

FELLOWSHIP WITHOUT THE RINGS

Jimmy Pautz
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“Fellowship.” When I think of fellowship, I think of the fellowship hall in the basement of my home church. Many older churches have them. The fellowship hall is a place for the members of that congregation to gather with coffee and donuts to have a committee meeting, a bible study, an Easter breakfast, and other expressions of their faith together. Church fellowship is all of these activities and more. Church fellowship, by definition, is “every joint expression, manifestation, and demonstration of their common faith by Christians who on the basis of their confession find themselves to be united with one another.”¹ The proper observance of fellowship follows Luther’s worship principle, “Participation of the Congregation.”² Through different interpretations of doctrine, fellowship can be applied properly and improperly to worship in Holy Communion, prayer, and worship leadership.

When discussing church fellowship, it is important to have a clear understanding of what the Bible teaches about fellowship. John Brug distinguishes fellowship into three different aspects: “the spiritual fellowship that all believers have with God and with each other through faith in Christ, the doctrinal fellowship that is recognized by a shared confession of the truth, and the fellowship that is expressed by joint activities.”³ The first aspect of fellowship, faith, is one that is only known by God; only God can see if someone has faith in their heart. The other two aspects, confession and action, are the visible products of that faith and should be judged according to Scripture to determine whether to join in fellowship with someone.⁴ Since it is impossible to see into another’s heart, Christians judge by confession and by what is said and

¹ David Kuske, “The Scriptural Principles of Fellowship Applied in an Area Lutheran High School Setting.” Unpublished paper presented in January 2001, WELS. (On file at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, WI.): 1.

² Gary Baumler and Kermit Moldenhauer, eds., *Christian Worship: Manual* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1993), 23.

³ John Brug, *Church Fellowship: Working Together for the Truth*. (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1996), 20.

⁴ Brug. *Church Fellowship...*, 21.

done.⁵ “It is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved” (Ro 10:10).

It is *only* according to Scripture that a person should be judged to determine fellowship. Fellowship is not dependant on whether the same customs, styles of worship, or lifestyles are kept but rather complete agreement in doctrine.⁶ Several places in the New Testament state the need for complete scriptural unity and preservation. For example, I Timothy 6:3-4 says, “If anyone teaches false doctrines and does not agree to the sound instruction of our Lord Christ and to godly teaching, he is conceited and understands nothing...” Paul is stressing the need to keep the integrity of the Bible and its teachings and that anyone who thinks they know better “understands nothing”. In respect to fellowship, believing the true scripture is a critical need in order for fellowship to exist. When doctrinal unity exists, God wants Christians to join in fellowship. “It was [Christ] who gave some...to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Eph 4:12b-13). Paul is saying in order to achieve the “the whole measure of the fullness of God”, Christians need to unify in their faith, knowledge, and actions.

Though encouraged in fellowship with those of common confession, conversely, Christians should not join themselves in fellowship with those who are “persistent errorists” (those who insist his/her error is truth).⁷ Avoiding fellowship is not to prevent them from hearing the truth, but to give a clear testimony of what is truth and to protect those weaker

⁵ Wilbert R. Gawrisch, “Romans 16:17,18 and Its Application to Individual Fellowship,” Unpublished essay presented on April 21, 1980. (On file at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, WI.): 3.

⁶ Brug. *Church Fellowship...*, 38.

⁷ Kuske, “The Scriptural Principles of Fellowship...,” 1.

members in our fellowship from the appearance of accepting error.⁸ Paul warns against “those who cause divisions and put obstacles” in the way of those who know the bible (Ro 16:17). Paul advised the congregation in Rome to avoid fellowship with those who had different beliefs, in order to protect their faith; Christians today should also heed this advice.

Although there are many dangers of improper fellowship, the blessings of proper fellowship greatly outweigh the negatives. One example of this is in Holy Communion or *altar fellowship*. “Communion” by definition means “closeness or fellowship”⁹. There are three communions involved that give the Lord’s Supper the name “Communion”. The first is that we are in communion with God through faith when partaking of this sacrament. The second is the communion of the body and blood of Christ with the physical elements of bread and wine. The third communion is the communion of faith and unity with all those who partake of the sacrament together. Those who do not understand and believe these three bring judgment upon themselves and do not receive the blessings of the sacrament. The sharing of the Lord’s body and blood is one of the greatest expressions of fellowship God has gifted us with. “Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf” (1Co 10:16-17). Those with whom a Christian partakes the body and blood of Christ must share the same confession of faith because they “are one body” in fellowship.

⁸ Kuske, “The Scriptural Principles of Fellowship...,” 1.

⁹ “Communion.” Dictionary.com. *Dictionary.com Unabridged (v 1.1)*. Random House, Inc. n.p. [cited: 4 November 2008]. <<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/communion>>.

From the beginning of the Lord's Supper, it was only intended for those disciples of Christ.¹⁰ The first ever distribution of the body and blood by Jesus Christ himself was with a closed group of believers (Judas' attitude and intentions were hidden at that time). Christians need to follow Christ's original example and only distribute his body and blood to those who have been properly instructed and who confess belief in the true doctrine. People "must...adhere to the true doctrine, before they can celebrate the Lord's Supper together with the congregation."¹¹

Those people who wish to share in the Lord's Supper and are not in fellowship must be turned away from the Lord's altar. This is the process of closed or close Communion. Normally a Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) pastor only would serve Communion to the members of his own congregation or visitors from another congregation in synodical fellowship with the WELS.¹² Even if the person belongs to another Lutheran congregation, it is not advisable to assume that other Lutheran congregations instruct and prepare their members adequately to receive Holy Communion. Closed Communion implies that WELS congregations are keeping non-members from reaping the benefits of Holy Communion. This is not the case at all. First, the Lord's Supper is not a medicine or a potion. "For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself" (1Co 11:29). It is a gift of God and the true body and blood of Christ. To withhold from the uninstructed and unprepared is to protect their soul from judgment. "So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the teachings we passed on to you..." (2Th 2:15). Congregations need to be firm in doctrine and practice so that no one gets the wrong impression.

¹⁰ Seth Erlandsson, *Church Fellowship: What Does the Bible Say?* (trans. S.W. Becker; Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1979), 35.

¹¹ Erlandsson, *Church Fellowship: What...?*, 36.

¹² Brug, *Church Fellowship...*, 118.

Another way fellowship is applied in worship is in prayer. According to John Brug in *Church Fellowship*, “Prayer is always an act of worship.”¹³ Therefore, when praying with someone else, one needs to take into account the biblical principles of fellowship. Since all prayer is an act of worship, there is definite need for the correct observances of fellowship. “True prayer, prayer which pleases God, is a fruit of faith.”¹⁴ Joint prayer with others needs to follow the same doctrine as and treated similarly to any other acts of fellowship in worship. Therefore, Christians are commanded to pray with those who share a common confession and life of faith and are to avoid those “errorists” who “adhere to false doctrine”¹⁵. Christians also are to avoid any means that would give the appearance of approving of error, praying with someone out of fellowship is definitely included.

Another means of public confession of faith are those who lead worship. Worship leaders include pastors, choirs, organists, choir directors, and soloists. Worship leadership does not require special preparation (except for pastors) like those who wish to partake in the Lord’s Supper. Even though special preparation is not necessary, worship leaders are in a very visible position and can make a great expression of faith and fellowship. Furthermore, worship leaders, whether they like it or not, represent to the public the church and what it believes. Therefore, those who hold any leadership role in worship need to be members of that congregation or one that is in fellowship.¹⁶ “But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea” (Mt. 18:6). God does not want those who have differing beliefs from scripture to teach his children: he promises punishment to those who lead one of his own astray.

¹³ Brug. *Church Fellowship...*, 114.

¹⁴ Erlandsson, *Church Fellowship: What...?*, 38

¹⁵ Brug. *Church Fellowship...*, 115.

¹⁶ Brug. *Church Fellowship...*, 115.

Generally speaking, only people who agree with the teachings of the church should play a part in leading its services.¹⁷ In the worship setting the WELS rightfully does not permit those out of fellowship to speak God's word, sing God's word, or play a melody that reminds the congregation of God's word. Improper pulpit fellowship is never acceptable.

A more specific way in which church leadership applies itself is in weddings. The Marriage liturgy is a form of worship, and some couples forget that when choosing a musician for their ceremony. Christian Marriage features all the crucial parts of any liturgical worship: the call to worship, hymns and music, lesson, a sermon, prayers, and the blessing.¹⁸ In Christian Marriage, "God's word and our worship are applied very directly to the marriage of two people."¹⁹ Because marriage is a form of worship, fellowship rules very much apply. The wedding couple needs to decide what is more important, musical beauty or a testament of faith. The couple should show the person love by giving a clear testimony of the doctrine that prevents them from taking an active role in worship in order to set a positive example.²⁰

Another example of an application of fellowship is with students. Sometimes Lutheran elementary schools, area Lutheran high schools, and at Wisconsin Lutheran College there are students who do not come from a church in fellowship with the Wisconsin Synod. There are times when these students wish to sing with a choir in worship settings. If they are seriously interested in change and are being instructed in the true scripture, it is acceptable for them to participate in leading worship through song. If the student is not willing to change from their

¹⁷ Brug. *Church Fellowship...*, 130.

¹⁸ Baumler and Moldenhauer, *Christian Worship: Manual*, 211-214.

¹⁹ Brug. *Church Fellowship...*, 129.

²⁰ Brug. *Church Fellowship...*, 129.

error, they are to be treated like any other person not in fellowship. They are not to participate in leading worship or serve as public representative of the faith.²¹

When scripture is properly and effectively applied, fellowship can be a beautiful, highly beneficial gift of God. But when scripture is improperly applied, what once was a blessing can turn into a curse. Communion is a gift from Jesus that was intended only for instructed disciples of Christ. Prayer is no different than any other act of worship; therefore it should have the same fellowship principles applied to it. Those who lead in worship must be in fellowship lest they be judged severely by God. Ultimately, fellowship is a gift from God that should be treasured and taken seriously in the context of worship.

²¹ Brug. *Church Fellowship...*, 132.

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