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THE PROBLEM OF CHRISTIAN
AND
CHURCH FELLOWSHIP

A Thesis presented to the Faculty
of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis,
Department of Systematic Theology
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Bachelor of Divinity

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by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

1. INTRODUCTION 1

2. THE CHURCH WITHIN THE CHURCH AND BAPTIST 12

3. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 14

4. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY IN THE 16

5. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 18

6. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 20

7. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 22

8. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 24

9. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 26

10. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 28

11. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 30

12. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 32

13. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 34

14. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 36

15. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 38

16. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 40

17. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 42

18. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 44

19. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 46

20. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 48

21. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 50

22. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 52

23. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 54

24. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 56

25. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 58

26. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 60

27. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 62

28. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 64

29. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 66

30. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 68

31. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 70

32. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 72

33. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 74

34. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 76

35. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 78

36. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 80

37. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 82

38. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 84

39. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 86

40. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 88

41. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 90

42. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 92

43. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 94

44. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 96

45. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 98

46. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 100

47. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 102

48. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 104

49. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 106

50. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 108

51. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 110

52. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 112

53. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 114

54. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 116

55. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 118

56. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 120

57. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 122

58. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 124

59. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 126

60. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 128

61. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 130

62. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 132

63. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 134

64. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 136

65. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 138

66. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 140

67. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 142

68. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 144

69. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 146

70. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 148

71. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 150

72. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 152

73. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 154

74. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 156

75. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 158

76. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 160

77. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 162

78. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 164

79. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 166

80. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 168

81. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 170

82. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 172

83. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 174

84. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 176

85. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 178

86. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 180

87. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 182

88. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 184

89. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 186

90. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 188

91. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 190

92. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 192

93. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 194

94. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 196

95. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 198

96. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 200

97. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 202

98. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 204

99. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 206

100. THE CHURCHES OF THE SEVENTH DAY 208

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. INTRODUCTION	1
II. THE FAITH WHICH JUSTIFIES AND SAVES	12
III. THE ONENESS OF ALL TRUE BELIEVERS	26
IV. THE PREVALENCE OF ERROR IN THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH TODAY	37
V. ERROR CANNOT BE CONDOMED	48
VI. SEPARATION FROM ERRORISTS	68
VII. THE FELLOWSHIP OF CHRISTIANS WITH CHRISTIANS	89
VIII. CHURCH FELLOWSHIP IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE SCRIPTURES	110
BIBLIOGRAPHY	135

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

What does it mean to be "all one in Christ Jesus?"¹

The history of the Christian Church from the first to the twentieth century could be written in terms of its struggle to maintain, to demonstrate, or to realise this fundamental unity² between the Lord Jesus Christ and His body, the Christian Church, besought of God the Father by Him in His great high-priestly prayer,³ and declared above by St. Paul. But is this oneness an earthly or a spiritual oneness? Is it a oneness to be manifest in this life and world or only hereafter? Is it a oneness which can exist despite or in spite of divisions, frictions, and refusal of fellowship between Christians? Or is it a oneness which requires a certain and reasonable external unity as its fruit, if it is to be genuine, and if so what is to be the nature of this external unity?

These questions are being asked by more and more Christians. That they constitute the burden of the modern ecumenical movement is illustrated by the theme of the North

¹Gal. 3:28.

²Ruth Rouse and Stephen Charles Neill, editors, A History of the Ecumenical Movement, 1517-1948 (S.F.C.K.: London, 1954) p. 27.

³John 17:21.

American Conference on Faith and Order on behalf of the World Council of Churches (1957), which was "The Nature of the Unity We Seek."⁴

The New Testament knows only one church, and that church is the body of Christ, the communion of saints, the ecclesia, the elect. Where this church was to be found we are also told. There was the church at Jerusalem, at Antioch, at Babylon, the Church of Laodicea, of Sardis, the church in Smyrna, in Pergamos, even the church in Nymphas' house,⁵ to mention some. However, already in apostolic times contentions and divisions developed in the church, so that some said they were of Paul, others of Apollos, still others of Cephas,⁶ and false teachers began to trouble and split the church.⁷ The conflict with the Judaisers and with other errorists and heretics called forth from the apostles strong denunciation of those who forsook the doctrine and faith they had received.⁸ With the advent of Gnosticism and its denial of the human nature of Christ, there was called forth from St. John the command to cease all fellowship with such

⁴Paul S. Minear, editor, The Nature of the Unity We Seek (St. Louis: The Bethany Press, c. 1958).

⁵Col. 4:15.

⁶1 Cor. 3:4, 21.

⁷Gal. 2:12, 13.

⁸Gal. 1:8; Rom. 16:17.

as abide not in the doctrine of Christ, for they are deceivers and antichrists.⁹

To heal some of the controversies which later rent the church, there were convened the four great ecumenical councils of Nicea (I), 325, Constantinople (I), 381, Ephesus, 431, and Chalcedon, 451, followed later by Constantinople (II), 553, Constantinople (III), 680, and Nicea (II), 787. At the Council of Nicea many of the bishops of the church were present, some of them bearing the scars of persecution. The emperor Constantine, who convened the council, himself was present. He hoped that if the decisions of this council were accepted universally, that a united church would then help cement together his unwieldy empire. But in this he was bitterly disappointed. Though some historians contend that never before or after was the church at large more effectively and completely one than during this period, 313-451,¹⁰ in reality the church never knew true unity. In the second century there was the Montanist and Apollinarian controversies, followed by the Novatian in the third century, and the Donatist and Arian in the fourth century. The actual state of affairs in the early church, therefore, was quite contrary to the popular ecumenical belief that before Constantine the unity of the church was a unity of faith, worship and spirit. Unable to achieve a unity of faith the

⁹II John 7f.

¹⁰Rouse and Neill, op. cit., p. 9.

emphasis was shifted to an attempted unity of organization. Both orthodox and heretic within the external church agreed that the church of Jesus Christ should be one and world-wide. Basil the Great affirmed that "our faith is not one thing at Seleucia, another at Constantinople, another at Zela, another at Rome . . . but one and the same everywhere."¹¹ In the ceaseless effort to effect an apostolic unity within the church, most of the ecumenical methods operative today were tried. The best that was attained was a kind of organizational unity under Constantine.

In the fifth century the seeds of the nationalistic churches were sown, the so-called "Lesser" Churches of the East, the Coptic, Ethiopian, Syrian and Assyrian, which today are either "monophysite" or "Nestorian." (Earlier there was the Armenian Church). Then came the split between the Greek and Latin churches, resulting in a permanent schism between East and West. All efforts to heal this breach up to the present time have been of no avail. However, the Roman Church of the west by stringent discipline was so successful in suppressing heresy that even as late as the fourteenth century the outward unity of the church was little disturbed by opposing minority groups within the Roman Church. But the moral and spiritual corruption of that church called forth the Reformation. The return on the part

¹¹Ibid., p. 11.

of the Reformers to the Scriptures, while it released Christendom from the stranglehold of Rome resulted, alas, in many more divisions within western Christendom. This divided state of the church has developed to its inevitable conclusion, so that in America, the home of the sects, there are now recognisable some 250 religious groups.

Side by side with the fragmentation of Christendom there has been, nevertheless, a deep awareness that the church of Jesus Christ is one. This essential oneness has been apparent in the common byan heritage of the church, in its common goal--the reclaiming of the lost, and the bringing of the heathen into the kingdom of God, as well as in its common stand against many flagrant social evils.

Church leaders of every age have realised the incompatibility of the Scripture-attested oneness of the Christian faith with the divided state of Christendom. Luther too, for whom truth was far more important than external unity, was deeply concerned and grieved over the disruptions within the Christian Church. In his Large Catechism he expresses his deep conviction concerning the "Only Holy Catholic Church" thus:

I believe that there is upon earth a little holy group and congregation of pure saints, under one head, even Christ, called together by the Holy Ghost in one faith, one mind, and understanding with manifold gifts, yet agreeing in love, without sects or schisms. I am also a part and member of the same, a sharer and joint owner of all the goods it possesses, brought to it and incorporated into it by the Holy Ghost by having heard and continuing to hear the Word of God, which is the

beginning of entering it.¹² Luther and his co-workers earnestly recommended free general Christian councils, which would be truly representative and be independent of papal dictation, so that unity, especially concerning the Gospel and the Sacraments, might be achieved. That, for example, was the purpose of the famous Marburg Colloquy of 1529 with Zwingli.

Since the time of the Reformation many carefully prepared plans for the unification of the church have been conceived. Most notable were Samuel S. Schumucker's proposals in the 1820's for "An Apostolic Protestant Church of America," based on a thorough exposition of the desirability of church union.¹³ Whole movements have been inaugurated to achieve unity, movements which ironically crystallised themselves into new denominations, as was typified by the Campbellite movement. There were also such carefully prepared proposals as the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral of the 1880's submitted by the Anglican Communion.¹⁴ However, it remained for such adventures of faith as the Y.M.C.A. and the Y.W.C.A., the Christian Student's Association, and the various national and international Bible and Missionary Societies to inaugurate the present world-wide ecumenical movements of the International Council of Churches and the World Council

¹²Triglot Concordia (St. Louis, Mo.: Concordia Publishing House, 1921), p. 691.

¹³Rouse and Neill, op. cit., p. 245.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 264.

of Churches. Unfortunately, the ultimate aim of the great current ecumenical movements, which are having such world-wide repercussions on the Christian Church, is not an honest effort to establish, to purify, and to consolidate the church of Jesus Christ on the basis of the truth as revealed in the Scriptures. Modern ecumenism tends to overlook doctrinal disagreement for the sake of unity. Its prime concern is to prepare the way for the purported, but scripturally unwarranted, establishment of the kingdom of God upon the earth. In accordance with this mistaken concept of the future of the church upon the earth, the ecumenical movements, rather than pass judgment or censorship upon heresy and doctrinal aberrations, solicit from every church its contribution. This fundamental premise gives to every errorist, heretic, schismatic or sectarian the same right and the same authority as the true teachers of the church, who continue in Christ's Word. It is this spirit of unionism, giving to error the same right as truth, and tolerating error alongside of truth, that is awakening an ever stronger, confessional attitude on the part of those who realize that it is the Lord alone who is the Head of His Church, and that it is the commandments of God alone which are to be taught, believed and obeyed.

However, this widening estrangement between ecumenism and confessionalism, instead of lessening, is increasing the problem of broken Christian Fellowship and a divided Christendom. But now, more than ever before both times and

circumstances demand a united Christendom. Modern transport and communication have not only brought the furthest nations so close together, but social conditions have brought the individuals of every community into such close contact that for Christians to be wrangling with each other and to refuse to fellowship with each other seems an incongruity which makes a mockery of our common faith in a common Lord. The pressing need for joint Christian action in dealing with the problems of war, civilian annihilation, global suicide, mass migration, relief in times of national disaster, to mention but a few instances, is so evident as to require the most earnest effort to bridge the present impasse. While the evident benefit from joint action in the rapidly expanding fields of home and foreign missions, in the challenge confronting Christian education on every level, in the call for a unanimous moral judgment on such national and international problems as divorce, delinquency, alcoholism, gambling, not to overlook tradeunionism, strikes, socialism and communism, surely requires the attention not only of those who seek union in Christendom without unity, but also the most earnest concern and concerted effort on the part of confessional Christians. Or shall we throw up our hands in despair and say that nothing can be done, since the church militant is too hopelessly bogged down by heresy, perversion and schism?

Much to the chagrin of most Reformed churches the confessional Lutherans--in particular the Missouri Lutheran

Church--together with the Southern Baptist Church of America have stood aloof from the ecumenical movement. Yet within our confessional Lutheran churches there has arisen the awareness both of the desirability and the deep necessity of trying to achieve a God-pleasing union of those churches which profess a common doctrinal background. In America there were long negotiations between the various Lutheran Synods resulting in the drawing up and adoption of a "Doctrinal Affirmation and Brief Statement." In Australia intersynodical negotiations between the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Australia and the United Evangelical Lutheran Church in Australia, which recommenced in 1941 by an exchange of statements on the "Minimum Requirements for Church Fellowship," have resulted in the joint adoption of a comprehensive "Theses of Agreement." Despite this significant achievement, the two Australian Lutheran Churches are unable to agree as to what constitutes sinful unionism with reference to cooperation in sacris and cooperation in externis. Despite almost complete and unprecedented doctrinal agreement, de iure if not de facto, the negotiations have broken down on such problems as membership in the Lutheran World Federation, and joint mission work in New Guinea under the proposed "Lutheran Church New Guinea."

The desirability not only of cooperation in externals, but of altar and pulpit fellowship between churches of the same confession is so self-evident as to be obvious. But the question must be asked: "At what cost?" "Is church

union worth the compromising of the truth?" The ecumenical movement generally has as its goal unity, without defining the truth on which this unity is to be based. The confessional goal is the preservation of the truth, no matter what the cost. The confessional conviction is that the truth will of itself unite in the truest sense those who possess it and cling to it.

However, the problem arises. How far must we make the confession of the truth divisive of our fellowship in Christ? Is it possible to expect and require of every Christian that he agrees with us and we with him in every point of doctrine and practice? Is there a certain fundamental position, which if honestly endorsed, is as much as can be expected in this world of diversified human character, mental grasp, environment and outlook? Is Christian Fellowship possible without full agreement in all doctrine? Can Christian Fellowship be practised along-side of confessional witness? Does confessional witness to the truth always, inevitably and completely require separation? Will not confessionalism if logically endorsed and universally adopted lead inevitably to separatism, to individualism, and almost to as many different Christian "communions" as there are Christians?

The earthly church is confronted by Scylla and Charybdis. On the one hand there is being advocated union at any cost. On the other hand there is the danger of severe individualism and a type of narrow confessionalism, which denies

the hand of our Christian Fellowship to all except those who are in complete accord. Both extremes seem to be offensive to the true Christian conscience and disastrous for the church at large.

To endeavor to bring scriptural clarification on this vexing problem and to restate some of the basic principles in such a way that they may throw light on our path as we journey the troubled waters of inter-church negotiations is the purpose of this paper.

CHAPTER II

THE FAITH WHICH JUSTIFIES AND SAVES

The goal of the Christian faith is citizenship in the kingdom of heaven and eternal life with God. What this kingdom of heaven is Scripture clearly teaches us. With everything about to collapse around Him, with His earthly ministry a seeming failure, with His friends having forsaken Him, with His own nation turned against Him and with death on the cross only a few hours off, the Saviour without the slightest trace of fear or doubt simply, but categorically affirmed: "My kingdom is not of this world: if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight . . . but now is my kingdom not from hence."¹ That this kingdom was not something which could be sighted or pin-pointed by human observation, He, the Son of God, made quite clear: "The kingdom of God cometh not with observation."² That entrance into this kingdom required a change of heart, he unmistakably declared; "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God."³ That it was not a kingdom of sensual and earthly delights, St. Paul pointed out: "The kingdom of

¹John 18:36.

²Luke 17:20.

³John 3:3.

God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace and joy in the Holy Ghost."⁴ That it was not a Platonic or philosophical abstraction or theorising the same apostle demonstrated: "The kingdom of God is not in word, but in power."⁵ That it was a kingdom of another world and another state he conclusively affirmed: "Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; neither doth corruption inherit incorruption . . . for this corruption must put on incorruption and this mortal must put on immortality."⁶ The kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of God are therefore synonymous with the estate of eternal blessedness in the presence of God.

We become eligible for this kingdom of God, and receive the title of heirs to it, when the Holy Spirit awakens and arouses us to the knowledge of our sinful and utterly lost condition and bestows in our hearts a penitent trust in the atoning merit of the death of God's Son. Conversion, that is, a complete change of heart from unbelief to faith in Christ, from pride to penitence, from rebellion to submission, from hatred against God to love for Him, is different and distinct from a self-effected reformation of character and deeper than mere cessation from gross sin. Starr Daily, the thrice remanded convict, sinking slowly into unconsciousness in a dungeon, with his arms and legs blue and

⁴Romans 14:17.

⁵I Cor. 4:20.

⁶I Cor. 15:50.

swollen, and his veins and arteries enlarged and tight, was prepared to die rather than yield to the iron will of the prison deputy. Then something happened. The hatred of his heart was changed by Christ into love. His whole attitude to life was transformed. The exconvict was on the road to recovery, to rehabilitation, to Christ-inspired and Spirit-sanctified living.⁷ Conversion, whether it be immediate or gradual, though in God's sight we are either converted or not converted, we are either for Him or against Him, is more than a general, formal or historic knowledge of God and acquaintance with the Gospel. It is a personal acceptance of Him as God, and it implies complete willingness to follow Him in obedience and faith.

This faith in the heart is wrought by the miraculous power of the Holy Spirit through the means of grace. Faith in the Lord comes from the hearing of His Word. Because there is not always an immediate response to the Word, many Reformed and Calvinistic theologians have contended that the Holy Spirit converts directly. But since St. Paul asserts that "faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God,"⁸ it is evident that faith is quickened in the human heart by the power of God's Word of grace. The Alcoholics Anonymous testify over against the alcoholic that he cannot

⁷Starr Daily, Release (5th Edition, Evesham, Worsc.: Arthur James), p. 53.

⁸Romans 10:17.

obtain release from the curse of drink till he realises his own powerlessness to conquer this evil and has that "vital spiritual experience" whereby he comes to know the power and help of God in his life.⁹ So true conversion is always such a vital spiritual experience. It is something living and certain. Every true Christian knows the power of the Holy Spirit in his heart, as St. Paul asserts: "God hath sent forth the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying, Abba, Father."¹⁰ The relationship established with the Lord by conversion is not something vague or indefinite. "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me: And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand," declares Christ.¹¹ Accepting the Son of God's atonement in repentant faith makes the believer a member of the body of Christ, of the communion of saints, of the una sancta. The Lord knows those who are His, as many who cried, "Lord, Lord," but did not love Him, will realise on Judgment Day, when He dismisses them with the rebuke; "I never knew you: depart from Me ye that work iniquity."¹² And the Christian knows when he is the Lord's, as Peter Marshall graphically

⁹Alcoholics Anonymous (Kingswood, Surrey: The World's Work [1913] on behalf of Alcoholics Anonymous), pp. 35,37ff.

¹⁰Galatians 4:6.

¹¹John 10:27-28.

¹²Matthew 7:23.

preached:

I know that I am a Christian. Now on this point, there need be, and indeed can be no doubt or hesitation. One either is a Christian--or one is not. One either is a believer--or one is not When someone asks you if you are married, there is no hedging or uncertainty. You either are--or you are not. You are in no doubt concerning your citizenship. You either are a citizen of the land in which you live--or you are not. There is no possibility of equivocation. So, it is not humility or piety to say that you are "trying to be a Christian" . . . or that you "hope you are a Christian" Either you have given your life to Christ and asked Him to be your Master, or you are still trying to run your own life. Either you have promised to obey Christ in all things, or self ego, is still at the centre and at the helm.¹³

This coming to know Christ in faith is not human choice or striving,¹⁴ but by God's gracious election, for "as many as were ordained to eternal life believed."¹⁵

The Lord receives His own into His kingdom of grace through baptism, which is the "washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost."¹⁶ Baptism is the normal method of entrance into the kingdom of God. It is the God-ordained entry, because He in His Word has prescribed this sacrament,¹⁷ and has given His certain promise: "He that believeth and is baptised shall be saved."¹⁸ Only unbelief can

¹³Peter Marshall, Mr. Jones, Meet the Master (Reprint; London: Peter Davies, 1955), p. 24.

¹⁴John 1:13.

¹⁵Acts 13:48.

¹⁶Titus 3:5.

¹⁷Matthew 28:19.

¹⁸Mark 16:16.

nullify God's promise, and destroy the efficacy of baptism. By far the majority of those who are God's children, have been received into the kingdom of God, and have become the temples of the Holy Spirit by their baptism in infancy, even if only later they came to understand its significance, and even if only later the struggle between the flesh and the spirit came to its crisis and the battle was won by the power of God's grace. Luther clarified this matter of the efficacy of Holy Baptism especially for the young--a matter so vehemently disputed by the Baptists--in his own inimitable way:

If the baptism of children were nothing, then certainly there would not be a single person on earth who would truly speak a single word about Christ (ie. a Christian). But since Christ most certainly bestows the Holy Spirit (and thus confirms baptism), for Bernard, Bonaventura, Gerson, and John Huss and the Spirit, because this is God's work, believe therefore that infant baptism is true. How do you know this? I see the wonderful works of God, I see that He has sanctified many and given them the Holy Spirit¹⁹

The redemption of the cross of which the Christian becomes partaker through Baptism is sealed to him as often as he desires it in the second sacrament, the Sacrament of the Altar, as the words and promises of Christ declare: "Take, eat; this is my body Drink ye all of it; for this is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins,"²⁰ and again: "This do ye, as

¹⁹Luther's Works (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, c. 1959) Vol. 51, 186.

²⁰Matthew 26:26-28.

oft as ye drink it, in remembrance of me."²¹

This faith, which is such a certain, sure thing, may, nevertheless be very frail. But like the life of a new born infant, no matter how easily it could be extinguished, it is still real and certain. It is something wrought by the Holy Spirit. It is the trusting confidence which accepts and believes as true the certain promises of God in Christ. Very little else in Scripture may or need be understood. The knowledge of God's Word may be negligible, imperfect and hazy. Just as a little infant, looking about it, sees everything in the room yet comprehends so little, so many new born babes in Christ can be aware of the fact that God has and is speaking to them through the Scriptures, and that the Scriptures are His Word, and yet comprehend very little of it. This, of course, is not to be the final condition of a Christian, nor can a Christian claim "imperfect" knowledge of the Scriptures to cover up wilful perversion of the Scriptures, transgression of their clear injunctions, or stubborn rejection of their evident ordinances and implications. But as new born babes, who desire the sincere milk of the Word, Christians are to grow by the same,²² and come to perfect manhood, even to the stature of the fulness of Christ.²³

²¹Cor. 11:25.

²²I Peter 2:2.

²³Ephesians 4:13.

Another aspect of saving faith is that it can and quite often evidently does exist in the hearts of those who hold erroneous concepts concerning Christian doctrine and life, as is exemplified by Adventists, Buchmanites, Roman Catholics, Salvationists, yes, amongst all the various denominations and "isms" of Christendom. To require perfect and full knowledge of God's revealed truth for acceptance into the kingdom of God is to make entrance into the same conditional upon human merit. The very suggestion of such a condition nullifies the basic and fundamental concept of the kingdom of grace, by which the Saviour has not come to condemn but to save sinners, and declares "whosoever believeth in Him shall not perish, but have everlasting life."²⁴ Further, if complete knowledge and true understanding of all Christian doctrine were a pre-requisite for saving faith, salvation would be an impossibility for any mortal, for even the most learned and correctly indoctrinated divine knows only in part.²⁵ There are a surprising number of those, who by their confession evidently believe in Christ, yet who nevertheless are not well-informed and properly indoctrinated Christians. Many clergymen only partly understand the truths of God's Word and in teaching and practise often reveal gross ignorance and misunderstanding of important and even basic scriptural tenets, such as, for example

²⁴John 3:16.

²⁵I Cor. 13:9.

the efficacy of Holy Baptism and the purpose of the doctrine of Election. Because of the great diversity of background and outlook amongst Christians, of the large number of institutions of religious training, of the great variety of religious opinions and of the almost infinite variety of definition of the doctrines of Scripture, it is not surprising that few ministers, preachers and teachers of the Gospel are correctly indoctrinated. If they do not understand the truth clearly and correctly, their people will not be correctly taught. Nevertheless, we know that wherever the Gospel is proclaimed and the Sacraments are celebrated, even in the church of the Antichrist, there some hearts are believing the Gospel and are being reclaimed by Christ.

It is not so difficult to understand that saving faith is existent despite lack of complete knowledge of the Scriptures, but what is harder to comprehend is the possibility of saving faith continuing in the heart of those who keep on adhering to erroneous opinions and false teachings. On the one hand, there is the "happy inconsistency" of which Dr. F. Pieper frequently spoke,²⁶ whereby a theologian's personal faith is at variance with his published views. On the other hand, there is the weakness of human nature, the perversity and corruptness of the carnal mind, the objections of unbelief, the littleness of faith, and wilful

²⁶Francis Pieper, Christian Dogmatics (St. Louis: Concordia, c.1950). I, 72, 114.

resistance against the truth. There is the tremendous influence of early training and religious bias, the unfortunate effect of overemphasis, the lack of a comprehensive view--"the analogy of faith,"²⁷ and the deficiencies and inadequacies of spiritual enlightenment. All these situations are evident as we ponder the spiritual status of many who in apparent sincerity bear and confess the name of Christ. It must be conceded therefore that saving faith is possible despite doctrinal errors, just as saving faith is possible despite the persistent sins of weakness on the part of the flesh. But it must also be emphasised that erroneous conceptions militate against saving faith, harm it and gravely endanger it. And the warning must be given that while the soul will be saved, the consequences of error can bring about a tragic loss in the life and work of a Christian, as St. Paul so graphically writes in connection with those who build on the foundation of Jesus Christ--gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble.

Every man's work shall be made manifest: for the day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try every man's work of what sort it is. If any man's work abide . . . he shall receive a reward. If any man's work shall be burned, he shall suffer loss: but he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire.²⁸

Just as living in and after the flesh will bring death and

²⁷Romans 12:6.

²⁸I Cor. 3:12-15.

condemnation,²⁹ so pernicious adherence to error against better knowledge, also in non-fundamental doctrines, can completely annul saving faith. The Saviour clearly brings out the seriousness of continuance in and proclamation of error even in the most minor matters of doctrine when He warns: "Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven" ³⁰

While it can be a much debated theological question as to when continuance in error and sin destroy saving faith,³¹ it is evident that saving faith is impossible when a person is ignorant of the true God, of Christ, the Son of God, of the meaning of sin and its guilt, of the Saviour's atonement and of the hope of the resurrection. St. Paul asks: "How then shall they call on him in whom they have

²⁹Romans 8:16.

³⁰Matthew 5:19.

³¹In the September Issue (1959) of "Eternity" (Philadelphia: Evangelical Foundation Incorporated, c.1959), p. 13, there appeared a "No" and "Yes" column on the question: "Must Christ be Lord to be Saviour?" Dr. Everett F. Harrison, professor of New Testament at Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, Calif. contending "No," stated that if we make submission to the Lordship of Christ essential to salvation we make our salvation to be by works, we negate the believer's security and we run counter to clear scriptural teaching. Dr. John R. Stott, rector of All Soul's Church, London, contending "Yes," stated that a faith that does not include submission to the Lordship of Christ is an incomplete faith. When any man comes to Christ for rest, he must also take Christ's yoke as Scripture teaches.

not believed? and how shall they believe on him of whom they have not heard?"³² It is also evident that when a person comes to know and understand such fundamental doctrines as the Trinity, the Atonement and the Resurrection, and then denies them, that he is not and cannot be a disciple of the Lord, and that he has no saving faith. If a person from ignorance or from mistaken prejudices and bias denies such important doctrines as Baptism, the Scriptures as the Word of God, the Means of Grace, the Law and the Gospel, there is something wrong with his faith, but he may still have saving faith. But he cannot have saving faith if he denies or fails to believe or be aware of the object of saving faith.

Saving faith, while it is dependent on the knowledge of the fundamental truths of Christianity, is however, not dependent on external church connections. Where the Scriptures are taught and the Sacraments are administered in their purity, there the Holy Spirit is working and true faith is being quickened in the heart and sinners are being converted, justified and sanctified. This is God's promise "My word . . . shall not return unto me void."³³ Where, however, the Gospel is seldom proclaimed, where it is obscured by the social Gospel, where it is entrammelled by human ordinances, or undermined by rationalistic cavillings, there it is difficult for the seed of the Word to produce

³²Romans 3:16.

³³Isaiah 55:11.

saving faith. Nevertheless, it must be maintained that wherever the Gospel is proclaimed and the Sacraments are administered, there will be some believers. In consequence it must be asserted that there are true children of God in every Christian denomination.

It is this faith which trusts completely in Christ Jesus as Saviour which gives membership in the una sancta, the one holy Christian Church and makes men heirs of the kingdom of heaven. Those who have come to such faith are the elect of God, chosen before the foundation of the world, called by the Holy Spirit, justified by His grace, and preserved to eternal life by His power. This membership in the una sancta is neither dependent on good works nor on depth and completeness of Christian knowledge, but solely on that faith which accepts the promises and mercy of God in Christ. Saving faith is that act whereby a sinner is changed in his heart, born anew by the Spirit of God through the water and the Word, so that he looks upon Christ in faith, even as the Israelites looked upon the brazen serpent of Moses, and in believing were healed of the poisonous bites.³⁴ So the sinner is cleansed and justified by his faith in the atonement of Christ, according to the promises of the Gospel.³⁵

³⁴Numbers 21:6-9.

³⁵John 3:16.

This is the faith which justifies and saves. It is no more and no less. Any addition is of the law. Any protestation of human merit or achievement by way of sanctification or better understanding as being an indispensable adjunct to saving faith, disqualifies a person from salvation by grace through faith, even as the Scriptures say: "By grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works" ³⁶ and again, "Christ is become of none effect unto you, whosoever of you are justified by the law; ye are fallen from grace." ³⁷

³⁶Ephesians 2:8-9.

³⁷Galatians 5:4.

CHAPTER III

THE ONENESS OF ALL TRUE BELIEVERS

The prime purpose of the Saviour's earthly ministry was to lay the foundations for the establishment of the eternal kingdom of heaven, the kingdom of God. After He had been baptised and His heavenly Father had confirmed His mission, Jesus came to Galilee preaching: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel."¹ For the coming of this kingdom He taught His disciples to pray.² Already in their own life time its basic nature would be manifest, for in connection with His coming in the glory of His Father, the Saviour made that puzzling, but deeply significant declaration: "Verily I say unto you, There be some standing here, which shall not taste death, till they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom."³ By His twofold command: "Be converted" and "Believe the Gospel" the Lord makes evident that this new transcendent reality of the kingdom of heaven must be laid hold of by faith and by the radical transformation of our relationship to God.⁴ So effective and so spiritually

¹Mark 1:14.

²Luke 11:2.

³Matthew 16:28.

⁴Anders Nygren, editor, This is the Church (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, c. 1952), p. 29.

stirring was the preaching of John the Baptist as he called upon Israel to repent in preparation for the kingdom of heaven that Jesus exclaimed: "From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffered violence, and the violent take it by force."⁵

The Church which the Lord came to establish by the offering up of Himself for sin, and against which the gates of hell shall not prevail, was the kingdom of God in its earthly form as the kingdom of grace, the representation in this world and age of that which is to come. This Church was and is His body.⁶ Those in whose hearts repentance and saving faith have been wrought by the power of the Holy Spirit through the Word and the Sacraments have become members of His body. He is their Head, and they are His members. He is the Vine. They are the branches. They cannot live apart from Him, nor can they do anything without Him. They live alone by the power of His grace,⁷ even as the believers under the Old Testament covenant lived "by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God,"⁸ and drank

⁵Matthew 11:12.

⁶In the opening chapters of "This is the Church" Anders Nygren and Anton Fridrichsen carefully investigate what is meant by the "Church" as the Corpus-Christi and the relationship of the church to the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven.

⁷John 15:1-6.

⁸Deuteronomy 8:3.

of that same spiritual Rock which was Christ.⁹ Hereafter they would reign in His eternal kingdom as kings and priests. There they would behold His glory, they would be sustained by His power, they would be fed from His throne, they would be cheered by His presence, they would be unspeakably happy, confirmed in their state of everlasting blessedness. In the regeneration, when the Son of Man will sit upon the throne of His glory, then those early disciples who were closest to Him, when He came to establish His kingdom, would sit upon twelve thrones (the place of Judas being undoubtedly taken by Paul), and they would judge the twelve tribes of Israel. Thus the Lord in an earthly picture and in the language of this world described for His twelve disciples the consummation of the kingdom of heaven.¹⁰

But while it was and is in this world, the New Testament Church, which the Lord had come to establish, which He bought with His own blood, and which the Holy Spirit is gathering together by His efficacious working through the means of grace, was not to be an idealistic state of the believers, but a functioning, active body, a missionary church,¹¹ local, visible and yet invisible.¹² All who.

⁹I Cor. 10:4.

¹⁰Matthew 19:28.

¹¹Nygren, op. cit., p. 42.

¹²It is noteworthy that the distinction we are obliged to make between the visible and the invisible church for doctrinal clarity, is not made in the Scriptures.

believe in the Lord of glory, the Saviour of sinners, are members of this glorious ecclesia, members here in the kingdom of grace, and joint heirs of the kingdom of glory. Being members of His body they partake of a mystic, supernatural, spiritual, yet true and real oneness. They are joined together into one body, for through their faith in Him and acceptance of Him as Saviour and Lord, they have become "members of His body, of His flesh, and of His bones."¹³ To help us understand the mystery of the union between the Lord and those who believe in Him, His Church, the apostle Paul compares it with the union of a husband and wife in marriage, who joined together become "one flesh."

This New Testament Church is of one body and one Spirit. It has been called and brought together by the one hope--Christ's reconciliation of God and man, and God's acceptance of this propitiatory sacrifice of His Son by raising Him from the dead. It has one Lord, one faith, one baptism. It has one God, and one Father, who is above all and through all and in all.¹⁴

This essential oneness of all believers in Christ is of God and from God. As in the first Adam, who sinned, the whole redeemed race is equally a unity. In Christ, the Christians, though many are "one man." The masculine "eis,"

The Scriptures know the only one church.

¹³Ephesians 5:30.

¹⁴Ephesians 4:4-6.

not the neuter "en" of Galatians 3:28 gives us this vivid concept of all believers through their union by faith in Christ becoming "one person." Again, in the metaphor of the Building whereas in I Cor. 3:11 Jesus Christ is the foundation, in Ephesians 2:19-32 Jesus Christ is the chief corner stone and the apostles and prophets are the foundation, yet "the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord," we see the essential oneness of the Church. Even more clearly and incontrovertibly does the apostle establish this essential, basic oneness of the New Testament Church in I Cor. 12, where he uses the analogy of the body. The body is one. It has many members. But as the members of that one body, though many, being members, are one body--so is Christ. If they were not members, where would be the body? "But now are they many members, yet one body." The consummation of this unity is brought out by the same apostle in the first chapter of the Epistle to the Ephesians where he states that the very purpose of God, yes, the good pleasure of His will is in the fulness of time to "gather together in one all things in Christ." Everything in creation and redemption reveals the exceeding greatness of God's power and His unsearchable wisdom, when He raised Christ from the dead, set Him at His own right hand, and "put all things under His feet so that He might be the head over all things to the church, which is His body,

the fulness of Him that filleth all in all."¹⁵

The unity of the Church is a unity which knows neither sex nor age, neither color nor race, neither boundary nor time.¹⁶ It is a unity of which every child of God becomes a partaker because of his faith in the Lord as Lord and Saviour. It is not dependent on their merit or demerit, on their knowledge or ignorance, on their spiritual strength or the weakness of the flesh. The children of God become one by their faith in the Lord. No man makes them one. No man can destroy their oneness in the Lord. It is not a unity in orthodoxy, but an organic and vital unity in the body of Christ, as Dr. Brux contended in his investigation of the Missouri Lutheran position with respect to prayer-fellowship with Christians of other denominations.¹⁷ It is a mysterious unity beyond the power of human description, so that St. Paul strains language in his effort to describe it effectively.¹⁸ But although mystical, it is an actual and real unity. It is a unity which embraces believers of both Covenants, the Old as well as the New Testament. It is a unity which reflects and is incorporated in the unity which

¹⁵Ephesians 1:22.

¹⁶Galatians 3:28.

¹⁷Adolph A. Brux, Christian Prayer-Fellowship and Unionism (Wisconsin: Pamphlet, 1935), p. 63.

¹⁸F. H. Knubel, Church Unity (Philadelphia: United Lutheran, c. 1936), p. 34.

exists between the Father and the Son.¹⁹ It is the unity of Christian fellowship in the Lord, which is experienced before it is defined or explained.²⁰

This oneness of spirit the early disciples experienced in a most wonderful manner, as after Pentecost they all continued with one accord in prayer, in breaking of bread, in fellowship, in the mutual sharing of earthly goods, in gladness and singleness of heart.²¹ This unity was in Christ brought about by their unreserved and wholehearted acceptance of the apostles' doctrine. This deep unity and singleness of heart is still the not-infrequent experience of newly founded congregations. It is the common experience when a Christian meets a fellow-Christian, and in mutual discussion about their common Saviour they become aware of their oneness in Him. It is the experience every soul-winner has when his convert first manifests his Christian faith. There are few joys like this joy of oneness in the Lord. From it stems the desire for continued fellowship in the Lord, for further discussions about Him and His Word, and for joint-prayer to Him. From it there develops quite naturally the desire on the part of Christians to gather together for worship and mutual edification and encourage-

¹⁹John 17:21.

²⁰Ruth Rouse and Stephen Charles Neill, editors, A History of the Ecumenical Movement, 1517-1948 (London: S.P.C.K., 1954), p. 3.

²¹Acts 2:42-47.

ment.²² This is the motivating power behind all congregational, ecclesiastical and synodical organisation. This is the dynamic of all true ecumenism.

This unity of the spirit St. Paul had the Ephesians earnestly to endeavor to maintain.²³ They could lose it. They could destroy it. It was not without reason that the Lord in His great high-priestly prayer besought of His Father that His disciples might be one as He and His Father were one.²⁴ He foresaw all that would come into His Church, whereby believer would be set against believer--strife, wranglings, jealousies, contentions, heresies, perversions, even bloodshed, especially in connection with the bitter opposition of the Antichrist.²⁵

To put anything in the way of Christians fellowship

²² Hebrews 10:25.

²³ Ephesians 4:3.

²⁴ John 17:21. Revelations 13:7, 17:6.

²⁵ Though this unity for which Christ prayed is not to be interpreted as an organisational or external unity of the Christian Church, but a deeper, spiritual unity, for it includes all believers of every age yet how much offense would have been avoided and how much would not the cause of the kingdom of God have been advanced had all Christ's brethren dwelt and worked together in unity? Yet God in His power and infinite wisdom is using even the disunity of Christendom to further the building of the kingdom of grace. The very divisions within the external church is a constant challenge to every Christian earnestly and continually to examine his own position in the light of God's Word, and is productive of a certain healthy, competitive spirit.

with Christians is an affront to our common Saviour. Likewise, to hinder fellowship between Christian groups, who in sincerity are seeking the Lord is a true offence, a scandalon. To set up barriers where they don't or need not exist is schismatical. The conscience of western Christian civilisation has become dulled to this offence because of age-long barriers, bias and prejudice, whereby we know or think we know too well the attitudes and beliefs of Christians of denominations other than our own. But most missionaries to the heathen find themselves confronted by this touch stone of the faith. Native converts desire the fellowship of other native converts. The church at home is certainly conscience-bound to inform its native converts of the erroneous teachings and practices of other denominations, and warn them against such perversions of the truth, as well as against fellowship with those who are adherents of error. Nevertheless, it is not always easy for Lutheran native converts, for example, to understand why they should not and cannot have Christian fellowship with fellow native converts who have been brought to Christ by a Baptist or an Adventist missionary. There are a surprising number of people in our own communities, who in childlike simplicity argue the same way. "Why should not we Christians all be one?" they ask. And who will venture to deny it, for were not the first disciples all one? This demonstration of the unity of the spirit--be it in the spirit or of the Holy Spirit and of which we still get glimpses--is the vision of the oneness

which shall be all who are Christ's in the great hereafter, when all that has split and divided Christendom and rent asunder this unity in Christ is removed.

This unity of the church in Christ will indeed be manifest hereafter. But alas, it is something we can only hope for in faith, for as real and as factual as it is between Christians, that is, all who are true believers, it is so quickly obscured by the dust of the flesh, by petty wranglings, lovelessness, anger, selfishness, and ruthless ambition, by the grime of human speculations which depart from the clear and evident meaning of God's Word, by the dirt of carnal attitudes, narrow-mindedness, bigotry, intolerance and partisanship. Here we lose sight of this unity when confronted by the necessity of cleaving to the truth in the face of sometimes dear and respected friends, who for some incomprehensible reason prefer their own mistaken interpretations to the clear Scriptures. Here we are not able to walk with those whom we are not in agreement.²⁶ Here we must continue to confess all the truths of God's Word, even if it leads to separation.

This oneness of the spirit, of the building, of the body, this unity which God planned and for which Christ prayed, cannot be a physical oneness, of organisation such as crass ecumenists look for. Yet it is a oneness, which would manifest itself in unity, even in organisational

²⁶Amos 3:3.

unity, else it is self-contradictory. This is a oneness which here in the church militant is broken by the hypocrite and the errorist, but which hereafter in the church triumphant will truly unite all who are the Lord's. This is a oneness which will include every child of God from Adam and Eve, Abel, Enoch, righteous Noah, faithful Abraham, the patriarchs, Moses, the 7,000 in Israel, the prophets, the apostles, the early Christians, the saints of all ages on to the last person born before Judgment Day, who has been ordained to eternal life. This is the una sancta, the one holy Christian Church, which emerging from the church militant into the church triumphant, will be found to possess an organic unity with its head Christ, in which there will be no more any schisms, differences, deviations, or hypocrisies.

Though this unity will be manifest only hereafter, it is there now.

CHAPTER IV

THE PREVALENCE OF ERROR IN THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH TODAY

In the scriptural sense the Church is the universal body of all true believers, whose composition is known only to God. This universal body comprises the believers of the Old as well as of the New Testament. They have become members of Christ's body through their faith in His atonement. Being known only to the Lord it is called an invisible church, or the church in the strict sense, stricto dicta. Those who by grace through faith are members of this church shall inherit the kingdom of heaven.

This church is no platonic concept, but a living body, composed of those, who though physically dead are with the Lord forever, and of those, who still on this earth are by faith members of His body. The Scriptures do not distinguish between those who are members of the external church and those who are members of the una sancta. Those who are not members of the una sancta are not Christians. They are not the Lord's. They are not of His body, even though they may be on the local church records, and may classify themselves as Christians. Those who are of the Lord are members of His body. They are one with Him and one with each other, even though they may not be aware of each other here. From the scriptural point of view there is no need to distin-

guish between the visible and the invisible church, the church stricte dicta and the church large dicta, for there is no church, no ecclesia, no body of Christ outside of living, true faith in Him. There is and can be only communion of saints, una sancta.

From the human, practical and theological point of view, it seems to be desirable, even necessary to make this distinction, that we may understand truly and correctly how and where the Holy Spirit is at work, and how and under what conditions He gathers together the believers, as far as that is possible in accordance with God's self-relationship.¹ The church does not come into existence through the fact that some or many like-minded people unite themselves in a common organisation. The Church is given in and with Christ, His will, and His Holy Spirit.² The church is to be found where the true Word of God is proclaimed and the Sacraments are duly administered in accordance with Christ's command.³ Wherever Christians gather together for the hearing of this Word and the celebration of the Sacraments there is a local church. Wherever people of a certain persuasion and conviction organise themselves into a group (church), there is a

¹Compare John 3:8 with Romans 10:13-17 and II Cor. 6:1-2.

²Anders Nygren, editor, This is the Church (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, c. 1952), p. 17.

³Clarence Tucker Craig, The One Church in the Light of the New Testament (London: Epworth Press, c. 1952), p. 38, quotes Luther and the Reformers to prove that the church is a visible institution with definite, visible marks.

denomination. The universal church is not the sum total of all local churches and all denominations, but the sum total of all believers. Whoever has and keeps Christ's Word has Christ and the Father, and there is the church. The local church indeed pre-supposes the presence of believers in the Christ.⁴ But no local church and no denomination can define itself as the una sancta. Where the Word of God is faithfully proclaimed, and where the Sacraments are truly administered there is a true visible church, qualified, however, by the faith of the persons hearing that Word and partaking of the Sacraments. The true visible church cannot be theoretically designed either by purity of doctrine, or by sanctity of life, or by zeal of service, though these are all marks of the visible church, even as they are the marks of a true Christian faith in the individual. The true visible church is wherever there are by the gracious work of the Holy Spirit true believers in Christ, who adhere wholeheartedly and unreservedly to His Word of grace.

⁴Adolph A. Bruz, Christian Prayer-Fellowship and Unionism (Wisconsin: Pamphlet 1935), p. 77, writes: "When we speak of a Christian local congregation we always mean only the Christians or the believers that are found in the visible organisation. Also the local congregations consist of believers only All activities that are enjoined on the local congregations, for example, mutual instruction and admonition, exercise of church discipline, superintendence over doctrine and teachers, preaching the gospel, holy walk of life, etc., presuppose in every case faith in Christ. In other words, these activities presuppose membership in the invisible spiritual church and are an expression and manifestation of such membership." Dr. Bruz has here quoted from Dr. Pieper (l. c. III, 483 f.).

Every local church and every denomination is per se imperfect and impure. It contains hypocrites, unbelievers, impenitent sinners, and errorists. But we must distinguish between the local congregation and denomination, which adheres to the truth and the practice of the same, even though it has those within it who are not of Christ and in Christ, and the local congregation and denomination, which constitutes itself a distinct group because of doctrinal aberration or practice. A congregation or denomination which fosters officially and as a policy anything contrary to God's clear Word and command is to that extent disloyal to Him and unfaithful to Him, even though by a happy and fortunate inconsistency⁵ its members are members of Christ's body by their faith in Him.

As we look back through history we can see the reason for the existence of the multitude of denominations, sects, groups and persuasions. It is an over simplification to make all these groups branches of the Christian Church, for the two terms are not commensurate. It is a misrepresentation of the biblical position to seek the contribution of every denomination as a means for the obtaining of the sum total of Christian truth and understanding. There is one truth and there is only one way to understand the truth correctly, its own witness, even though its explanation and

⁵Francis Pieper, Christian Dogmatics (St. Louis: Concordia, c. 1950), I, 72, 114.

confession may be made in different terms, from different points of view and with different emphasis. Every deviation from the truth is error and must be labelled as such. The guilt of those in error will be analysed and elaborated in the next chapter. Here we are concerned with the cause, the reason for, and the background of error, in perversion of the truth, and of the many faulty, unscriptural practices which have crept into or arisen in the churches of the world today.

Practically every denomination and current religious movement has its roots in history. Indeed there is hardly an erroneous view or perverted practice existent in Christendom today, which was not known to the Christian Church of the first few centuries as Church History and the writings of the Early Fathers so clearly demonstrates. The historical development from an initial confession or deviation can be traced in practically every case. By way of illustration we can see, for example, how the whole Roman hierarchy developed from a mistaken understanding of the place good works occupy in the life of the believer. From the misinterpretation of St. James' declaration: "Ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only,"⁶ there subsequently developed the whole iniquitous system of the Antichrist, beginning with the doctrine of purgatory (593), the claim of temporal power (754), the celibacy

⁶James 2:24.

of the clergy (1075), the inquisition (1184), the sale of indulgences (1190), transubstantiation (1215), the adoration of the host (1226), the indexing of the Bible (1229), the papal bull on the unam sanctam (1303), the denial of the cup to the laity (1415), culminating in the official turning of the Roman Church at the Council of Trent from the authority of God's Word to the authority of tradition, and the condemnation and anathematisation of all those who teach justification and eternal life by faith alone (1545), and then proceeding inevitably to the invention of the scapulars (1600), the immaculate conception of Mary (1854), the condemnation of the separation of church and state (1864), the proclamation of papal infallibility (1870), the invalidation of marriages not performed by the Roman priest (1908), and in 1950 the dogma of Mary's assumption. Underlying every fresh perversion of the truth is the mistaken concept that good works are necessary to salvation, and that it is the responsibility of the church under its viceregent, the pope to show what constitutes good works.

Similarly, we can understand the cause for the basic split between East and West. Likewise, we could trace the reason for the development of the many schisms within Protestantism after the Reformation. There is the basic cleavage between Lutheran Reformed, the latter failing to submit to the complete authority of the Scriptures, to acknowledge the Word and Sacraments as the God-ordained means of

grace, to appreciate the mystery of the union of Christ's twofold nature, human and divine, to recognise the basic differences between Law and Gospel, to accept the mystery of conversion and election, and to distinguish between state and church. There are within the Reformed Churches the further cleavages denoted by the Calvinists, the Synergists, the Armenians, the Baptists, the Enthusiasts, the Pietists, the Holiness Groups, the Pentecostal bodies, the Rationalists, the Modernists, the Fundamentalists, and the various Evangelical associations. Each group claims to have the truth and to be following the truth, but when tested against the yardstick of God's Word, the discrepancies, deviations and aberrations are at once apparent. As serious as is this deviation from and unfaithfulness to God's Word, what is more serious is that those who espouse error, claim for themselves the right to their own interpretations and require that their fellow orthodox Christians recognise such deviations as being of and from the Spirit of God who is guiding into all truth. Thus error and wrong practice are placed on the same level as the truths of God's Word, and the right practice in accordance with it. This is the essence of the "modern" sin of unionism, giving to error an equal standing with truth.

Now, however, the problem arises that to a large extent the individual's faith and outlook reflects his environment and his early training. The instruction he has

been given sets the pattern of his thought and the colour of his convictions, patterns and colours which it is later very hard to alter, correct or change. The Romanists are always afraid that the evangelicals are going to overthrow sanctification. The Calvinists fear that the final sovereignty of God is being undermined by the Arminianists. The Baptists are convinced that sacramentalism is the only alternative to intelligent co-operation with God. The modernists fear biblical literalism. The enthusiasts believe that the absence of the direct working of the Holy Spirit leads to nominal Christianity and "dead" orthodoxy. The pietists and holiness groups are sure that entire sanctification must be the goal of Christianity, else the implications of the Gospel are denied. From this point of view we can understand the contentions of the ecumenists that each denomination has some treasure and that the point of view of individual Christians is of such merit as to be sought, realised and accepted as a significant contribution of Christian experience to world Christendom. But the ecumenical attitude goes too far when it gives to error the same standing as the truth, so that it is no longer God's Word which is the arbitrator and judge, but human appraisal and appreciation.

It is this environmental bias, this persistence in error, this overemphasis of one truth to the obscuring or even destruction of other important truths, and the determined adherence to doctrinal and practical aberrations which

cleaves Christendom into many groups and schisms. But while this is the explanation for a divided Christendom, and while every Christian today finds himself affected by this diversity of opinion, persuasion and conviction, need this state of affairs continue, and must the individual Christian resign himself to his denominational connections because of the tremendous influence of his environment, when for and according to the Scriptures there is only one church? No! This very situation is a challenge which the Lord is giving to His church, the true believers who constitute His body, the una sancta, to test every spirit and to examine themselves as to whether or not they are in the faith.⁷

Just because initially every person is a child of his environment it is necessary for every believer, especially for every teacher and minister in the church earnestly to examine his own position, and see whether he is in the faith and walking and teaching according to the faith. It is the individual believer's personal, Spirit-wrought faith in the Saviour, which makes him a member of Christ's kingdom, of the una sancta. His denominational connections may be in harmony or in disharmony with the una sancta. When a Christian finds that his denominational connections are not in accordance with the truths of the Scriptures, he must for the sake of the confession of the truth sever his associations with such a heterodox church. Since continuance in

⁷I John 4:1, II Cor. 13:5.

membership with any church implies assent to that church's teachings, a person who against his better knowledge of God's Word retains his membership in such a heterodox church endangers and eventually negates his membership in the una sancta.

Heterodox and erroneous practice can never advance the kingdom of God and build the una sancta. Yet it is apparent that God in His mercy still uses the power of His Word in heterodox and erring churches to build the una sancta. The Southern Baptists of America are very evangelical and are plugging hard at deeper indoctrination, that they are arousing in many a better appreciation of basic scriptural truth, even though they still adhere to some of the aberrations of the anabaptists. Something similar is seen in connection with the Adventists. Their realisation of the imminence of the Lord's return is provoking a great evangelical zeal and activity, though, alas it is spoiled by the leaven of sabbatarianism and chiliasm. This is true even of the papacy which has such a world-wide religious and moral influence. Despite the fact that it is still manifestly the church of the antichrist, many Roman Catholics are being found by Christ in the midst of their earnest devotion to the things of the spirit. The zeal of confessional Lutherans has at times been shamed by the greater zeal of non-confessional and erring denominations, but true faith always produces the best fruit. The consistent proclamation of

and adherence to the full truth of God's Word by the confessional Lutheran Church has and will continue to achieve its God-appointed goal, namely, the eternal salvation of souls, whether it be in the local congregation, in the home or foreign mission field, in Christian education on every level, or in the profession or defence of the truth against the errors of other denominations and false hopes of so many world-wide religious movements.

While the imperfections of the visible church are serious handicaps to the building of God's kingdom, they cannot really hurt nor hinder it. God has plotted the course of His Church. Even though storms and contrary winds test or delay it, it will reach its appointed destination in His good time. Every person ordained to eternal life will be saved. Every sheep known to the Lord and called by Him will be delivered from the pollutions of this world and the corrupting influence of heterodox and false teachers, and preserved safe until the consummation of all things.

CHAPTER V

ERROR CANNOT BE CONDONED

"What is truth?"¹ This age-long question put by Pilate, whether in despair or in cynicism, is still a haunting question for philosophers, religious educators and all who are searching for a solution to the problems which life and living in this world pose. There are those who believe they have found "truth" in their way of life. But does personal conviction establish the truth? Others are certain that they have the remedy to all life's ills, that they have the basic answer to man's place and purpose in life, and that they understand all that is necessary for the full utilisation of life's opportunities and responsibilities, but what if time proves them wrong? The Truth must be something outside of ourselves, something definite, certain, tangible in the sense of comprehensible, experimental, that is, something that can be experienced, something that can be known without any trace of uncertainty, something which is vital and dynamic for us, and yet something which is independent of our knowing it.

Jesus came to reveal such truth. Though the judgments of God's truth were made known throughout the Old Testament revelation and though all the essential doctrines of the

¹John 18:38.

Christian faith are contained in the Old Testament, Christ Jesus came as the light to and of this world. He came into the darkness of this world, and the darkness comprehended not the light.² In God's Word, both Old and New Testament, the challenge is thrown down to all men - "Thy Word is truth,"³ "Everyone that is of the truth heareth my voice."⁴ If a person will accept God's Word as truth, on the basis of God's own promise and manifold attestation, he will know that it is indeed the truth. All are invited to test the Scriptures against any criterion, moral, ethical, philosophical, geographical, scientific, religious, psychic, experimental, sociological, historical or archeological, and to see for themselves whether it is not 100% truth. The business of the Christian theologian is to believe the Scriptures himself, and then set them forth as this truth of God. He is not asked to prove them, to establish them, or argue about them. He is to proclaim them.

This problem, however, arises, that there are many proclaimers of the truth, but they don't agree. This is one of the great and real offences to the world, an offence out of which Satan is making great capital. If the theologians who study the truth cannot agree amongst themselves, how

²John 1:4-5.

³John 17:17.

⁴John 18:37.

can the layman know the truth?⁵ The problem becomes intensified by the contention of some modernists that the different doctrinal tenets are merely various interpretations of the Scriptures. Others claim for their interpretations the honor of "insights."⁶ But who is going to classify the interpretations? Who is going to pass the judgment on the insights? Who is going to establish the truth in this bewildered maze of countless conflicting theological expositions? Rome has solved the problem by claiming "infallibility" of the pope, when he speaks ex cathedra. And a surprising number of prominent men of learning in the various fields of science, art and philosophy have been won for the Roman Church by its bold assertion of final religious authority. "There is no truth and no salvation outside the Roman Church" has been accepted by many as the only final fact of life. Others like the Episcopalians of England assert that the final authority on the truth is the witness, the testimony, in reality the conservative traditions of the Church. The Church determines the truth by its common voice.

⁵That this agnostic conclusion is not found is apparent when we apply it to fields of scientific research such as medicine. There will always be a certain amount of conflicting opinion amongst the specialists, but this neither destroys nor basically undermines the obvious use and purpose of that which continues to exist and function despite human contention.

⁶Dr. H. Hamann, "The Nature of the Unity We Seek," The Australian Theological Review, XXX (March - June, 1959, Nos. 1 and 2), p. 11.

down through the centuries. Did not the Church determine the canon of Scripture?

We, with Luther, contend that the truth is alone in God's Word. The business of the theologian is to find this truth and proclaim it. The method is proper exegesis of the Scriptures. Only the Scriptures can determine the truth. Everything which is contrary to the Scriptures and the analogy of faith (the spirit of the Scriptures) is error, and error is untruth--spiritual poison.

There are those who look upon their distinctive and peculiar interpretations as Spirit-given insights and persuasions resultant from Christian experience. Others regard the different expositions of the doctrines of Scripture, for example, the Lord's Supper, as being different ways of looking at the same phenomenon, like viewing a mountain from different quarters, as different descriptions of the same spiritual reality. While some look upon the many theological aberrations as being regrettable historical developments rather than as sins against the clear Word and command

⁷This argumentation is a begging of the question. The Church did not give the Word of God. God gave it to His inspired pen-men. The canon of Scripture is the clarification of certain rules and principles according to which the contents of a book are examined and classified as measuring up to the universally accepted standards of inspiration. The Church is the recipient of the Word, not the giver of it. It can and must intelligently judge the message which is brought to it, for there are many false prophets gone into this world. God Himself gave the Jews ways of testing the prophets, Deut. 13:1-3; 18-22.

of God, which must be repented of and forsaken.⁸ But false exegesis, misrepresentation of the scriptural position, overemphasis of one doctrine to the beclouding or subversion of another doctrine (though no doctrine correctly presented according to the Scriptures is in contradiction to another revelation of the Scriptures), omission or corruption of any truth proclaimed by God's Word is error. Error for the soul is spiritual poison. Error, like poison, is not always, nor immediately fatal. As the human body can grow accustomed to certain toxics and harmful bacteria and virus, and successfully withstand them, so the soul is not immediately or permanently harmed by "minor" error. But as poison can never produce healthy tissues and healthy living, save by way of medical counteraction, so spiritual error will never develop spiritual life, but retards and endangers it in direct proportion to its intensity. Although the consideration of and temporary adherence to error can exercise and test faith, error itself destroys spiritual life instead of building it.

The Scriptures give a very earnest and emphatic warning against error. Through the prophet Jeremiah the Lord said to the Israelites:

Hearken not unto the words of the prophets that prophesy unto you: they make you vain: they speak a vision of their own heart, and not out of the mouth of the Lord I have not sent these prophets, yet they

⁸Hamann, op. cit., p. 11.

ran: I have not spoken to them, yet they prophesied. But if they had stood in my counsel, and had caused my people to hear my words, then they should have turned them from their evil way, and from the evil of their doings The prophet that hath a dream, let him tell a dream; and he that hath my word, let him speak my word faithfully. What is chaff to the wheat? saith the Lord.⁹

Here the Lord God distinguishes between His Word of truth and erroneous human opinion. Human visions, dreams and speculations are to His Word of truth as chaff is to the wheat. The Lord God is sore displeased with all who propound error and set it forth as if God had spoken it. His Word is like a fire and a hammer that will break the rock in pieces.

Lest men think that this only applies to basic and fundamental teachings and principles, but not to the so-called minor articles of faith,¹⁰ the Saviour purposefully warned:

Till heaven and earth pass one joy or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled. Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least

⁹Jeremiah 23:16-28.

¹⁰Nothing God has seen fit to reveal can be regarded as being minor or of less importance. Even such a non-fundamental doctrine, as the doctrine of the angels, if consistently denied could mean the loss of salvation. What would have happened to Jacob in his grief and loneliness, had God not revealed to him the ascending and descending angels! What will happen to a soul at death, if God in righteous retribution on a person's denial of the existence of the angels refuses to let His ministering spirits bear that soul to heaven! When the angels on Judgment Day gather the tares for the burning then shall those who have doubted or denied their reality be in great fear. We cannot deny any, even the apparently most insignificant truth of God's Word without endangering the basic fact that the Scriptures are the Word of God. To deny the least can lead to the loss of the whole of God's revelation in Christ--the loss of salvation.

commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.¹¹

As St. Paul points out in the analogy of building upon Christ houses of gold, silver, precious stone, wood, straw or stubble, and the fires of judgment revealing of what sort the building is, that even though a person's work may be lost, "he himself shall be saved; yet so as by fire,"¹² so the Lord does not necessarily imply that such a one as the above will not be in the kingdom of God. His personal faith may effect that. But his failure to do His Lord's will and proclaim the same in every detail will most certainly cost Him his place of honor in the kingdom of heaven. What a warning not to depart from the Scriptures even in the smallest issue!

That this is not just an isolated or single reference to a matter of such far-reaching consequence in dealing with the problem of error within Christendom, yet even if it were the only reference it would be altogether sufficient, but that it expresses the whole spirit and attitude of God over against all that He has seen fit to reveal and command, is evident from both the Old and New Testament. We read: "Ye shall not add unto the word which I command you, neither shall ye diminish ought from it, that ye may

¹¹Matthew 5:18-19.

¹²I Cor. 3:15.

Keep the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you."¹³ This command given to Moses at the beginning of His revelation to mankind is repeated just as emphatically through John at the close of the revelation:

I (Jesus) testify unto every man that heareth the words of the prophecy of this book, if any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book: And if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book."¹⁴

That the detraction of anything from God's revelation can cost a person eternal life with God, the Saviour here makes quite clear.

Over against the Israelites who continually erred in their hearts not knowing His ways, the Lord God swore in His wrath: "They shall not enter into my rest."¹⁵ To the Sadducees, who denied the resurrection and came to Christ tempting Him with the account of the woman who was married several times, "Whose wife shall she be of the seven in the resurrection?" Jesus replied in terms that cannot be misunderstood: "Ye do err, not knowing the scriptures, not the power of God. For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are as the angels of God in

¹³Deuteronomy 4:2.

¹⁴Revelations 22:18-19.

¹⁵Hebrews 3:10-11.

heaven."¹⁶ After exhorting Timothy to study to show himself approved to God, "rightly dividing the word of truth," Paul proceeded to show how poisonous and destructive error in doctrine could be by the unhappy example of Hymenaeus and Philetus: "And their word will eat as doth a canker: of whom is Hymenaeus and Philetus; who concerning the truth have erred, saying that the resurrection is past already; and overthrow the faith of some."¹⁷

In everything they touch upon the Scriptures are always clear-cut. The Scriptures always set before us the positive truth without any possibility of compromise. This is true of all that God reveals concerning Himself, His work of creation and preservation of all things, as well as of the whole plan of redemption. It is true of all moral issues and it is equally true of all doctrine. As an action is either right or wrong, as a person is either a believer or an unbeliever, for or against God, so a teaching is either right or wrong. The Scriptures never speak in terms of grey they always speak in black and white.¹⁸

Accordingly, it would seem a simple matter of comparing the doctrines of Christendom with the Scriptures and

¹⁶Matthew 22:29.

¹⁷II Timothy 2:17-18.

¹⁸Dr. H. Hamann, Jr., An Examination of the Relation of Certain Passages of the New Testament to the Problem of Fellowship, Intersynodical Notes (ca. 1958), p. 5.

classifying them as truth or error. In essence such is the case. But the problem becomes more involved when dealing not with error per se, but with the errorist, who is often a professing Christian. In this connection we are obliged to take note of the different ways error has developed. There is the error due to misunderstanding. The Baptists, for example, seem to misunderstand the doctrine of the means of grace. The denial of the real presence by the Reformed in general seems to be closely associated with their confusion of the union of the two natures in Christ. Pelagianism, syncretism, Calvinism, Arminianism, though each different, sometimes antithetical, have arisen because of the basic misunderstanding of total depravity, of God's infinite grace, of the bondage of the will, of man's spiritual deadness, of his accountability to God, of the difference between God's foreknowledge, and the hidden purposes of His predestination of the elect in Christ. Likewise, the hope of the chiliasts, the millennialists and most ecumenists is a misunderstanding of the true nature of the kingdom of the heaven, and of the church--the body of Christ and the communion of all true believers.

There are the errors due to overemphasis. It is tragically regrettable that the whole system of the papacy is built on an overemphasis of the place which good works occupy in the life of a Christian. The overemphasis of God's sovereignty leads to an obvious limitation of saving grace

and an election to damnation, or by contrast the irresistibility of saving grace. The overemphasis on the requirement of the law to be perfect, with the overlooking of the essential dynamic of the Gospel, which alone impels the Christian to strive to attain perfection, has led to the rise of the modern perfectionist and holiness groups, which can produce as good or hard a Pharisee as the Lord had to deal with.

Such erroneous developments, to mention but a few examples, are not only regrettable deviations from the truth, which ought to be more strongly denounced as error and heresy, and labelled as sin, but they are also the obvious cause of schism and division within the external church, a disruption of the unity of the spirit. Yet they do not and need not of themselves destroy or prevent saving faith, even though they hinder faith and do not aid spiritual growth.

Going still deeper in our attempt to understand the development of error in the Christian Church we must note the tremendous and unhappy influence which faulty instruction has had upon Christians during their formative years. The errors of otherwise earnest Christians even some of the most seriously intentioned evangelists are evident for the above stated reason in such vital fields as the proper distinction between Law and Gospel. To cite current cases. Dr. Billy Graham in laying the responsibility of resisting

the Holy Ghost upon the conscience of the individual goes very close to subverting the whole doctrine of conversion by making it dependent upon man's volition, though he himself is a strong exponent of the reality and need of the spiritual rebirth by the sole work of the Holy Spirit. When he says that not even Almighty God can save the soul that does not desire eternal life or that will not come to Christ, while such statements can be understood correctly, they, nevertheless, constitute a contradiction of the Scriptures that by nature men do not desire the things of God,¹⁹ of the Saviour's answer to the disciples concerning the salvation of the rich: "With men this is impossible; but with God all things are possible,"²⁰ and of the Saviour's very revealing declaration: "No man can come to Me, except the Father which hath sent Me, draw him"²¹ Everything to do with man's salvation is by grace alone.²² As with the confusion of Law and Gospel, there are similar misconceptions implanted from childhood on over against the efficiency of the Means of Grace, the part prayer plays in the Christian's life, and the duty of a Christian over against his government, to cite some illustrations.

¹⁹Romans 8:7.

²⁰Matthew 19:26.

²¹John 6:44.

²²Ephesians 2:5.

Obviously, it is not the person who has been wrongly trained, as the person responsible for giving the wrong training, who has committed the greater sin. But here again the judgment of God will take into account the extent to which those in error, those who have been incorrectly instructed, react, when the truths of God's Word are clearly, tactfully and adequately presented to them. When certain people have been theologically trained in a definite way, they seem, alas, to be almost incapable to giving an unbiased evaluation of the true position, if it is the antithesis of what they have been taught. It is not for us to anticipate God's judgment on such misguided Christians. Nevertheless, we are to recognise and renounce their erroneous views and teachings.

A greater problem in dealing with our erring brethren in Christ, however, is the issue of holding to error despite the witness of the truth. Why can't the Roman Catholic, for example, accept salvation alone by faith? Why can't the Baptist accept the validity of infant baptism by the application of water? Why can't the Reformed accept the real presence in Holy Communion? Why can't the Seventh Day Adventist accept the liberty of the New Testament with regard to worship? Are these adherents guilty of hardness of heart and stubbornness against God's Word, when the proof is made so clearly? Perhaps it is the effect of religious training; perhaps it is the result of a biased way of thinking; perhaps it is a spiritual pride; perhaps it is partial spiri-

tual darkness even as most people are guilty of some moral blindspots. God is the judge. Fortunately, there occurs that happy inconsistency, so frequently referred to, whereby a person's faith may be right, even though he may pronounce it wrongly.

Whatever the error is, it must, however, always be taken seriously. Even the smallest error if consistently adhered to can undermine the whole foundation. Normally it does not do so. But if anybody argues that his error does not matter when he is shown, and recognises the fact that his position is anti-scriptural, and then declares his intention to continue proclaiming his error against the clear Scriptures, such a one is not a Christian, but a heretic, and outside the kingdom of grace. It is a very earnestly debated issue as to what extent this judgment should be passed upon the multitude of erring Christian theologians, ministers and teachers today. Perhaps it would be most salutary to do so. Perhaps the orthodox confessional churches are failing to follow the example of the apostles, particularly St. Paul and St. John, and give this clear-cut testimony to the truths of God's Word. Luther did! And our Lutheran Confessions in their oft-repeated "damnamus," "we condemn," do!

To what extent we must or should assert that all those within the Christian Church, who espouse and proclaim error are not true Christians, but false prophets, is disputed

very seriously. Dr. Brux in his Summary of Findings puts it this way:

It is not primarily error in doctrine that makes a heretic in the sense in which the church uses this term, but the attitude of the mind and heart of him who preaches it. A heretic is a person who "in spite of repeated admonition and in spite of better knowledge and conscience continues in his perverse conduct" (Walther, Die ev. Luth. Kirche die wahre sichtbare Kirche Gottes auf Erden, 1891, p. 24; also Kirche u. Amt, p. 126; also Guenther Symbolik, pp. 7-8; also quotations from Luther given on p. 28). Error in doctrine may be simply a weakness in a Christian, who, in spite of the weakness, is filled with a sincere passion for Christ and His Word. But when the error is known and understood by a person and adhered to nevertheless because of a sinister purpose or ulterior motive that person has ceased to serve Christ, and is, instead, serving his own self, his ambition, his greed, his belly. His preaching is intentional falsehood, a lie, and Scripture calls such an one a "liar" (pseudes, Rev. 2:2), a person "speaking lies in hypocrisy" (en hypokrisi pseudologos, I Tim. 4:2), a "false brother" (Pseudadelphos, Gal. 2:4), a "false teacher" (Pseudodidakalos, 2 Peter 2:1), a "false apostle" (Pseudapostolos, 2 Cor. 11:13), a "false prophet" (Pseudoprophetes, Matthew 7:15; 24:11-24; Mark 13:22; I John 4:1; Rev. 16:13; 19:20; 20:10). The word "pseud" or "pseudo" in the above compounds is equivalent to "lying and thereby deceiving." A misstatement of fact arising from lack of proper information, but made in good faith, is not a lie, not a "pseudos." A "pseudos" like our English word "lie" is a conscious and intentional misstatement of fact, a deliberate falsehood, made for the purpose of misleading or deceiving, and implies better knowledge on the part of the person making it. This is brought out clearly in Matthew 7:15, (wolves, who for the purpose of deception put on sheep's clothing), II Cor. 11:13, (where "deceitful workers" is added), II Peter 2:1-3, ("Through covetousness shall they with feigned words make merchandise of you"), I Tim. 4:2, (where "having their conscience seared" is added) . . .

The accusing conscience naturally plays a part in such persons, and we find it referred to a number of times in reference to false teachers, e.g., I Tim. 1:19-20; 4:2; Titus 1:15; 3:11, (implied in "autokatakritos"). It is necessarily involved also wherever the "pseudo"-compounds are used, or a form of "planan" in a context

that implies purpose to deceive, or where the setting of a "skandalon" (trap) is predicated of a person (Romans 16:17; Matthew 18:6-7; Luke 17:1-2).

By employing such names and terms to characterize false teachers, the Scriptures thus mark them as reprobates, as men who have ceased to be Christians, if they ever were such, and who ought no longer to be treated as Christians, but excluded, if they are within the congregation, and avoided and not admitted, if they come from without.

This will become still more evident if we contrast the above terms with the expressions employed by the Scriptures when such teachers are referred to as are unsound in doctrine, but must still be assumed to be vitally connected with the church in fundamental faith and, therefore, to be sincere and loyal to Christ. In such cases the Scriptures do not use words which connote lying and deceiving, but terms that merely indicate a departure from the received doctrine, as "teach otherwise" (heterodidaskalien) I Tim. 1:3; 6:3), or "a man that is a heretic (hairesitikos anthropos, Titus 3:10, this term meaning merely a person that chooses a view or doctrine for himself, or is inclined to a faction or party--see pp. 36f), or persons who "build upon this foundation (Christ) . . . wood, hay, stubble" (I Cor. 3:10-15). The use of the term "brother" in II Thess. 3:6, 15 is similar, though there the term does not refer to teachers.²³

We appreciate the distinction Dr. Brux is making between false teachers who are out to deceive and teachers who have become unsound in doctrine, but we cannot endorse his conclusion "and there, to be sincere and loyal to Christ." Since a person is loyal to Christ only when he is loyal to His clear Word, we cannot and dare not try to exonerate or excuse any teacher who becomes unsound in doctrine or practice. We may have to bear and plead with such an erring

²³Adolph A. Brux, Christian Prayer-Fellowship and Unionism (Wisconsin: Pamphlet, 1935), p. 42.

brother for an indefinite time, but we can never cover his error with the commendation of "sincerity and loyalty to Christ." Nevertheless, we believe that Dr. Brux' basic contention stands, namely, that a false teacher is not so much one who unintentionally errs in a point of doctrine, but who against better knowledge sets forth his error as the truth.

While we are therefore quite clear as to what constitutes error, namely, every departure from the Scriptures, we must distinguish between the false teacher and the false prophet, who consciously deceives men as to the truth, and the erring teacher who believes that he is setting forth the truth of the Scriptures, when in fact he is sponsoring error. Herein lies the crux of the question as to whether or not we are to look upon all those who espouse and proclaim Roman, Reformed, Baptist, and all other sectarian and heterodox views as being to that extent false teachers and false prophets, whom we are to rebuke and avoid?

Andrew Quenstedt's quotation of Balduin's definition of "heretic" in his *Theologia Didactico-Polemica* (11,1565) is of pertinent interest:

A heretic is a person, who holds a doctrine which subverts the foundation of faith, who persistently attacks some teaching which belongs to the fundamental article of faith, who creates dissension and quarrels in the Church, and who in such opinion, although frequently admonished, contumaciously and maliciously perse-

veres.²⁴

The attitude of Luther to the errorists of his day is noteworthy. At first his approach was always irenic, but when after quoting the Scriptures which convinced him, but failed to convince his opponents, Luther in his typical, abrupt way would then leave it to their consciences, and if they continued in their error, without qualification he would denounce their opinions.

Though we are not able to determine with any degree of certainty the attitude of the heart and mind of those in error, and therefore cannot with certainty make a clear-cut distinction between the person who errs from ignorance, prejudice, environment or training and the person who is a false teacher and a false prophet--out to deceive others for some carnal purpose either in some particular matter or in general, what is evident is that error affects Christian fellowship in direct proportion to its gravity. On the initial level believers are aware of and experience the common bond they have in Christ, just as did the believers of the early Church after Pentecost. These continued in the apostles' fellowship and doctrine. But as Dr. Brux points out this does not of itself mean the sum total of apostolic doctrine, for that was as yet not given, but these early Chris-

²⁴Theodore Graebner, The Borderland of Right and Wrong (Tenth Print; St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, c. 1951) p. 140.

tians yielded themselves to the teaching and instruction of the apostles,²⁵ and it was that which cemented their unity in the spirit. But as the doctrines of the apostles became explicit and clearly defined the deviations of some from the truth became apparent. The more explicit became the doctrine, the more definite became the judgment of the Scriptures upon those who opposed the same, as is evident from Romans 16:17: ". . . Mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned and avoid them . . ."; and I Timothy 6:3: "If any man teach otherwise, and consent not to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which is according to godliness; he is proud, knowing nothing" Initially, the assurance of the Saviour: "If ye continue in my words, then are ye my disciples indeed . . ." ²⁶ referred to the topic under discussion, that Jesus was the God-sent Saviour from sin and death. Of themselves these words of the Saviour do not require perfection in doctrine as a mark of true discipleship, but a continuance in the basic truth of faith in Him as the Son of God. However, subsequently, these words of necessity imply faithful compliance to His word. Here we disagree with the conclusion that Dr. Brux draws.²⁷ Nor can we accept his argumentation concerning the

²⁵Brux, op. cit., p. 60.

²⁶John 8:31.

²⁷Brux, op. cit., p. 56.

difference between shunning error and not shunning erring Christians as he endeavours to prove from II Timothy 2:16-18.²⁸ To shun error will inevitably involve shunning the errorist, if he continues adamant in his error, for error destroys Christian fellowship.

²⁸Ibid., p. 35.

... listen to his reasons without being con-
 sidered the fact, that all believers in Christ
 and that they are to endeavour to preserve this
 their lives as Christians. The position put for-
 ward is, that the Holy Spirit is the bond of
 unity to the Christian Church of all time.
 "There is one body." The Church with all its variety of
 members all its differing members is one body in Christ.
 "There is one head, and we are His members." "There is one
 Spirit." The Holy Spirit is the Lord's gift to His Church.
 By this Holy Spirit we have all been baptized into the one
 body. He calls, gathers, enlightens and sanctifies the
 whole Christian Church on earth. "There is one hope that re-
 leads to your call." In the New Testament we have seen
 the one hope of salvation through the blood of the Lamb of
 God. The final consummation of this hope is eternal life in
 the Kingdom of God. "There is one Lord." It is no mystery
 but a fact. There is one and the same who marked himself
 and became obedient unto death, even unto the shameful death,

²⁹Ibid., p. 35.

CHAPTER VI

SEPARATION FROM ERRORISTS

No one can carefully read the exhortation of St. Paul: "Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace,"¹ and then listen to his reasons without being convinced of the two-fold fact, that all believers in Christ are one, and that they are to endeavour to preserve this unity in their lives as Christians. The position put forward by St. Paul to the Ephesians applies beyond the possibility of dispute to the Christian Church of all time. "There is one body." The Church with all its variety of gifts and all its differing members is one body in Christ. He is the head, and we are His members. "There is one Spirit." The Holy Spirit is the Lord's gift to His Church. By this Holy Spirit we have all been baptised into the one body. He calls, gathers, enlightens and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth. "There is one hope that belongs to your call." In the New Testament covenant there is the one hope of salvation through the blood of the Lamb of God. The final consummation of this hope is eternal life in the kingdom of God. "There is one Lord." It is so obvious but so true. There is One and One only who humbled Himself and became obedient unto death, whom God has highly exalted,

¹Ephesians 4:3.

and appointed to be the Judge of the living and the dead. "There is one faith." There is only one body of truth, the whole revelation of God in Christ Jesus. There have been many credal statements and many confessions, but there is only one true faith. "There is one baptism." The baptism in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost is the only Christian baptism. "There is one God and Father of us all." The one true God of both Old and New Testament, the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the Father of all men is the only true God. He knows of none other. And there is none other. As He is one, so all who believe in Him, will, in answer to the prayer of the Son, become one.² This unity of the spirit, which all true Christians have because of the one body, the one Holy Spirit, the one hope, the one Lord, the one faith, the one baptism, the one God and Father, is their God-given responsibility to preserve.³

But just as clear as is this obligation, so the injunction of the Saviour is also clear: "Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves."⁴ "Take heed that no man deceive you. For many shall come in my name, saying, I am Christ; and shall

²C. T. Craig, The One Church in the Light of the New Testament (London: Epworth Press, c. 1952), p. 19.

³F. H. Knubel, Church Unity (Philadelphia: United Lutheran Publication, c. 1936), p. 49.

⁴Matthew 7:15.

deceive many And many false prophets shall arise, and shall deceive many."⁵ And: "If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed . . ."⁶ The implications of this warning of their Lord the Apostles clearly recognised, when they exhorted: "Mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them."⁷ "Have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness . . ."⁸ "From such (men of corrupt minds, destitute of the truth) withdraw thyself."⁹ While those who do not confess that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh "receive . . . not into your house, neither bid him God speed."¹⁰

The position is quite clear over against those who are false prophets, and wolves, and anti-christ, and self-condemned heretics, as we have shown in the previous chapter. But what has created the great problem in the Christian Church today are the borderline cases. Nowhere do the Scriptures have a good word to say for errorists.¹¹ Nowhere do

⁵Matthew 24:4,5,11.

⁶John 8:31.

⁷Romans 16:17.

⁸Ephesians 5:11.

⁹I Timothy 6:5.

¹⁰II John 10.

¹¹Dr. H. P. Hamann, An Examination of Certain Passages, Intersynodical Notes, p. 5.

the Scriptures permit any compromise of the truth. This must be the position of those who would be loyal to Christ. This was the position of the early Lutheran confessors, who protested and so clearly demonstrated their adherence to apostolic doctrine and practice, and refused to compromise with divergent contemporary reformers.

In principle we must denounce all error. This implies inevitably, we believe, the denunciation of and dissociation from all those who persist in or cling to error great or small. But in practice it is not so easy for the issue is not always clear cut. As we have previously noticed, from the human point of view there are often extenuating circumstances. Not all have been privileged to be trained in the truth, nor have all had the whole truth fairly and without prejudice presented to them. Further, since we are unable to distinguish with any degree of certainty between those who err in weakness from those whose heart and attitude is opposed to the truth, we find ourselves often in the position where we are obliged in love to bear with those who may not be consciously opposing the Scriptures. Here another question arises: "What constitutes wilful opposition to the Scriptures?" Some argue that their "heterodox" position is the position of the Scriptures, and they claim that we are making ourselves judges over them. (It seems possible by astute exegesis to prove almost anything from the Scriptures. Nevertheless, sooner or later it becomes apparent when somebody is subverting the truth.) Likewise, how

can we determine when a person is resisting the Holy Spirit? Or discern when his resistance to the truth is due to the fact that he has not as yet come to realise the implications of those relevant Scripture passages, which are so clear to us? Similarly, how long shall we bear with those who are erring because of the influence of false teachers and errorists! From their confession it seems that they are children of God, believers in Christ, but it becomes difficult to harmonise their heterodoxy in a particular matter, with the Lord's clear assertion that they are His true disciples, who continue in His Word.

The views of Dr. C. F. W. Walther on these problems are lucidly set forth in a series of theses. Thesis II: "Even an error against the clear Word of God on the part of an individual member of the church does not at once, and in fact, deprive him of church-fellowship, confessional fellowship, or collegueship." Thesis III: "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."

This thesis Dr. Walther elaborates thus:

We are far from desiring to discontinue fraternal fellowship with an individual person, or church-fellowship with a church-body, if these are not dogmatically correct in their Christian knowledge. By no means do we regard such correctness as a condition of such fellowship. If we do that, we would have to contend against ourselves; for while we note such faults, i.e., errors, in others, they again may note such in the one or the

other among us. No, as soon as there reveals itself in an individual person or in a church-body the readiness of mind to submit unconditionally to the entire Word of God and to hold nothing that militates against the foundation of the Christian faith--be it the real foundation (Christ), or the dogmatic foundation (the doctrine of justification through faith), or the organic foundation (the Scriptures)--we gladly extend to every such person the hand of fraternal fellowship, and are also cordially willing and ready to have church-fellowship with such a church-body. This, however, is our attitude and practice, not because we regard any doctrine clearly revealed in the Word of God as an open question which we are free to affirm or deny, to decide thus or thus, but because we know that there are errors of weakness, and that a Christian may carry about in his mind even a fundamental error, without overthrowing the foundation in his heart, let alone that a person erring with respect to a non-fundamental point would necessarily reject the foundation of faith. Nevertheless, we regard it as our duty to reprehend, refute, oppose, fight, and censure as error whatever becomes manifest as such in those who desire to be our brethren whether the error concern a fundamental or a non-fundamental doctrine of the Word of God. (L.c., p. 110f)¹²

Error, therefore, does not necessitate always and immediately the severance of Christian fellowship, though logically and finally it must. In dealing with an erring Christian we often have to proceed in the same way as when we deal with a moral weakness or failing. We dissociate ourselves from the error and the mistakes, but not immediately from the person. "In dealing with a weak brother two things are always necessary," Dr. Brux observes.

Dissociation from the matter which constitutes a weakness in him, and association in everything that does not touch the weakness. These two elements are necessarily present in every case where a weak brother is being dealt with, and they must therefore be looked

¹²Adolph A. Brux, Christian Prayer-Fellowship and Unionism (Wisconsin: Pamphlet, 1935), p. 90.

for also when considering our relation to doctrinally weak brothers, congregations, or denominations.¹³

That dissociation from someone's error does not of itself imply religious severance is clear from St. Paul's direction to the Thessalonians. They were to withdraw themselves from every brother who walks disorderly . . . "And if any man obey not our word by this epistle, note that man and have no company with him, that he may be ashamed. Yet count him not as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother."¹⁴ Contrary to breaking off religious fellowship, that is, looking upon him as an enemy of Jesus Christ, he is to be entreated and corrected as a weak and erring brother in Christ. Love, not legalistic coercion, is often the only way to win an erring brother. By love, however, is not meant uncertainty or vacillation, deference or compromise, but patient instruction, kind understanding, sympathetic consideration and cordial friendship, which tries and keeps on trying to win a person to the truth. "Speaking the truth in love," St. Paul urges the Ephesians in the very same chapter that he exhorts: "Endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bonds of peace."¹⁵ How long this must continue depends entirely on the circumstances and the evident attitude of the person in error.

¹³Ibid., p. 94.

¹⁴II Thessalonians 3:6-15.

¹⁵Ephesians 4:15.

What is true for the individual Christian is true for the church. When churches discuss questions of altar and pulpit fellowship with a view to organic union the truth is to be spoken in love. The members of a confessional church cannot be forbearing enough in their endeavours to win others to the truth of God's revealed will. But the position with the individual is different from that of the church, when the latter makes some error or unscriptural practice its confessional platform. Then we are no longer dealing with someone open to conviction, even though they may be erring from lack of knowledge or in weakness, but we are dealing with a body which contends that its position is right and scriptural, with the converse implication that the scriptural position we are standing for is not the truth. Obviously, under such circumstances we weaken and destroy the whole value of our confessional witness, if we then tolerate by fellowship an erroneous position, which has become a publica doctrina, a public platform, an asserted confessional position.

Since the unity of the spirit is of God and not of man, it does not have to be made or called into being by Christians, but is there amongst all believers, binding them together in the Lord. It is there in such a positive sense that it actually has to be broken. Not only should this fellowship be recognised, but to discourage it is a sin against our common head, the Lord, and our fellow believers. To pre-

serve this unity of the spirit, as St. Paul urges, is the natural, inevitable consequence of saving faith in the common Lord. Christian fellowship as a result of this unity of the Spirit in Christ is to be distinguished from church fellowship, which is essentially confessional fellowship. Christian fellowship is not dependent upon complete and perfect unity though it certainly cannot endorse or condone anything contrary to God's Word or any compromise of God's Word. Dr. Bruz puts it this way:

The basis of the fellowship of Christians in prayer and worship is always the already existing unity of all believers as members of the body of Christ, not perfect unity in all points of doctrinal confession, not orthodoxy.

Again:

We Christians fellowship not because in all particulars we all confess the same doctrinal creed, but because we are already united by the Holy Spirit as members one of another in the body of Christ, and as such members naturally seek to express this existing unity in Christian fellowship.¹⁶

It is most desirable that this Christian fellowship be maintained on the local and individual level, in the home, in very small isolated communities, in camps, during maneuvers, on expeditions, and often holidays, even to a limited extent in local prayer and Bible study gatherings, and ministers' fraternals.

Unless the principle of Scripture is involved--and by this we mean that an article of faith, a scriptural command or prohibition, or an example given for the guid-

¹⁶Ibid., p. 73.

ance of the Church in all ages is at stake--agreement is not necessary for spiritual unity, though it may be highly desirable for Christian harmony of purpose.¹⁷

There is a distinct and most important place for Christian fellowship based on the one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all. To deny this is to deny the very essence of our faith. Prayer, joint-Bible study, mutual discussion, encouragement, and admonition under such circumstances are not only not sinful, but the duty of all true believers, who recognise the reality and the full implications of the una sancta, and the common hope of all being together forever in the presence of the Lord, and partaking of the blessedness of the kingdom of heaven.

As on the human plane it is necessary to distinguish between Christian Fellowship and Church Fellowship, so it is necessary to distinguish between Christian unity and Church unity. The failure to make this distinction is evident in The Right Reverend Angus Dun's address at the opening plenary session of the North American Conference on Faith and Order, 1957 when speaking on "The Meaning of 'Unity'," he says:

Our orthodox brethren . . . believe uncompromisingly that the outward and visible unity of the Church in faith and order and worship is of its very essence, and is guaranteed by the over-ruling power of the triune God, who called it into being. Accordingly, they

¹⁷Theodore Graebner, The Borderland of Right and Wrong (Tenth Printing: St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, c. 1951), p. 138.

cannot in good conscience join in the search for a lost unity. Nevertheless, I believe that they recognise the presence in the world of many Christian believers, in a significant sense, who stand outside that unbreakable unity¹⁸

These are the ecumenical aim of a united external church, united for worship and service. But this ecumenical goal, as little as some ecumenists desire it, leads to a superficial unity of all Christians into one great church, where there is no inner, spiritual unity. The same trend in an even more realistic sense is evident when union with another specific denomination is entered upon without an adequate basis of agreement in doctrine and practice. In order to be a truly united church, hearkening to the same Word, celebrating the same sacraments, and putting into practice the same principles, we believe that it is paramount that the understanding of the Word, the comprehension of the Sacraments, and the intention of practical application be essentially the same for all participating churches.

Even though we acknowledge that on the private, personal level we can and should and even must have fellowship with other Christians under certain circumstances, as when living together, yet, on the church, the public, the confessional level, we believe it is impossible to practice genuine altar and pulpit fellowship, unless we are entirely in accord as to what the Word and the Sacraments means to us,

¹⁸Paul S. Minear, editor, The Nature of the Unity We Seek (St. Louis: Bethany Press, c. 1958), p. 37.

and what is to be the practice of life and work in accordance with the principles of the Word. On the other hand, it is true that though we strive for perfect unanimity, we can never achieve complete doctrinal purity, as Dr. Brux. argues with the support of quotations from Dr. C. F. W. Walther.¹⁹ It is also true that the casual intrusion of error into a section of the church does not make that church heretical, nor does it mean that fellowship must be broken unless that section hardens itself in error. On the other hand, there can be no genuine altar and pulpit fellowship unless there is full accord between the participating churches, an accord which not only includes the fundamentals, but also the non-fundamentals, for even the non-fundamentals become church divisive, when they are specifically and consistently ignored.²⁰ Moreover, this subscription to

¹⁹Brux, *op. cit.*, p. 91: "Thesis V. The church militant has, indeed, the duty to strive after absolute unity in faith and doctrine as the goal, but it never attains a higher degree of unity than a unity in fundamentals. With respect to the dogmas which do not involve an overthrowing of the means necessary to obtain salvation, all believers may err Toleration of non-fundamental errors and deficiencies of knowledge is part of the fellowship of love among those who, without division, are joined together in a visible church. (Huelsemann, quoted by Dr. Walther with approval, *l.c.*, p. 114)."

²⁰Theodore Graebner, The Historic Lutheran Position in Non-Fundamentals (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1939), p. 27 writes: "With reference to church-fellowship, non-fundamentals may be divisive when these concern a doctrine or historical statement clearly set forth but consistency ignored or denied in the public doctrine of a religious body; while problems of theology are not divisive of church fellowship at any time."

the articles of faith must be a de facto as well as a de iure subscription, a subscription which is implemented by the public and private teaching and practice in conformity with the declared confessional position.

The early Christian Church was one so long as it continued in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, for it was through the doctrine of the apostles that the Lord built His church. The unity of that first Christian Church was a very definite and explicit unity in the word of Christ, and thus in Christ Himself. But as soon as errorists came into the early church, the church militant became divided, not the spiritual una sancta, but the visible body which composed the una sancta. Not that the true believers, who clung to the Word of Christ were divided, but that those who were misled or deceived by the errorists were separated from their fellow believers. Departure from the Word of God immediately began to destroy the fellowship of faith, and the unity resultant from that fellowship. What became true within a few decades has continued to be the pattern of visible Christendom. Christians who love and adhere to God's Word cannot have church fellowship with those who resist and deny God's clear Word. Even if there were no command in the Scriptures to separate from, to withdraw, to avoid, to have no church fellowship with those who depart from the truth--not even personal fellowship with those who are of the anti-

christ²¹ --this separating of themselves from those with whom they are not in agreement in doctrine and in practice, would be inevitable as the Scriptures declare: "Can two walk together except they be agreed?"²² In this respect the Catholic Churches, whether Roman or Greek are quite logical, even though their teachings are not in accordance with the Scriptures, when they insist that there is no such thing possible as compromise with those who have left the "fold" --for which reason any participation on their part in the World Council of Churches is meaningless.²³ Unless the schismatic churches return to the mother churches they can have no fellowship with them. (The Eastern Christians are even more certain than the Romans that there is one Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church on earth, and that the Orthodox Churches of the East together are its authentic representative.)

The public exposition of the Word and the celebration of the Sacraments, which as we noted earlier constitutes the essential activities of the visible church, requires such complete accord and common understanding of the truth and the application of the same, that genuine and complete fellowship, church fellowship, altar and pulpit fellowship,

²¹II John 7:11.

²²Amos 3:3.

²³Ruth Rouse and Stephen Charles Neill, editors, A History of the Ecumenical Movements, 1517-1948 (London: S. P. C. K., 1954), p. 672.

confessional fellowship, with errorists is unthinkable. The Scriptures bid us: "Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you,"²⁴ and "If ye continue in My Word then are ye my disciples indeed."²⁵ And the Scriptures warn: "Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them."²⁶

If any man teach otherwise, and consent not to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which is according to godliness; he is proud, knowing nothing, but doting about questions and strifes of words, whereof cometh envy, strife, railings, evil surmising, perverse disputings of men of corrupt minds, and destitute of the truth, supposing that gain is godliness: from such withdraw thyself.²⁷

If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine (that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh, v. 7), receive him not into your house, neither bid him God speed: for he that biddeth him God speed is partaker of his evil deeds.²⁸

Beloved, when I gave all diligence to write unto you of the common salvation, it was needful for me to write unto you, and exhort you that you should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints.²⁹

Where there is common accord in the truth, where there is a common confession of the same, and a common practice,

²⁴Matthew 28:20.

²⁵John 8:31.

²⁶Romans 16:17.

²⁷I Timothy 6:3-5.

²⁸II John 10-11.

²⁹Jude 3.

church, altar and pulpit fellowship immediately becomes not only practical, possible and desirable, but inevitable. This is the reason why there have been such long and exhaustive negotiations between the various Lutheran churches in Australia, America and Europe. Because of their common confessional background--the Augsburg Confession or the Book of Concord, these bodies have earnestly examined the differences keeping them apart to see whether they were real or fictitious, accidental or incidental, and whether or not they stemmed from a fundamentally different grasp of certain basic principles. At first negotiations in Australia between the United Evangelical Lutheran Church in Australia and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Australia progressed fairly rapidly, and a comprehensive and exhaustive statement of Theses of Agreement on all the controverted points of doctrine and teaching was drawn up and officially endorsed by both Churches at general conventions. When it came to the analysis of the root cause of the differences over against the unionistic implications of membership in the Lutheran World Federation, the Lutheran Church New Guinea (projected) and the World Council of Churches, it became apparent that there was a fundamentally different understanding of what constituted compromising of the truth, and here the negotiations seemed to have reached an impasse, and it looks as though the two Australian Lutheran Churches will have to go their own way again. We, of the Evangelical Lutheran

Church of Australia, believe that fellowship in the world ecumenical movements involves us in the compromise of the truths of God's Word, because, though the doctrines of the Scriptures are freely and earnestly discussed, the Scriptures are not regarded as the normans, the final norm of truth. (In the case of the Lutheran World Federation, the Lutheran confessions, though constitutionally prescribed, are not regarded as the norma normata, the true and correct exposition of the Scriptures.) The brethren of the United Evangelical Lutheran Church in Australia believe that within the constitutional frame-work of the Lutheran World Federation and of the projected Lutheran Church, New Guinea, and also it seems of the World Council of Churches they have the opportunity and the duty to **confess** the truths of God's Word, and the witness of the Lutheran confessions. Though world ecumenism is an external matter for the two Australian Lutheran Synods, it has such practical implications that a union of the two Synods would be jeopardised, unless basic agreement is reached on the above issues.

The confessional Lutheran attitude to the truths of God's Word is essentially different from the modern ecumenical spirit. Commencing from the reality of basic spiritual unity in the one Lord, the ecumenical spirit overlooks the fact that error and deviation from revealed truth and unscriptural practice have broken this fundamental unity in the visible church, and endeavours to smooth over the deep gulfs, which have developed, not by correcting the errors

and erroneous practices which have perverted the Christian Gospel, but by throwing all, both truth and error into a common melting pot, declaring that since we are one in Christ, we must manifest this unity. To remain separate, irrespective of the reason, is sin, the ecumenists contend. Ecumenism tries to cut the gordian knot, and therefore achieves no solution. The only true unity of the visible church lies in a complete return to the truth and precept of the Scriptures. Since this is seemingly impossible, a truly united church here below is, likewise, impossible. That, somehow, many world ecumenists manage to misunderstand this fundamental objection is apparent from such writings as those of Dr. C. F. Craig, who in 1937 was invited to become a member of the American Theological Committee of the Faith and Order Movements, and who since that time has been actively connected with the growth and the work of the World Council of Churches:

There are other bodies which do not say so frankly that they and they alone are the true church. But actions speak louder than words. When fellowship is denied, this indicates that they do not believe that others are really a part of the church. I shall use for illustrations the Southern Baptists, the Missouri Synod Lutherans, and the Anglicans They are committed to inflexible absolutes which forbid recognising other bodies as fully a part³⁰ of the true Church.

³⁰It is incorrect to describe the denominational bodies of Christendom as parts of the true church. The true church is composed of all true believers. They alone are its members. And the true church is there where the Word is proclaimed and the Sacraments are administered. The local church is a true visible church only when it truly preaches the whole Word of God, and administers the Sacraments in

The Southern Baptists and the Missouri Lutherans are the most logical Protestant representatives of the exclusive position which we are considering. They will have nothing to do with church federations or any form of the ecumenical movement, for that would mean the admission that other bodies equally belonged to the Church. Southern Baptists are sure that only the local assembly of immersed believers has spiritual warrant. For them to join a body like the National Council of Churches would mean "the perversion and even the total disregard of the clear New Testament idea of the church." Baptists must love their brethren of other denominations, but must not partake of their errors. Others may "accept the unscriptural theory of an organized Universal Church . . . but there will be one band of our Lord's anointed defending with becoming heroism the sublime ideals of the Gospel."

The Missouri Synod Lutherans lay the stress upon correct doctrine. Though they are willing to consider whether other Lutherans may not still preserve this, the question does not need to be raised about Catholics, Reformed, or Methodists. They never did subscribe to the Augsburg Confession. Hence, Missouri Synod Lutherans cannot in principle join in a service of worship with others, even a Boy Scout Jamboree, much less consider union with them. Other Lutherans also find unity with others difficult to conceive, so great is the store laid upon correctness of doctrine.³¹

Other ardent ecumenists look upon the Lutheran confessional position as simply a stumbling block to the cause:

This body under its later name--the Lutheran Church (Missouri Synod)--is one of the largest and strongest Lutheran bodies in America, and has proved a serious obstacle to union even among Lutherans. It has taken up a rigidly confessional and unco-operative position on the basis of all the Lutheran symbolic books, and refuses to enter into any kind of co-operation or union with the World Council or any other body, such as would in its views compromise the revelation of the truth which it has received through the Holy Scriptures in their

accordance with Christ's command. All true believers are part of, in the sense of, members of the una sancta. Wherever the Word is truly proclaimed and the Sacraments are correctly administered there we can recognize the true church, but not in the denominational sense--a part of the true church.

³¹Craig, op. cit., p. 27f.

Lutheran interpretation, so writes Dr. R. Rouse.³²

It is possible, as we have noted, for somebody to believe in Christ, and yet because of the weakness of human nature, of bias or prejudice due to religious environment, and of inadequate or deficient indoctrination, to espouse an erroneous opinion or practice. Further, since all Christians are to grow into the perfect manhood in Christ, then we can only expect to find doctrinal imperfections as well as moral weakness amongst Christians and in Christian congregations. But neither the fact that many Christians are in error, nor that there will ever be a time when the earthly church is completely free from error, requires that error be tolerated. On the contrary, the Scriptures categorically condemn all error and all errorists, as we have also noted. This basic principle we dare never lose sight of in our consideration of the problem of Christian Fellowship and Church Fellowship.

Dr. Samuel Johnson's observation: "For my part, Sir, I think all Christians, whether Papists, or Protestants, agree in essential articles; and that their differences are trivial; and rather political than religious,"³³ may have expressed a salient characterisation of the many discussions of ecclesiastical union during the 17th and 18th centuries, but is essentially unrealistic and superficial.

In true Lutheran fashion, following the "damnamus" of

³²Rouse and Neill, op. cit., p. 325.

³³Ibid., p. 123.

the Confessions, Dr. F. Pieper in his brochure on "Unionism," lists the churches with whom we cannot have church fellowship. He writes:

In applying this doctrine we will reject union with

- a. the Unitarian denominations;
- b. the Romish church;
- c. the Reformed denominations, both such as teach that God does not desire the salvation of all men, as well as those that maintain that God does not by grace alone wish to save and convert men. It is a regrettable fact that the latter false doctrine has found a home within the Lutheran church;
- d. those who deny the means of grace which God has ordained;
- e. those who deny that the Bible is the infallible Word of God.³⁴

Dr. Pieper devotes a whole chapter to proving his position from the Scriptural and the attitude of the churches concerned. Later he gives a refutation of the many objections raised in the defence of unionism. He shows that under such circumstances as arise in our dealings with erring churches, refusing church fellowship is not impatience with weak brethren, is not contrary to Christian love, and is not an act of arrogance,³⁵ but a confession of the truth that we have become the Lord's alone by His grace through faith in the promises of His Word. Since His Word is the foundation of our faith, and the one hope of our eternal salvation, it must be our sole guide in all matters of faith, doctrine and life.

³⁴F. Pieper, Unionism--What does the Bible Say about Church-Union?, trans. Rev. J. A. Rimbach and Prof. E. H. Brandt (Oregon City Enterprise, pamphlet, 1925), p. 10.

³⁵Ibid., p. 28f.

CHAPTER VII

THE FELLOWSHIP OF CHRISTIANS WITH CHRISTIANS

"In the New Testament sense, the church means the fellowship of Christ here and now--this and nothing else," writes Gosta Lindeskog in his consideration of the relationship between the church and the kingdom of God.¹ Being of one body Christians are members of each other. As members of each other, one in their Lord, they are in spiritual fellowship with each other. This spiritual fellowship partakes of the nature of their spiritual oneness in Christ. It is not seen and not always apparent. In essence it cannot be broken just as the unity of the invisible church cannot be broken. But just as in the visible church we have offences and schisms and divisions, so the earthly fellowship between believers is often strained and marred and broken.

For Christians to desire fellowship with their fellow-Christians is most natural. If they do not desire the fellowship of their fellow believers, it is very doubtful if they are truly the Lord's. This fellowship is not denominational fellowship. It is a spiritual fellowship in the Lord. It is apparent in the attitude of believers one to another. It shows itself in the relationship of believer to believer. As the circumstances arise and the occasions require, it

¹Anders Nygren, editor, This is the Church (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, c. 1952), p. 146.

manifests itself in spiritual discussions, in mutual encouragement in the faith, in joint-prayer and meditation on God's Word. Prayer fellowship is not denominational fellowship either, as Dr. Brux contends.² Prayer fellowship is an expression of universal Christian fellowship, the fellowship of those who have accepted Christ's atonement, and who manifest their faith by their walk and their confession.³ This individual fellowship is not a token of perfect or full unity in all matters of faith and hope.⁴ It is the token of fundamental Christian faith,⁵ of the one heavenly Father, of the one Lord, one faith, one baptism. Those who are of the Lord are one in Him, and spiritually one with all their fellow believers.

This fellowship of believers would be certain and evident were it evident who are the believers. But no human being knows just who are the true believers in the Lord. While each individual knows whether or not the Lord is his

²Adolph A. Brux, Christian Prayer-Fellowship and Unionism (Wisconsin: Pamphlet, 1935), p. 100. "The Scriptures (Eph. 2:18, 3:12) base prayer and prayer-fellowship on fundamental faith in Christ as Redeemer, not on agreement in every particular of doctrine, and thereby make prayer-fellowship an act of universal Christian fellowship and a normal expression of the existing brotherhood of all Christians in the universal Church."

³Ibid., p. 81.

⁴Ibid., p. 80.

⁵Ibid., pp. 68-70.

Saviour and God,⁶ often he is so harassed by temptations and trials, and the sinfulness of his own nature, that he is fearful of his own standing before the Lord. If that is the case with ourselves, how much less certain are we of the faith of the heart of our fellowmen! When and as this faith manifests itself by attitudes, dispositions, confessions and particularly by manner of life and by loving-kindness, the believer feels drawn to such a fellow believer, and, by the gracious leading of the Holy Spirit becomes aware of such a basic bond in their common Lord, that fellowship together in Him is the result. It is the genuineness of Christian faith, not necessarily the question of the orthodoxy of the person concerned,⁷ which draws believers together. But any apparent disparity or inconsistency of life, confession, or attitude to the spirit, teachings, love and holiness of the Lord, immediately and proportionately destroys Christian fellowship. While the profession of error at once makes a person's faith suspect, and by contrast the confession of the truth affirms and attests a person's faith, individual Christian fellowship is not essentially based on confession or lack of confession, but on the one spirit. For this reason confessional fellowship cannot nullify Christian fellowship, but having its roots in the latter, it grows out of Chris-

⁶Galatians 4:6.

⁷Brux., op. cit., p. 89.

tian fellowship.⁸ The Christian has no desire, and no inner urge to fellowship with a non-Christian, even though he be from a Christian home, of a Christian community, or (nominally) in a Christian congregation. On the other hand, a Christian does not demand of another that he show his credentials of membership in the invisible church before he fellowships with him. There are many evidences of faith which sooner or later become apparent. These attest a person's faith and attitude to the Lord. What is true over against the establishment of individual fellowship is essentially true also for the establishment of membership in a congregation and synod. No one can postulate membership in the invisible church before such visible fellowship is accorded. It is true, however, that the fellowship within the local congregation and in church communions presupposes and presumes membership in the una sancta. While individual fellowship is based on membership with the invisible communion of saints, the two cannot be equated. Individual fellowship and congregational and synodical fellowship are closely related to membership in the una sancta, and in essence are dependent on it, but they are not the same.

The fellowship between Christians is to a large extent dependent on local circumstances, and the exigencies of the hour. We find the early Christians fellowshipped together quite naturally. This bond of fellowship was strengthened

⁸Ibid., p. 83.

and intensified during times of persecution. It became strained by the advent of the discrimination between Jews and Gentiles. It was disrupted by the emergence of schismatics, errorists, heretics and false prophets. In the course of the centuries this Christian fellowship was normally restricted to those of similar faith and conviction. From time to time local circumstances brought Christians together, and the barriers of creed, colour and tongue were overridden. The same is true today. Normally Christians fellowship with those of their own faith. This denominational segregation seems to be stronger and more apparent in the new countries, the United States, Canada, Australia, South Africa, than in Europe or amongst the indigenous churches of India and China. Amongst our Lutheran people there is usually no need for fellowship with non-Lutherans. But there are so many situations which arise where there is need for individual Christian fellowship, which overrides denominational barriers that an elucidation and clarification of the fundamental principles involved is necessitated. There are so many situations in life, in which it seems unnatural for Christians not to fellowship with other Christians, that we are forced to look at and restate the deeper implications of the whole problem of fellowship in the Lord. Under such circumstances it becomes apparent that confessional fellowship, which is to be practiced on the basis of mem-

bership in the universal church.⁹ Are we then to conclude as do the ecumenists that the sole criterion for Christian fellowship is personal Christian faith? The answer to this question can be given correctly and understood intelligently only when we carefully distinguish between individual and church fellowship.

To ignore doctrinal differences for the sake of Christian fellowship is just as serious an issue and involves eventually just as much sin against the Word of God as to ignore the duty of Christian fellowship for the sake of confessional separation. The essence of unionism is disregarded for the revealed truth. The essence of schism is the unwarranted and unjustified disruption of spiritual unity. The clarification of these conflicting implications lies in the twofold realization: Firstly, individual fellowship is based on the membership of all true believers in the one holy Christian Church, whereas church fellowship is based on a common confession and profession of the Christian faith. Second, individual fellowship is a matter each person has to decide according to his own conscience, whereas church fellowship involves all like-minded Christians.

That this is not merely a theological disputation but an endeavour to clarify the principles which are involved in actual problems of life is evident when we consider the

⁹Ibid., p. 88.

case of a husband and wife, who find that they both believe in the same Lord, yet their denominational background causes divergent opinion over various points of doctrine and the interpretation of Scripture. Is their marriage to be disrupted because neither can convince the other? If St. Paul had the believing partner to continue with the unbelieving one, when the latter was pleased to dwell with the former, how much more should not Christian husband and wife continue together and find a way of living despite their denominational differences?¹⁰ Further, because of these differences should they decline to inaugurate the family altar or terminate the same? Should they desist from prayer and devotional reading upon awaking and retiring, or do so with a guilty conscience? The implications are surely unthinkable. How can a Christian husband and wife who are physically one in the Lord, and spiritually one in the una sancta, decline to have spiritual fellowship with each other? Here it is not the question of confessing the truth over against error, but of a husband and wife acknowledging each other as fellow believers, though their knowledge of Christian faith is still imperfect. In other words, here is the problem of those who are one in the una sancta and physically one in the Lord, yet who are separated from each other by the barriers caused by erring teachers in the course of the growth of the Christian Church.

¹⁰I Cor. 7:12-14.

Let us consider what this could lead to. Neither husband or wife are able to convince each other as to the truth of the Scriptures on their different beliefs. Nevertheless, they maintain the Family Altar. They rear their children in the Christian faith. When the children grow up, due to circumstances, and the lack of clear parental guidance, they become associated with denominations other than those to which their parents belong. But the whole family remains a devout Christian family. Should not the Family Altar be resumed when the whole family comes together? The answer is an obvious "Yes!" But what about communion? It is horrifying to a confessional Lutheran to think, for example, of a Lutheran father, a Methodist mother, a Baptist daughter, and a Church of England son communing together. We are aware of the deep confessional differences separating those churches. Yet this family has grown up together. They have become tolerant of or indifferent to each other's religious affiliations. They could be ignorant of the doctrinal differences, especially those concerning the Sacrament of the Altar, which brought into being their different churches. When in the simplicity of faith, they as a family attend the celebration of the Sacrament and participate, can we deny them a beneficial communion? Surely, the answer lies in the extent to which the persons concerned are aware how incompatible are the conflicting teachings of their respective churches on the Sacrament. Where they are not aware of the

inherent contradictions between the Lutheran and Reformed teachings on the Sacrament of the Altar, we could not charge them with sin, but they will receive the blessings of the Sacrament only as they believe the words of institution. But as they become aware of the conflicting teachings of their respective churches as to the sacramental presence of the body and blood of Christ for the forgiveness of sins, they cannot commune without becoming guilty of indifference to the declarations of the Lord in the words of institution. Their deepest fellowship in the Lord has now ceased, and this is going to have its repercussions in their devotional fellowship.

While initially the family could and did practice a God-pleasing prayer and devotional fellowship, if now some members of the family persist in refusing to believe the words of institution in the Sacrament of the Altar, this, like any other matter on which the Word of God has spoken, will become a cause of division. When it becomes apparent that some members of the family are hardening themselves against the clear Word of God, even prayer and devotional fellowship with such eventually becomes impossible for those who fear the Lord and believe His Word.

From the above we must therefore conclude, that while Christian Fellowship, as practiced in a home by way of family devotions and prayer, is not dependent of the correct understanding of all Christian truth, it cannot continue

where there is indifference or opposition to the Word of the Lord. Christian Fellowship amongst individuals presupposes true faith in the Lord Jesus, not complete doctrinal agreement. But since a Spirit-wrought willingness to submit to the Word of the Lord is a fruit of true faith, persistent adherence to that which is contrary to the Word of the Lord, that is, to erroneous teachings and practices, cannot but hinder and eventually destroy fellowship in the Lord on the individual level as well as on the church and confessional level.

The problem, however, is not confined to the family relationship. Nor is it an isolated or extreme case. A similar situation arises when Christian soldiers find themselves thrown together in a military camp, when a team on expedition gets to know each other intimately under conditions of prolonged isolation, when Christian families by the necessity of following their trade or earning a livelihood go into sparsely populated areas where there is no church. In a way the same problem arises when Christians find themselves in the company of fellow Christians on a longer vacation. The implications of Christian fellowship are very far-reaching, even to involving the celebration of communion in cases of emergency, or when soldiers, for example, face battle and death. Though some circumstances rightly come within the sphere of exceptional cases, the general principles of God's Word are clear enough for every earnest seeker after the truth to know when he is to practise Christian

Fellowship and when he is to refrain for conscience sake.

Further, in the course of the general ministry we have come up against problems of the following nature. We have met and earnestly spoken to folk in hospital, and in consequence have been invited to their homes. We have then found them to be exemplary Christians of fine calibre, but perhaps of Baptist or some other fundamentalist persuasion. They obviously yearn for spiritual fellowship, especially when they live in the isolation of some rural areas. The position we have come to is that with such people Christian fellowship in Bible study and prayer is not only desirable, but a duty and a responsibility of Christian love. Communion and church fellowship, however, is dependent on full agreement concerning the confessional differences which distinguish our Lutheran position from that of their particular denomination. Their willingness to grow in Christian knowledge proportionately affects our Christian fellowship together.

Dr. Brux has attempted to clarify the underlying principles involved when in his examination of "Christian Prayer-Fellowship and Unionism," he writes:

1. From II Thessalonians 3:6-15 it is clear that the passage actually declares that religious fellowship with the persons in question (a brother who walks disorderly) should be maintained and continued (admonish him as a brother). This will hold, by analogy also for such cases of doctrinal error where the fundamentals of Christian faith are not overthrown.¹¹

¹¹ibid., p. 31.

Here we should note, however, that on the contrary the admonition of St. Paul in verse 6: ". . . that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the tradition which he received of us" is clearly an injunction to cease spiritual and religious fellowship with such an erring brother to make him realise that he is walking disorderly and not after the tradition received from us. But when we thus withdraw from him our attitude to him is to remain that of a brother, and not become that of an enemy.

2. Prayer-fellowship with Christians of other denominations implies and involves only a recognition of a common Christianity on the basis of the same foundation, Christ (I Cor. 3:11-15), and does not in itself imply or involve any acceptance of, or connivance at, or indifference in regard to, doctrinal error.¹²

3. Universal Christian fellowship is possible wherever Christians are to be found; confessional or denominational fellowship, on the contrary, is possible only where all agree to the same statements of doctrine. We can, accordingly, have universal Christian fellowship with any person, irrespective of denomination, who accepts Christ as his Saviour and gives evidence of the reality of his faith by a Christian conduct, or does not by his conduct belie his profession of faith; but we can have church (denominational) fellowship with those individuals or church bodies only that subscribe to our Lutheran Confessional writings and act accordingly.¹³

4. The essence of pulpit fellowship is mutual exchange of pulpits. And this mutual exchange of pulpits rests on a confessional basis, be it that of strict confessionalism (as e.g., in the Synodical Conference), or that of doctrinal indifference (as is frequently the case in some Reformed denominations). Pulpit fellow-

¹²Ibid., p. 61.

¹³Ibid., p. 81.

ship is intimately linked up with the confessional position held by the denomination. The pulpit being the public platform of the denomination for proclaiming its confessional position, fellowship in the pulpit implies and involves fellowship in the public platform of the denomination, be that platform one of strict confessionalism, or one of doctrinal indifference. Pulpit-fellowship is, therefore, confessional fellowship.

Altar-fellowship too, must be defined as confessional fellowship. Altar-fellowship with the Roman Catholic Church means acceptance of the doctrine of transubstantiation; with the Lutheran Church, belief in the real presence of the body and blood of Christ; with the Reformed Church, generally, rejection of the doctrine of the real presence, and belief only in the spiritual participation in the body and blood of Christ through faith, if there be any participation at all; with others, total indifference with respect to the doctrine of the Lord's Supper. Altar-fellowship is thus simply part and parcel of confessional fellowship with respect to the doctrine of the Lord's Supper. Further more, altar-fellowship, like pulpit fellowship, is mutual. It implies e.g. the admittance of Reformed Christians to communion in our churches and admittance of Lutherans to communion in theirs

Neither prayer nor prayer-fellowship are acts of confessionalism, but merely acts of communion with God based on fundamental faith in Christ, and as such free from the implications of confessional fellowship in those doctrines wherein Christians of other denominations differ from us. Prayer-fellowship differs, therefore both from pulpit fellowship and from altar-fellowship in this that the latter are intimately linked up with confessional fellowship, while prayer-fellowship is not. Circumstances may, indeed, arise which will carry confessional implications into an act of prayer-fellowship, and thus render it an act of confessional fellowship, but normally such circumstances are not constant concomitants of prayer-fellowship¹⁴

5. In the Augsburg Confession (Art. VII par. 2; Triglot p. 47) it is stated, on the basis of Eph. 4:5-6: "And to the true unity of the church it is enough to agree concerning the doctrine of the Gospel and the ad-

¹⁴Ibid., pp. 82-83.

ministration of the Sacraments." And the Apology (Par. 20, Triglot p. 232-233) unambiguously defines "the pure doctrine of the Gospel and the Sacraments" as "the foundation" referred to by Paul in 1 Cor. 3:11 ("Other foundation can no man lay than that laid, which is Jesus Christ"), i.e., as "the true knowledge of Christ and faith," and expressly takes doctrinal errors which do not overthrow the foundation into account as matters that "are both forgiven them and also corrected," hence as matters which do not destroy the requisite fundamental unity of the church spoken of in the Augsburg Confession.

Wherever, then, this essential unity exists, religious fellowship will also be possible, and such universal Christian fellowship will not be nullified or excluded by confessional fellowship. For while confessional fellowship is based on unity of confession in particulars of doctrine, and represents the highest and best religious fellowship attainable by the members of a confessional group, it still has its roots sunk in the essential unity of the church universal and is, within that unity, a legitimate development toward greater maturity and purity. It cannot, therefore, void and nullify universal Christian fellowship, but, having its roots in the latter, must continue the latter along with the former, unless through circumstances (time, place, occasion, etc.,) a violation of confessional conscience should be definitely and necessarily involved. Our Confessional Writings do, indeed, take a definite stand against church- (i.e. confessional or denominational) fellowship with those who differ from us in doctrine, particularly when the contrary doctrine may be described as "teaching of demons and of Antichrist" (Smalcald Art., Par. 42; Triglot, p. 517); but they do not place a ban on universal Christian fellowship; they rather recognise it in recognising the Christians outside of the Lutheran Church as members of the church, and in requiring for unity in the church (which certainly includes Christian fellowship resulting from such unity) no more than agreement in fundamental faith in the basis of Eph. 4:5-6. "For never," writes Dr. Walther (Lehre u. Where, 1868, p. 66) "has the church attained a higher degree of unity in doctrine than a unity in fundamentals, and only a fanatical chiliast would hope that the church would ever reach a higher degree." This same position, we saw, is on the same basis (Eph. 4:6) taken also in our Synodical Catechism with respect to prayer-fellowship: "Because all believers are in Christ the children of one Father, and should, therefore, pray for and with each other." All which is in keeping with the practice of

the apostolic Church, I Cor. 3:10-15; Eph. 2:18-22;
3:12.¹⁵

Individual Christian fellowship, such as is involved in prayer, Bible study and discussion, the family altar and most devotional exercises, is basically different from church fellowship, the interchange of pulpits, intercommunion, and confessional fellowship, because the latter involves the status confessionis, whereas the former usually does and need not. Should the status confessionis become involved in individual Christian fellowship, as in the family communion problem cited earlier, it would logically and inevitably necessitate a cessation of fellowship at that level. Wherever the need for confessing the truths of God's Word or the right practice in compliance with the same arises, Christian Fellowship cannot continue until the basic unity of faith by way of submission to the Word of God, is demonstrated.

By its very constitution, however, a visible, local church is always in statu confessionis. Believers have grouped themselves together because of their common faith and conviction. In some groups this confessional association is lost sight of almost completely. In other groups it constitutes the very essence of that denomination. To jeopardise a confessional position by association with or toleration of a contradictory position is an evident compro-

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 88.

wise, even insincerity.

The scriptural exhortation not to fellowship with error, in addition to being the guiding principle which must direct every Christian in statu confessionis, is the only possible position that can be adopted by those who desire to remain faithful to God's revealed Word. If we give to an erring Christian, who despite the fact that he has become aware of his error, or who has been shown that his particular position in a certain matter of importance is not the scriptural position, the hand of church--(that is, altar and pulpit) fellowship we thereby confirm him in the conviction that his error does not matter, or at least that his position might be just as scriptural as ours. This attitude which is so subtle as to be almost unrecognisable at first, is nevertheless so potent, and so fraught with spiritual danger, that it must be labelled and designated for what it is. Initially, the condoning of error by fellowship may seem to be an act of Christian charity, but in reality it can be laying the foundation for that which will destroy the very essence of the Christian faith. This is just what the ecumenical movement so often leads to spiritually, though there are some things in which all churches could unite with great benefit, for example, social relief, witness against national evils, moral leadership in the ominous times in which we are living.

Dr. H. P. Hamann in his contention that unionism, the

compromising of the truth, if unchecked ends up in rank heathenism, demonstrates how this actually happens, when in a synodical doctrinal paper he wrote:

In the year 1955, there was held a so-called "Festival of Faith." There was a service held to commemorate the tenth birthday of the United Nations, and arranged by the San Francisco Council of Churches under the leadership of prominent men in the W.C.C and L.W.F. A Jewish rabbi spoke the Invitation of Worship. The lection, read antiphonally by the liturgist and the assembly, consisted of statements taken from the holy writings of Confucianism, Hinduism, Buddhism, the New Testament, the Koran, and the Old Testament as the holy book of the Jews. This was followed by silent prayers, the text for each religion being printed on the programme. A professor of one of the leading Lutheran seminaries in the U.S.A. took part prominently. There you have the logical end of unionism and the unionistic thinking. The exclusive claim of Christianity to have the one and only revelation of the One and Holy God is given up. Christianity and heathenism join hands. We are left with no name of God at all. We force God into obscurity and hiddenness. Unionists, of course, do not all end up here, but it is only by the grace of God that they do not. Their principles do end here. Confession of God's name is always total, never partial, always a hundred per cent, never less. Failure to confess what you see to be the truth of God at any point means in principle, that you will fail to confess all along the line. God's name is not in one place holy and untouchable, and in another something at our disposal, for us to do with as we please. Where a Christian sees the truth to be involved, there his sense of awe and reverence for God's holiness cries Alarm! Here is holy ground! Off with your shoes!¹⁶

The confession of the truth is a service of love which Christians both individually and as a church owe to one another as they do their part in the building of the kingdom of

¹⁶Dr. H. P. Hamann, "Hallowed Be Thy Name," Doctrinal Paper 1958 Synodical Report, S. A. District (Naracoorte: Hansen Printing House, published by the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Australia, S. A. District, Inc., 1958), p. 28.

the Lord. Whether or not the confessional church can go to the extreme and err in this respect immediately becomes a loaded issue. It is the issue with which confessional Lutheran leaders are grappling throughout the world. This is perhaps the crux of the issues dividing or keeping apart the two Lutheran Churches in Australia. Both agree as to what constitutes sinful unionism--giving to error the same standing as truth. But they are not agreed as to what circumstances involved unionism.

It is possible to offend Christians by remaining separate from them on the confessional level, when no clear doctrinal issue can be pinpointed. This sort of offence has been given to many Lutherans of both churches. The two Lutheran Churches in Australia have agreed officially as to the sum total of publica doctrina on the basis of the Scriptures and the Confessions. If the two Lutheran Churches are agreed as to what is to be taught and believed, and if what is taught and believed generally by the two Lutheran Churches is in accordance with the Scriptures and the Confessions, why should they not unite in altar and pulpit fellowship? If that were the de facto position of the two Lutheran Churches in Australia, continued separation would be schismatic and a cause of offence. But while the United Evangelical Lutheran Church of Australia believes that it is their duty upon occasion to confess the truth within non-Lutheran, non-confessional, even under certain circumstances within non-biblical associations, but particularly within such organisations as

the Lutheran World Federation, which according to its constitution is pledged to uphold the Scriptures and the Confessions, and also, if need be, within the World Council of Churches, which acknowledges Christ as Lord and Saviour, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Australia argues that officially as a church to enter into the association of say the Lutheran World Federation, and debate, discuss, and bear witness to the truth under circumstances in which there is no genuine desire to receive the truths of God's Word and to acknowledge the witness of the Confessions, is putting the church in a position of compromise as to the truth. The Lutheran World Federation knows the position of the Scriptures and the Confessions. Indeed it has pledged itself to that position in its constitution. But many of its member churches have no intention of adhering to the principle, for their own church status is often a denial of the same, particularly in the matter of intercommunion with the Reformed Churches, who deny the real presence. Can any confessional Lutheran Church then say that for conscience sake it should enter the Lutheran World Federation, when from the outset it knows that its confessional witness will be accepted only as a contribution, not as that which is the revealed truth? Because so many Lutherans, especially the members of the U. E. L. C. A. do not understand how serious are the implications of the above, they feel offended at the continued division of the Lutheran Church in Australia.

God. There are many circumstances when faith is strengthened by fellowship. Individual Christians can be greatly cheered, comforted and helped in most of the difficulties of life by the encouragement of their fellow believers, by the comfort and guidance of God's Word and by the help of prayer. This is where the common hymn heritage of the Christian Church has been of such inestimable blessing. It is possible to think of situations in which a heterodox church body could receive a great blessing from the fellowship of a church, which is pure in its declaration of the truth, strong in faith, and mighty in love, on the condition, however, that the weaker church is fully in earnest to know, to heed and to be guided by the truths of God's Word. Under these conditions both the individual Christians and the confessional church should earnestly seek to extend the hand of true fellowship in the Lord and His Word. But while it is a clear Christian duty to extend the hand of Christian fellowship to those who are in the Lord, except when to do so would compromise the truth, and while this will bring wonderful blessings from the Lord, declining to extend the hand of altar and pulpit fellowship to those who in certain matters of doctrine or practice are in error, is also His will, and is the most effective, often the only adequate answer to error. To remain separate from fellow Christians, whom we acknowledge as such, and with whom it would be of mutual advantage to associate and work, because we are not in confessional agreement, is the most convincing attestation that

God's truth means more than earthly advantage. When we are convinced that any weakening of the revealed truth means a concession to error, and that error is spiritual poison, it becomes our bounden duty to dissociate from fellowship with Christians, who do not, will not, or refuse to accede to, proclaim, or put into practice the whole truth of God's Word.

That question has previously been considered in the following pages. Having seen that the church is not a mere organization, but a living organism, we must ask ourselves, one who seeks an organization, what is the nature of the church? It bears the name of Christ, and is called the church of Christ. Within that church, there is a diversity of affines, as well as a diversity of gifts, talents and so forth. The question then arises, if we are actually saved, what is the nature of the church? Is it not rather the product of a divine work, which is not the work of all men? Jesus said, "I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." Is not the church an organization, as defined by the scriptures, instituted by Christ?

The ultimate decisive question is, whether the church is properly defined as the assembly of those who are found in the company of the Lord, or as the body of Christ. The truth is, that the church is defined by saying that in the fact that Jesus Christ, the second person of the Godhead, has become man, and that we think of Christ as really existing in the world. But Christ is what he is, and we know that he is, that he entered into the world, and that he is, and that John says "the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and that becoming flesh, he became man, and that he remained that which he was, and that he did not become less or cease to be, when he became man. In like manner, the church is the assembly of those who are found in the company of Christ, and that Christ is the head of the church, and that the church is the body of Christ, as the head of the body, which is the church."

To what extent the church is defined, according to the scriptures, and

¹ Anders Nygren, *Agape: The Christian Philosophy of St. Agnes*, p. 110.

CHAPTER VIII

CHURCH FELLOWSHIP IN ACCORDANCE

WITH THE SCRIPTURES

"Did Christ establish the church, or not?" asks Anders Nygren, and answers:

That question has generally been answered about as follows. During his life time Jesus gathered a group of disciples around himself, but there was as yet no kind of organisation. Then if one moves on a bit into history one meets an organisation which girdles the globe. It bears the name of Christ and announces itself as his church. Within that organisation one finds a rich diversity of offices, as well as sacraments, a Christian cultus and so on. The question presents itself, did Jesus actually found that organisation? Did He actually envision anything of the kind? Is it not rather the product of a development whose result was not at all what Jesus would have approved? Is it not, in any case an anachronism to speak of the Church as instituted by Christ?

The ultimate decisive answer to the question whether the church is properly viewed as instituted by Christ is found in the concept of the church as the body of Christ. The truth can be most simply expressed by saying that in the fact that Christ exists, the church exists as his body. The danger is always present that we think of Christ as wholly separate from human life. But Christ is what He is precisely because of the fact that He entered into human life. When the Gospel of John says "the Word became flesh," it means to say, not that becoming flesh limited his fitness as Christ, but rather that such fitness was conditioned thereon. Had he not become man he would not have been the Christ. In like manner, the situation is the same as to the church. Christ is not Christ by Himself, but He is Christ as the head of His body, which is the church.¹

To what extent the institutional, organisational, and

¹Anders Nygren, editor, This is the Church (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, c. 1952), p. 4.

denominational development of the church has been in accordance with the Lord's will and has been prompted by the Spirit of God will only be clearly known at the final Judgment. But there are some things of which we can be sure. The omniscient Lord certainly knew and knows the external forms the visible church would take, also the divisions which would rend it. Whatever form the church has taken down through the centuries, the Holy Spirit through the Word and the Sacraments has been gathering the elect of God into the una sancta, and making them heirs of the kingdom of heaven. No matter what difficulties, hindrances, and obstacles Satan, this world and our human weaknesses and perversions have raised, and no matter how difficult it is for us to harmonise the ideal with the real, the task of building the church is the Lord's work, and is being carried out as the Scriptures have both promised and affirmed: "Upon this rock (the confession of Peter) I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it;"² and again: "Ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow-citizens with the saints, and of the household of God; and are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief corner stone"³

Many have been offended at the divided state of Christendom as Dr. Minear pointed out at the Faith and Order Con-

²Matthew 16:18.

³Ephesians 2:19-20.

ference held at Oberlin, Ohio, U. S. A. in September, 1957:

In every city today the Christian community is obviously and obstreperously divided within itself. There is no fully mutual recognition of the churches as truly churches, as of all ministries as truly ministry, of all sacraments as truly sacraments. The conflict is as destructive on the local as on the universal scene In any case, local congregations are as deeply involved in this scandal as are the world confessional bodies. And to ignore this scandal is to deny the headship of the one Lord. For example, if every celebration of the Lord's Supper is viewed as a token of the scandal of Christian division, should not every church celebration attend to Christ's judgment on the scandal? To be sure, we annually join in the World Communion Sunday, but is that enough? Unless every Eucharist includes the world it is not truly Christ's table.⁴

But the zeal of the ecumenists for the reunion of Christendom becomes a zeal without knowledge when the Scriptures as the foundation on which Christ is building His Church are ignored. Not a few ecumenists would effect the reunion of Christendom under the flag of loyalty to Christ. Indeed, loyalty to Christ is the sum and essence of the Christian faith, and true loyalty to Him unites all Christians in that one communion of saints. True loyalty to Christ could well be the basis of Church Fellowship, for Christ is indeed the sum total of God's revelation to man, the fulness of all things, the One by whom and for whom all things have been made, the One who has redeemed us to God by His blood. But loyalty to Christ is essentially loyalty to His Word, for it is through His Word that He has made Himself known to man.

⁴Dr. H. Hamann, "The Nature of the Unity We Seek," The Australian Theological Review, XXX (March-June, 1959), p. 12.

As the essence of the Son's relationship to His Father consisted in this that He obeyed His Father's will completely even to death, and always did those things which pleased Him, so He tells us: "If ye keep my commandments, ye shall abide in my love; even as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in His love,"⁵ and "If ye love Me, keep my commandments."⁶ To protest loyalty to Christ and to disobey His Word is a contradiction, but "if ye continue in My Word, then are ye My disciples indeed."⁷

That we are now living in a world, in which Christendom is plagued by every conceivable schism and heresy is evident to all. Simply and categorically to deny the hand of individual or church fellowship to everyone who does not agree with us in every point of doctrine, while it makes the issue clear cut, and puts one in a position beyond all possibility of compromise may result in oversimplification of the whole problem of Christian and church fellowship as we have shown. If every Christian, both theologian and layman, had been brought up in the orthodox Christian faith, and then departed from it, the appraisal of their position would be easier. But as we have also shown, the majority of erring Christians are not even aware in their hearts and consciences that they are in error. Because of their environment

⁵John 15:10.

⁶John 14:15.

⁷John 8:31.

and training many are quite certain they are right that their position is the truth, that they are in God's kingdom and that they are faithful builders of it. God will be the judge, and the Last Day will declare their works. But many of their teachings and practices are even now condemned by the Word of Truth. Hence it is not presumption, but the warning of true Christian concern to point out that many churches are perverting the truth, that some are hindering the growth of God's kingdom, and that others like the Pharisees and Sadducees do not want to enter in themselves and keep others from entering also. But what is the basis on which such an important, vital issue can be clearly and unequivocally decided? We cannot do more nor less than with Luther go back to God's Word.

The truths of God's Word are clear, and the witness of orthodox Christianity through the centuries from the time of the apostles on, is a consistent witness for those who have ears to hear, who are of the truth, and who are prepared to accept the truth when it becomes evident. That we can by the grace and enlightenment of God's Holy Spirit know the truth of His Word is axiomatic theologically. It is just as axiomatic as, for example, is the acceptance by science and engineering of the principle that the rational human being can gauge the straightness of a line or surface. As the evidence of our senses under test conditions immediately declare whether an edge or surface is straight or not, and we accept this evidence else the whole realm of

applied science is thrown into confusion and chaos, so in the realm of theology the Christian theologian must accept the straight edge of God's Word as the criterion of the truth. But just as the engineer or craftsman does not immediately discard a piece of material, because it is not straight but proceeds to work on it, so theologically and spiritually we cannot immediately dissociate ourselves, either individually or as a church, from those who are in error or who are guilty of wrong practice. Dr. C. F. W. Walther understood this quite clearly when almost a hundred years ago he pointed out:

We are far from desiring to discontinue fraternal fellowship with an individual person, or church-fellowship with a church-body, if these are not dogmatically correct in their Christian knowledge. By no means do we regard such correctness as a condition of such fellowship. If we would do that, we would have to contend against ourselves, for while we note such faults, for example, errors in others, they again may note such in the one or the other among us. No, as soon as there reveals itself in an individual person or in a church-body the readiness of mind to submit unconditionally to the entire Word of God and to hold nothing that militates against the foundation of the Christian faith--be it the real foundation (Christ), or the dogmatic foundation (doctrine of justification through faith), or the organic foundation (the Scriptures)--we gladly extend to every such person the hand of fraternal fellowship, and are also cordially willing and ready to have church-fellowship with such a church-body. This, however, is our attitude and practice, not because we regard any doctrine clearly revealed in the Word of God as an open question, which we are free to affirm or deny, to decide thus or thus, but because we know that there are errors of weakness, and that a Christian may carry about in his mind even a fundamental error, without overthrowing the foundation in his heart, let alone that a person erring with respect to a non-fundamental point would necessarily reject the foundation of faith. Nevertheless, we regard it as our duty to reprehend, refute, oppose, fight, and censure as error whatever becomes manifest

as such in those who desire to be our brethren, whether the error concern a fundamental or a non-fundamental doctrine of the Word of God.⁸

The basis, therefore, for the building of Christ's kingdom and for all fellowship in Christ, whether on the individual or on the church level is the Word of God.

But what does loyalty to the Word of God imply? Probably the majority of denominations would be offended, if they were confronted with the charge of disloyalty to the Word of God. That is what we are loyal to, they protest, and immediately they proceed to try and prove their claim. The resultant theological conflict becomes such an exegetical skirmish, that as Bishop Berkeley realised over against philosophical truth--it is almost impossible to find the truth because of the cloud of dust raised by conflicting speculations. Most students of doctrine soon discover that the astute exegetes can "prove" practically anything from the Scriptures. There are few denominations and sectarian groups which cannot defend their position from the Scriptures--at least that is their conviction. No wonder the lay person, who is caught in this theological whirlpool, despairs of finding the truth. But right here we have the reason for the fact that almost from the inception of the New Testament church, clear expression was immediately given to the faith. Philip answered the query of the Ethiopian

⁸Adolph A. Brux, Christian Prayer-Fellowship and Unionism (Wisconsin: Pamphlet, 1935), p. 90.

eunuch unequivocally: "If thou believest with all thy heart, thou mayest."⁹ To the question of the jailor at Philippi: "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" Paul answers categorically: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house."¹⁰ What this faith meant for Christendom Paul together with the other apostles made very clear in the epistles of the New Testament, which were not only given by divine inspiration, but have also been "miraculously" preserved to us by divine design.

With the growth of the church it became necessary for the candidates for baptism clearly to state the Christian faith into which they were being baptised, and so arose the Apostles' Creed, which though anonymous, has ever since been recognised as a true confession of the apostolic Christian faith. Then as errorists became more insistent and began not only to query the Christian faith, but to overthrow it, we find that more explicit creeds were formulated, chief of which were the Nicene and the Athanasian creeds. What makes these creeds binding for all who would be true Christians? The evident fact that they clearly set forth the central truths of the Scriptures concerning salvation, even as the Athanasian Creed concludes: "This is the catholic faith; which except a man believe faithfully and firmly, he cannot be saved."

⁹Acts 16:30.

¹⁰Acts 16:30-31.

A similar situation arose when Luther in his 95 Theses protested against the perversion of the Christian faith by the sale of indulgences. To halt the spread of the resultant controversy Luther was summoned by Emperor Charles V to Worms (1521) and called upon to recant. Luther replied:

Unless I be overcome and convinced by proofs of the Holy Scriptures or by manifestly clear grounds and reasons--for I believe neither the Pope nor the councils alone, because it is an open and known fact that they have often erred and opposed each other,--and I am convinced by those passages adduced and introduced by me and my conscience is bound in God's Word, I can or will recant nothing, since it is neither safe nor advisable to do aught against conscience. God help me! Amen.

Finally, to settle the dispute which was rending the whole of Christendom, the Emperor in 1530 invited the evangelical princes of Germany to the Diet at Augsburg. There the Augsburg Confession, as prepared by Melancthon, with the full endorsement of Luther, was presented. The reply of the Romanists, in which they so patently twisted the Scriptures, evoked the Apology or Defence of the Augsburg Confession. These confessions did not take the place of God's Word, but were submitted by the Lutheran confessors as the true exposition of God's Word. After Luther's death the peace of the church was threatened by the Adiaphoristic, the Majoristic, the Synergistic, the Flacian, the Osiandrian, the Antinomian, and the Crypto-Calvin controversies. To define the true doctrine in these controverted matters, as well as over against the anabaptists and the antitrinitarians, and the many errorists, Jacob Andreae and Martin Chemnitz prepared

the Formula of Concord, which sets forth the one true Christian faith with a theological clarity and the correctness unequalled in the history of dogma. Confessional Lutherans first began subscribing to the Formula of Concord in 1577. Thus the Augsburg Confession, The Apology of the Augsburg Confession, the Smalclad Articles, The Small and The Large Catechism of Luther, and The Formula of Concord with its Thorough Declaration became the symbols of Lutheran conviction. Let all who will, read them and test them against the Scriptures and examine them for themselves whether or not they are the truths of God's Word, set forth in answer to the questions of the time. Though, because of their historical background, like every other confession of faith, they are not an exhaustive declaration concerning every truth set forth in the Scriptures, yet so convinced and certain are we that they are indeed the true exposition of those fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith, with which they deal, that we, the ordained clergy of the Evangelical Lutheran Church have bound ourselves in conscience not to preach or teach anything contrary to these Lutheran Confessions. These confessional Writings, have been and are, the official expression of the beliefs of the Lutheran Church. The designation "Lutheran" here is not meant to be denominational, but being the name given by the Romanists to those who made that confession of faith, the term "Lutheran" has become a term of identification for this particular form in which the apostolic truth, upon which Christ the Lord is

building His Church, is set forth.

These same confessions go on to declare the Scriptural truth that "to the true unity of the Church it is enough to agree concerning the doctrine of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments," Augsburg Confession, Article VII, paragraph 2. The Apology, Article VII, paragraph 20 makes it quite clear that "the pure doctrine of the Gospel and the Sacraments" are "the foundation" referred to by Paul in I Corinthians 3:11: "Other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ."¹¹ That the confessors had in mind by "it is enough" the many ceremonies and ecclesiastical traditions of the Roman Church is clear from the rest of Article VII of the Augsburg Confession: . . . "Nor is it necessary that human traditions, that is, rites and ceremonies, instituted by men, should be everywhere alike. As Paul says: One faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all etc., Ephesians 4:5-6." These matters were adiaphora providing they did not contradict the clear Word of God.

For the true unity of the church today, it must similarly be held, that it is sufficient that there be agreement concerning the doctrine of the Gospel and the Sacraments. Now the problem arises with the intersynodical negotiations between the two Lutheran Churches in Australia.

¹¹ Triglot Concordia (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921), pp. 47, 233.

Agreement in the Gospel and the Sacraments has been attained and confirmed. Is not this then sufficient for church fellowship? It would be, were it not for the fact that church fellowship, distinct from individual fellowship, is confessional fellowship. When it becomes apparent that certain external relationships affect the clarity and consistency of our confessional fellowship, as we are convinced that membership in the various ecumenical movements does, for, as we noted before, the ecumenical movements are not based on the earnest and sincere intention to know and follow the truths of God's Word, then the very essence of our confessional fellowship is being challenged and undermined. If the subscription to the Scriptures and the Confessions by the Lutheran World Federation is only de iure and not de facto, then its member churches are not in full agreement as to the completely exclusive nature and inviolable character of the doctrine concerning the Gospel and the Sacraments. Further, membership in the Lutheran World Federation by the United Evangelical Lutheran Church in Australia indicates that the two Australian Lutheran Churches are not in full doctrinal agreement as to the exclusive correctness of the doctrinal position, which is our Lutheran heritage of grace and trust. We do not need more than agreement in the Gospel and Sacraments for church fellowship, but it must be an absolute and complete agreement, not a tentative or conditional agreement. We cannot hope to attain full doctrinal agreement in every minor issue. Dr. C. F. W. Walther cor-

rectly designates such a wish as chiliastic. The church militant is imperfect and will remain imperfect. But the church which desires to remain faithful to the Word of God cannot fellowship confessionally with any church, which does not beyond any trace of compromise and with absolute consistency affirm and practise the Gospels and the Sacraments according to the Scriptures. As it is disagreement in the doctrines of the Scriptures which has disrupted the visible church, so it is the threatened undermining of the basic doctrines of the Scriptures by alliances, which prevents Lutheran union in Australia.

The confessional Lutheran insistence upon doctrinal unity as the basis for organic church union is severely criticised by most ecumenists, because they look upon such a prerequisite as an insurmountable obstacle to the reunion of divided Christendom. However, as many are beginning to realise that without some or some sort doctrinal agreement any church merger simply results in theological chaos, it is interesting to note Dr. Ruth Rouse's summing up as a result of the Amsterdam Assembly of the World Council of Churches:

Looking back from the standpoint of 1948 and the Amsterdam Assembly of the World Council of Churches, it is easy to see that the ideals of Christian unity so long associated with warring parties and schools of thought are not hostile but complementary ideals. Unity in truth and unity in Christian fellowship are both necessary constituents in any true Christian unity. If ever real Christian union is to be attained, it must be sought along both paths of approach--reapproachment between Churches as such, and movements of co-operation and fellowship between individual Chris-

tians of different confessions. But these lessons learned from forty years of united ecumenical endeavor were hidden from the gaze of sincere lovers of unity in the 19th century, who, with equal sincerity pursued unity along different paths.¹²

It must be acknowledged that the confessional Lutheran position of requiring basic doctrinal agreement for true church union has sometimes lost sight of the reality of the universal fellowship all believers have in Christ. The insistence on the need to separate from errorists for confessional reasons has led some to refuse the hand of the fellowship of faith to those who are one with them in the Lord. Therefore it is factual and scriptural that true Christianity does involve unity in Christian fellowship. Where there is no understanding and deeper appreciation of this deeper unity of the Spirit between all true believers, there will, of course, be no desire to maintain or re-establish true unity with our fellow Christians. But even where there is a genuine awareness of the fundamental unity of the una sancta with all its implications, it still remains true that we cannot walk, work, worship, commune, preach and teach in true fellowship with other church groups unless there is basic doctrinal agreement, that is, full, true, complete agreement, as the Confessions say, "in the Gospel and the Sacraments." The more complete becomes doctrinal agreement be-

¹²Ruth Rouse and Stephen Charles Neill, editors, A History of the Ecumenical Movement, 1917-1948 (London: S. P. C. K.), p. 326.

tween two churches, the closer they are drawn to each other. Where there is full and genuine agreement in doctrine, with the natural implication of conforming practice, there the visible church becomes united. But until there is such basic agreement there can be no true union of the churches. That is why the confessional Lutheran position makes doctrinal agreement the touchstone of church fellowship or union.

Where there is such full doctrinal agreement, it is schismatical for churches to remain separate, and to refuse altar and pulpit fellowship. Because of the doctrinal agreement attested by the Australian Lutheran Theses of Agreement, not a few, particularly within the United Evangelical Lutheran Church in Australia believe that the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Australia is following a policy of separatism or isolationism by refusing the United Evangelical Lutheran Church's offer of pulpit and altar fellowship on the basis of the Theses of Agreement. There have been times perhaps when confessional Lutherans both officially and as individuals have erred and sinned against the unity of the Spirit, which St. Paul has bidden believers maintain.

Where this has been or is the case, the cause of confessional Lutheranism is harmed not helped. But, on the other hand, this charge of disrupting, breaking, hindering or preventing the unity of the Spirit cannot be upheld, if there is no real, genuine, and full agreement in doctrine and practice. Some, following the example of certain European churches,

have suggested selective fellowship between truly confessional pastors and congregations as a possible solution. But selective fellowship destroys the essence of the synodical bond, whereby all the constituent congregations or parishes of a synod have grouped themselves together on a certain confessional platform. Where a congregation or group of congregations within a synod fellowships confessionally with a smaller or larger group of another synod or denomination with whom the whole synod cannot enter into church fellowship, the very import of the different confessional platform is being set aside.

As we noted in connection with the problem of Lutheran union in Australia, though both churches have given official consent to the Theses of Agreement, whereby a common doctrinal basis is affirmed, the two churches are unable to unite because divergent practices reveal a different understanding of the doctrines both accept. In this case divergencies of practice reveal a fundamentally different understanding of the nature of the doctrines involved. In the case of Australian Lutheran union it is the matter of religious unionism and its implications. Or to put it in another way--the exclusiveness of the Lutheran confessional position over against the Gospel and the Sacraments. Both churches agree that "unionism" is sinful, but agreement has not been reached as to what constitutes "unionism," or when "unionism" begins.

Not all divergencies of practice, of course, are church divisive. Dr. Theodore Graebner warns:

Apart from principles of Scripture, there are convictions which Christians have regarding church life and activities. It would be unfair and unbrotherly to apply the term "weak Christians" to those who hold certain negative views. I believe that there has been much sinning by applying this objectionable term to those who take strict view in some question of church practice. Strong or weak has quite often nothing to do with the case. It may be a matter of temperament. It may be a difference in point of view. It may be lack of experience, some things being readily recognised as innocent when viewed in the concrete that appear objectionable in the abstract. But what excuse has anyone for declaring that through such difference the fellowship of faith is broken.¹³

Only that divergence in practice is disruptive of church fellowship which reveals disunity in doctrinal understanding.

While the general ecumenical movement overlooks the basic need for a true doctrinal agreement, the confessional churches, on the other hand must be on their guard lest they overlook the fundamental unity of the church universal, which the Holy Spirit has built upon the foundations of the prophets and apostles. Wherever the Word of God is proclaimed and the sacraments are administered, there the Holy Spirit is building the church universal, the una sancta. While general or universal Christian fellowship is the acknowledgment of this world-wide work of the Holy Spirit, church fellowship, that is, altar and pulpit fellowship is the confessional testimony of those whom the Holy Spirit has made willing to heed the voice of their Lord as He speaks to men in His Word, as He instructs and directs them, and as He

¹³Theodore Graebner, The Borderline of Right and Wrong (Tenth Print; St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, c. 1951), p. 138.

reveals to them the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven.

Confessional fellowship cannot be a fellowship within universal fellowship, as Dr. Brux elaborates in his argument:

As the unity of faith in the invisible spiritual church is a unity in fundamental Christian faith, that is, in faith in Christ as Redeemer (Ephesians 4:5), so the essential unity of the visible church is likewise a unity in fundamental faith ("unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God," Ephesians 4:13, and where "of the Son of God" is the object not only of knowledge, but also of faith), and it is WITHIN this essential unity, and on the basis of it, that there is growth and development to maturity, resulting in steadfast adherence to, and confession of, the truth in love, and in an ever fuller growing up into Christ in all things (Ephesians 4:13-15). Such growth and development to maturity will thus not destroy the existing fundamental unity of the church universal and make universal Christian fellowship impossible, but will rather strengthen, further and advance it, "till we all come unto the unity of mature faith and of mature knowledge to the Son of God, unto mature manhood, unto the measure of the full maturity of Christ," and will thus lay an ever deeper and wider foundation for universal Christian fellowship. Confessional fellowship should, therefore, not overlook and disregard the existing fundamental unity of the church universal and universal Christian fellowship given thereby, but should strenuously seek to preserve and to foster both, "endeavour to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:3).¹⁴

It is very difficult, moreover, to keep the proper balance in the apparent conflict between the universal fellowship of fundamental Christian faith, which Christians are to practise and maintain, and the exclusive nature of confessional fellowship, which are distinguishing marks of the many denominations and sects within visible Christendom. To

¹⁴Adolph A. Brux, Christian Prayer-Fellowship and Unionism (Wisconsin: Pamphlet, 1935), p. 87.

tolerate error in any form is tantamount to the denial of the truth concerned. It does not, will not, and cannot help true fellowship in the Lord to tolerate errorists. And as Dr. Sasse points out in his intersynodical notes:

It is an idea which is absolutely foreign to the New Testament that it might be possible to have a limited koinonia with heretics according to the measure of agreement existing between them and us. St. John had certainly some things in common with the heretics whom he so bluntly rejects, I John 4 and 2. In II John 11 he even warns against social intercourse with them, because even that might mean to become partakers of their evil deeds. The same is true with the people whom St. Paul had to reject. It was not easy even at that time to draw the borderline between those who were of the Lord, the ecclesia, and those who were seduced by heresy, as also beyond this borderline there are people who love their Lord and err in simplicity of heart. The church has never anticipated the judgment of God on particular persons, even in condemning heresy. In Eph. 4:14 ff. St. Paul expressly warns against heresies, speaking of "cunning of men" and "Of their craftiness in deceitful wiles." This plain and unambiguous condemnation of errors and stubborn errorists goes hand in hand with "speaking the truth in love," just as in the "Prayers of the Faithful," which were said after the doors had been closed (Matthew 6:6) before the Eucharist, a prayer was said "pro schismaticis et hearcticis" which had been excommunicated, that is, excluded from the Sacrament. This is a problem with which the Church is confronted at all times.¹⁵

It is just because error has now become so rampant and so destructive not only of non-fundamental doctrines, but also of the very essence of the Scriptures and of those articles of faith, which are basic to salvation, that it is so necessary and so vital to stress the importance of preserving true confessional fellowship. The more complete is the

¹⁵Dr. H. Sasse, Intersynodical Exegetical Theses, John 17:20-23 (ca. 1958), p. 5.

agreement in the Word of God both as to doctrine and practice, the deeper, the truer, the more satisfying, sustaining, encouraging, uplifting and edifying is the resultant Christian fellowship for individual Christians and for congregations. Error and errant practice divides, destroys and embitters. The truth with its consistent practice unites, builds and blesses.

What is then the confessional Lutheran attitude to the whole problem of Church unity? The fundamental unity of the Spirit, the unity of all believers in Christ, the unity of the una sancta, no man makes or destroys. It is there. It will be revealed fully in eternity. But it is present even now as the undergirding strength of Christendom. To demonstrate and promote this unity of faith in the visible church requires an open-minded consideration of the problem on the local, national and international level, a conscientious re-examination of the Scriptures, and a complete submission to the Scriptures as sole regina and index, on the part of each succeeding generation. That the ecumenical movement is to an certain extent aware of this is apparent from the Official Report of The North American Conference on Faith and Order, 1957, when under Section 2, Doctrinal Consensus and Conflict, it declares:

At the beginning of the Faith and Order Movement, faith in the divine-human Lord and Saviour tended to stand in a sort of splendid isolation, as the one clear point on which we were united. It is still the centre of our consensus; but under the influence of the biblical renewal there is now a growing sense of its connection with other basic Christian doctrines: God's covenant with his people Israel, fulfilled and renewed in Christ;

the Church as the new people of God, the Body of Christ, the community (koinonia) of the Holy Spirit pressing on toward its consummation in a new community of mankind and a new heaven and earth. The stern events of our time have taught us to see new meaning in the dramatic conflict between the kingdom of Christ and the God-opposing powers, as portrayed in the New Testament; both our faith in Christ's ultimate Lordship over the world as well as the Church stands firm as the final capstone in the arch of faith that now begins to tower over the wreckage and confusion of our times. There has been a great recovery in recent years of the centrality of biblical revelation in Christian doctrine--though this has not penetrated all the curricula of Christian education--both as the record of the mighty acts of God leading up to our redemption in Christ, and also as the source of intelligible truths expressed in inspired words, whereby the message of our redemption can be spelled out. While we differ in our theories of revelation, reason and biblical inspiration, we are united in looking to the witness of Holy Scriptures, confirmed and interpreted by the witness of the Holy Spirit in the church, as the sine qua non of authentic Christian doctrine.¹⁶

The church on earth is to listen to what God has said in His Word. All Christians must keep on searching that Word of Truth, praying and working with one another in accordance with Christ's departing command: "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations (make disciples of all nations), baptising them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you."¹⁷ Wherever there is a sincere desire on the part of an individual or a church to submit unconditionally to the Word of God, there the hand both of individual and of church fellowship can, should, and will be

¹⁶The Nature of the Unity We Seek, Paul S. Minear, editor (St. Louis: The Bethany Press, c. 1958), p. 189.

¹⁷Matthew 28:19-20.

gladly given. Where a true and complete agreement in the Gospel and the Sacraments can be attained, there full altar and pulpit fellowship can and should be practised, for the church will never be able to attain a higher degree of unity in doctrine than a genuine unity in fundamentals. But because we are convinced that in our Lutheran Confessions as contained in the Book of Concord, we have a true exposition of God's Word, we as a church cannot have church fellowship with any individual or church which does not subscribe to the doctrinal content of our Lutheran Confessions, and act in accordance with the same.

In conclusion, we believe that there is a proper, Scripture-ordained and God-pleasing place for the practice of individual, general or universal Christian fellowship on the basis of fundamental faith in Christ the Saviour. On the other hand, where as the result of the confession of the truth, church, that is, altar and pulpit fellowship is restricted to those who by word and practice assent to the same, such confessional fellowship is demanded by loyalty to Christ and His Word, and will receive His eternal commendation as He Himself has declared:

Whosoever shall confess Me before men, him will I confess before My Father who is in heaven. But whosoever shall deny Me before men, him will I also deny before My Father which is in heaven.¹⁸

Each generation will have to appraise the problem of

¹⁸Matthew 10:32-33.

individual Christian-and-Church-Fellowship afresh, for each generation is called upon to receive the truth, to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and to hearken to His Word. Whatever is set forth as the truth of God, must be tested by every Christian conscience, according to the apostolic command: "Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world."¹⁹ There is one guide, the Scriptures, which "is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works."²⁰ Those who will not heed the testimony of the Scriptures are not of the Lord.

A Christian cannot but have fellowship with all who are his fellow believers in the Lord. This fellowship begins with a mutual discussion of the things of the Spirit. It is strengthened by joint meditation on the Word of God and by prayer. It demonstrates itself by public profession of the truths of God concerning salvation. And it culminates in a joint participation of the body and blood of the Lord in the Sacrament of the Altar, a holy communion in and with the Lord. There is only one such fellowship, even as there is one body, one Spirit, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and

¹⁹I John 4:1.

²⁰II Timothy 3:16-17.

Father of all.²¹ In His own good time the Lord will make this manifest.

The growth of the Christian Church is like the growth of a tree. Its branches cover the whole earth. Only those who are true believers in Christ are in that tree. Now it appears a divided church, but hereafter its basic unity with the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit will be manifest to all. Then we shall understand and see everything clearly. The visible church is but the prelude to the great kingdom of heaven, for which we have all prayed, as taught by our Lord in His own perfect prayer, and which we shall by God's grace enter after Judgment Day. Here the church is a church militant. There it will be the church triumphant. The goal meanwhile for all Christians is set forth by St. Paul, when he exhorted:

Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.²²

Alas, that true Christian fellowship is here so broken and disrupted! But as sure as the Son is with the Father, so certain is it that one day the prayer of the Son will be answered and fulfilled: "Holy Father, keep through thine own name those whom thou hast given Me, that they may

²¹Ephesians 4:4-6.

²²I Corinthians 1:10.

be one, as we are."²³

To those who charge confessional Lutherans with disrupting or hindering the unity of the visible church, we reply with Melancthon in the Conclusion of the Apology:

As to the want of unity and dissension in the Church, it is well known how these matters first happened, and who have caused the division, namely, the sellers of indulgences, who shamelessly preached intolerable lies, and afterwards condemned Luther for not approving of those lies, and besides, they again and again excited more controversies, so that Luther was induced to attack many other errors. But since our opponents would not tolerate the truth, and dared to promote manifest errors by force, it is easy to judge who is guilty of schism. Surely, all the world, all wisdom, all power ought to yield to Christ and His Holy Word. But the devil is the enemy of God, and therefore rouses all his might against Christ, to extinguish and suppress the Word of God. Therefore the devil with his members, setting himself against the Word of God, is the cause of the schism and want of unity. For we have most zealously sought peace, and still most eagerly desire it, provided only we are not forced to blaspheme and deny Christ. For God, the discernor of all men's hearts, is our witness that we do not delight and have no joy in this awful disunion. On the other hand, our adversaries have so far not been willing to conclude peace without stipulating that we must abandon the saving doctrine of the forgiveness of sin by Christ without merit, though Christ would be most foully blasphemed thereby.²⁴

SOLI DEO GLORIA

²³John 17:11.

²⁴Trilog Concordia (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921), p. 451.

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