Forty-Third Convention of the Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod, June 20-29, 1956 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1956), p. 11.

for example, ought to be made joint endeavors of all Lutheran congregations in an area regardless of their synodical affiliation. We have not reached this point. Similarly, we have not reached the point where the Lutheran students on college and university campuses may engage in joint endeavors involving pulpit and altar fellowship.

Let us take this matter of relations with other Lutheran bodies one step at a time. If Judgment Day comes before we conclude our doctrinal discussions with the view toward pulpit and altar fellowship, very well. Until the Last Day does come, we have opportunity to work toward reaching such agreement in the proper way.³³

The minutes of the Workshop on Church and Ministry cite three explanations for Missouri's position on pulpit and altar fellowship. In the first place, Missouri wants to take denominationalism seriously, and so it would reserve, for example, practicing the Lord's Supper with other denominations "for later fellowship practice." Secondly, fellowship with other groups is lacking not so much because Missouri broke with these other groups as because they broke with Missouri. "Rather than compromise just to get together, I would have to 'stand pat' while helping him to bridge the chasm he has made." Lastly, synodical caution in such matters is attributable to a "preventitive conditioning" against the Prussian Union and "Eastern United States 'Lutheranism.'"³⁴

In that same workshop, however, Paul Heinicke presented a paper which leans toward some kind of change in synod's policy on pulpit and altar fellowship with others. In discussing fellowship Heinicke states that God is always the author of such fellowship. Moreover, the Christian's fellowship with his fellow Christian is always an expression of his fellow-

³³"Memo to My Brethren," dated November 1964, St. Louis.

³⁴"Workshop," Minutes of Section A-2, July 23, 1963, pp. 2-3.

ship with God. Heinicke then states that the areas of fellowship to which he is referring are Christian people praying together, praising God together, and confessing sins together.³⁵ This, in essence, also seems to be the opinion of Backus, Malte, and Saffen when they write:

All [*italics added*] believers in Jesus Christ are members of one another. They belong together as the muscles and bones and ligaments of your body. They pray for each other, worship together, partake of a common Communion, have the same Lord and hope. They are a close fellowship, a well-knit family. The saints in the church help each other grow toward God.³⁶

In connection with this, it is the opinion of many in synod that no form of joint pulpit and altar fellowship can be practiced with any other group except those groups which Missouri Synod has officially recognized as being in fellowship with synod. This can be exemplified in an answer given in The Lutheran Witness to a question about inter-Lutheran joint Reformation services. According to the answer, even though Lutherans may be in doctrinal agreement in any given area it still would not be "proper" or in "good order" for one to take part in such services:

By conducting joint services these congregations and pastors would be practicing a selective fellowship which does not have the sanction of Synod. Such practice would not necessarily constitute unionism if doctrinal unity is assured, but the Missouri Synod congregations would be violating good order and could cause confusion and possibly offense.³⁷

That same reply of The Lutheran Witness goes on to say that any member of synod ought not to act arbitrarily, but should act in consideration of

³⁵Paul T. Heinicke, "Fellowship in the Ministry and Mission of the Church," Workshop, Minutes of Panel Discussion, July 23, 1963, p. 1.

³⁶William Backus, Paul Malte, and Wayne Saffen, Adventuring in the Church (Medford, Ore.: Morse Press, 1960), p. 131. Cf. W. Danker, "Form and Function," p. 38.

³⁷"Ask the Witness," The Lutheran Witness, LXXXIII (December 8, 1964), 606.

the entire Synod, according to the principles of Christian love. Furthermore, disregard for proper order in this area on intersynodical relations can only slow down the progress toward Lutheran unity in practice and doctrine.³⁸

Although the above citation refers specifically to Missouri's relations with other Lutheran bodies, the implications of this answer would apply even more strongly to Missouri's relations with other Christian bodies outside the Lutheran denomination.

This same view can also be seen elsewhere. In the "Memo to my Brethren" by Oliver Harms the president of synod implied that there could be no practice of pulpit and altar fellowship with others until Missouri Synod, as a synod, was able to resolve the differences with the other groups.³⁹ Likewise, the 1965 synodical convention resolved, "That no joint worship services be held with those with whom we have not established pulpit and altar fellowship."⁴⁰

Perhaps this helps to explain the reaction on the part of many to the establishing or prohibiting of the practice of fellowship according to denominational labels. James Mayer is one of those who objects to Missouri's system of practicing fellowship by organization or organizational labels.⁴¹ The synod, claims Mayer, can never create or deny the

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Supra, p. 102.

⁴⁰ Resolution 2-16, Proceedings of the 46th Regular Convention of the Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod, June 16-26, 1965 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, [1965]), pp. 97-98.

⁴¹ J. Mayer, "Practical Implications," p. 5 (delivered at Workshop on Church and Ministry).

unity which the Spirit gives to two Christian groups in the same geographical community. If any two congregations essentially agree with each other, then they ought to be able to practice fellowship with each other; but they cannot do such, because Missouri tends to draw the lines of fellowship organizationally rather than dynamically. One of the big problems in this area is due to the fact that synod has tended to equate a God-given unity with agreement in doctrine arrived at by various Christian synods or denominations. Mayer continues:

It is because of this organizational thinking that we do not consider it permissible for two congregations in one community to acknowledge their oneness in the Word by working together and fellowshiping together in their community, so long as their respective synods are not in the same agreement. . . .

If ekklesia is truly the people of God united in the Word of God, it ought to be the "closer in" situation that takes precedence over the "farther out" synodical situation. . . . when God has granted one heart and mind in the Word to people whom He also has placed in close community with each other in this world, these people are united in the Word in the sense that it is more meaningful to them and to the environment in which they live than the unity their respective synods enjoy. If they are to grow as ekklesia in the world and out to the world as God intended, they must live united in the Word, speaking the Word to each other and manifesting their unity in the Word to the world.⁴²

Mayer is by no means the only one in Missouri Synod who is critical of this organizational view of pulpit and altar fellowship. Martin Marty writes that if it is true that one must wait for organizational realignment and total agreement in doctrinal formulations, "one whole dimension of the biblical command and promise concerning the Church will be cut off from Christian view and profession." The unity, according to Marty, already exists, and thus such a "truth first" approach can only be fruitless; for it divides what scripture unites, and sets goals that are impossible

⁴²J. Mayer, "The Church as the People," CTM, XXXIII, 669.

to achieve in this life.⁴³

The same attitude is reflected in many other recent statements on the church and church fellowship. In the Workshop on Church and Ministry it was questioned whether organizational fellowship was the will of God, or even if it were possible to apply the Scriptural passages on fellowship to organizations. "We have no control over Christian fellowship, only over what we call pulpit-altar fellowship."⁴⁴ In this same workshop Paul Heinicke states that most of the aspects of pulpit and altar fellowship, such as joint prayer, praise, and confession cannot be carried out by organizations and denominations, but by Christian people, individually and in groups. Such a fellowship is already practiced in many different circumstances.⁴⁵

Hoeferkamp, once again in that workshop, takes a slightly more extreme view when he says that it is quite clear that denominational "organizationals" must be willing to die if "thereby Christian truth and Christian fellowship are furthered."⁴⁶ To those who would object and state that no form of joint fellowship can take place until it is authorized by synod, Kretzmann answers:

The decrees and resolutions of a church body to the effect that its members should not attend meetings with Christians of other denominations cannot absolve the conscience of the individual in this matter,

⁴³Martin E. Marty, Church Unity and Church Mission (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1964), pp. 59-61. Cf. Frederick W. Danker, "What is the Church to You?" Advance, XI (June 1964), 20.

⁴⁴"Workshop," Minutes of Section A-2, July 22 (afternoon), pp. 1-2.

⁴⁵Heinicke, p. 2.

⁴⁶R. Hoeferkamp, "Fellowship in the Ministry and Mission of the Church--In Latin America" (Unpublished paper presented to the Workshop on Church and Ministry), dated July 23, 1963, p. 3.

nor can he say that he will carry out the obligations or affirmation and denial in his faith only within certain limits, for example, the limits of his own denomination. That would be an explicit denial of the unity of the body of Christ and an attempt to place limitations in the area of witnessing contrary to the nature of the Gospel and the express command of our Lord.⁴⁷

It is interesting to note, in this connection, as has already been cited, the 1965 synodical convention voted that in the foreign mission field each individual congregation or group of Lutheran congregations in a given area, could determine for itself when pulpit and altar fellowship with other Lutheran bodies could be carried out.⁴⁸

⁴⁷M. Kretzmann, "Letter," The Lutheran Layman, August 1, 1957, p. 7.

⁴⁸Resolution 3-04, Proceedings, 1965, pp. 104-105. Cited, supra, p. 66. Although this resolution refers to fellowship with other Lutherans, the principle of leaving the final decision in the hands of the local congregation is nevertheless relevant.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

In examining the statements on the church and church fellowship which have come out of Missouri Synod in the last decade, evidence reveals that these statements are quite different from the traditional view of the church as reflected in the writings of Franz Pieper. It cannot be said that these recent statements represent the opinion of most of the pastors and laity of synod; but the statements in question do represent the opinions of those members who are writing for periodicals, delivering essays, and publishing books. Among those members the concepts of the church and church fellowship have drastically changed. It is significant that, of all the major publications associated with the Missouri Synod, the only ones which consistently represent the traditional view of the church and church fellowship are The Confessional Lutheran and Through To Victory.

When one examines the current statements in the area of the practice of fellowship, however, it becomes evident that the change in this area is much less than it is in the area of the overall concept of the church and church fellowship. This does not deny the fact that there has been change in the statements regarding the practice of fellowship. Prayer fellowship with non-Lutheran Christians, for example, is tolerated more today than it was in the past, and there are many leaders who are strongly encouraging such a practice of prayer fellowship. Furthermore, many of the recent statements encourage the participation in certain interdenominational federations such as the National Council of Churches and the World Council of Churches. Nevertheless, the change is still not as

drastic in this area as it is in the area of the overall concept of the church and church fellowship.

In the third place, when one looks at the actual practice of fellowship, one sees that in this area the least amount of change has taken place. Judging from the evidence gathered from newspapers and other reports, seldom does a Missouri Synod congregation take part in an interdenominational prayer service. Furthermore, Missouri Synod is still not a member of the National or World Councils of Churches. Thus it must be concluded that while the theory, as reflected in recent writings, has greatly changed, the practice, on the whole, remains the same, in spite of the immense implications of recent Missouri statements on the church, relating to the practice of fellowship with non-Lutheran Christians. One can only conclude that, although these recent statements represent a majority of men who are publishing their views on the church, the Missouri Synod has failed to realize the implications of these statements in its practice.

It has already been established that the traditional basis for refusal to practice fellowship with non-Lutheran Christians has been rejected in a majority of recent Missouri Synod statements on the church and church fellowship. These recent statements reveal that the Scripture passages which were formerly used to reject such a practice of fellowship should be applied to non-Christians, and cannot be applied to other Christians. It has also been demonstrated that the former heterodox-orthodox, visible-invisible dichotomies have been rejected in a great majority of recent statements because every church grouping is filled with sin, and thus also with error. Thus, it must be concluded that, in this sense, every church

body is heterodox. Finally, it has been demonstrated that the recent statements on the church reject the traditional concept of unity through doctrinal agreement. These statements claim that the church is already one. God has made the church one. It only remains for the church to recognize the unity which exists, put this unity into practice, and work for a more complete unity.

Since the major objections to the practice of fellowship with non-Lutheran Christians have been removed by these recent statements, the implications for changing the traditional Missouri Synod position are great. For example, if the Scriptural passages cited by Missouri Synod fathers are rejected as "proof texts" against such a practice of fellowship, and if no other passages are substituted, then it could be concluded, that there might be no Scriptural basis for Missouri's former "separatism." Again, if it is impossible for one to distinguish between orthodox and heterodox, then it could be concluded that it is impossible for any church body to insist that it is orthodox, stating that the sin of another denomination is more divisive of fellowship than its own sin. Finally, the recent statements reveal that church unity is dependent on the action of God, and not of man. Since God has already established this unity among all who believe the gospel, then it could be concluded that man does not have the right to insist, for the practice of fellowship, on a more complete unity than the unity which God has already given.

Thus the first implication of these recent statements, for the practice of fellowship with non-Lutheran Christians, consists in the fact that the former basis for the refusal to practice such a fellowship has been removed. This would imply the possibility that such a practice of

fellowship with non-Lutheran Christians may not be "wrong."

The second implication is related to the first. Not only are the traditional objections to the practice of fellowship with non-Lutheran Christians rejected, but there is, inherent in these statements, a positive encouragement to practice such a fellowship. It has already been pointed out that Christ Himself did not limit His practice of fellowship to the "doctrinally pure." Furthermore, it has been shown that the New Testament church was plagued by divisions just as "serious" as are the divisions today, but this did not keep these differing factions from worshipping together.

The unity of the church is brought about through God's action in Word and sacrament. This is the means which God has chosen to make all Christians one in the Body of Christ, according to these recent statements on the church. If this is true, then it would seem that each grouping within the total body is obligated to recognize and put into practice this unity of fellowship; for, as it has been mentioned in these recent statements, failure to practice this fellowship is failure to recognize one of God's great gifts to the church. This does not mean to indicate that there are no doctrinal differences in the church. There have always been doctrinal differences--important differences which pose a potential threat to the unity of the church. When a church body, however, tries to remove these threats by any other means than the means which God has given to the church--the mutual sharing with each other of Word and sacrament--that church body would seem to be guilty of ecclesiastical schwaermerei.

In applying this concept to Missouri Synod one concludes that, if the recent statements on the church are valid, synod can no longer make

the practice of fellowship with non-Lutheran Christians dependent on complete agreement in doctrine qua doctrinal formulations. As long as man is imperfect, man's concepts of God's saving acts will remain partial and distorted. Thus, as important as denominational differences are, these differences in themselves can never be used as a barrier to the search for and practice of that fellowship and unity which God has already given to His body. It would seem that inter-denominational fellowship among various Christian groups should be practiced, not because these Christian groupings agree in every aspect of doctrine, but because these bodies disagree, and because the mutual sharing of Word and sacrament is the means which God has given to the church for overcoming these differences, that the entire body of Christ may be strengthened and edified. This does not mean that any kind of interdenominational practice of fellowship is ipso facto acceptable, as long as the participating congregations are essentially Christian. Nor does this indicate that any kind of mutual sharing of Word and sacrament will automatically bring about the edification of the entire body. Rather, the gospel must be preached and the sacraments administered in such a way that the forgiveness of sins in Christ, the power of the Holy Spirit, is clearly held out to all participants. Apart from this, the practice of interdenominational fellowship would be fruitless.

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