
CTCR—BIBLE STUDY ON FELLOWSHIP

THE LUTHERAN CHURCH—MISSOURI SYNOD
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OFFICE OF THE
PRESIDENT

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AREA CODE 314

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

I am pleased to be able to commend to you this Bible Study on Fellowship which has been prepared by the Commission on Theology and Church Relations in response to the discussions on fellowship which took place in the “Formula for Concord” conferences which the CTCR conducted in 1978. The participants in these conferences expressed the desire to reexamine the Biblical standards which guide us in dealing with the day-to-day fellowship questions which arise in the parish.

Many of the complex questions regarding fellowship have been with us a long time, and in recent years the Synod has spent considerable time studying this question. Nevertheless, as the CTCR reported to the 1979 convention of the Synod, there still seems to be some confusion and disagreement within the Synod on what the Scriptures actually say on this subject. The often-repeated request for a Scriptural study on this matter is a strong indication that the members of our church want to remain faithful to God’s Word and sincerely desire to achieve a greater degree of unanimity in their fellowship practices. Under God’s power and guidance this series of studies can be of great benefit to our church.

As you will recall, the Synod has asked the CTCR to prepare a comprehensive study on the nature and implications of the concept of fellowship (1977 Res. 3-03A; 1979 Res. 3-03). This study is scheduled to be sent to you in the fall of 1980. I hope that this report will be thoroughly studied and discussed at all levels in our church, including congregations, pastoral conferences, and other groups throughout the Synod. This Bible Study which is now being shared with you will help you gain some useful background information from the Scriptures in preparation for your study of the CTCR’s report. My fervent prayer is that God will bless our study of His Word to the end that we may carry out our relationships with other Christians on the individual as well as the church-body level in a God pleasing way.

As we begin the year 1980, the 400th anniversary of the Book of Concord and the 450th anniversary of the Augsburg Confession, we have reason to raise our voices in thanksgiving to God. He has blessed us with a rich doctrinal heritage based on His pure Word. May He continue to guide us now as we grow together in the knowledge of His Son Jesus Christ and in our joyful obedience to His will.

Sincerely,
J.A.O. Preus

BACKGROUND INFORMATION - 1

TEACHERS MATERIAL

In 1978 the Commission on Theology and Church Relations conducted 56 “Formula for Concord” conferences throughout the Synod as part of the “That We May Grow” program initiated by the Synod in 1975 (1975 Res. 3-01 “To Seek Unity”). At the 1979 St. Louis convention, the CTCR reported that over 4,000 pastors, teachers, and other professional workers attended these conferences and discussed three essays dealing with the confessional principles that form the basis for peace and concord in the church. The commission reported that these discussions revealed that considerable confusion exists within the Synod on the question of fellowship. Throughout the Synod the need was voiced for an intensive study of the Scriptures on the question of church fellowship and for a reexamination of the Scriptural foundations which undergird the confessional heritage given to our church.

In responding to the request for a Bible study on fellowship, the commission has given careful consideration to the purpose it might serve. The commission was asked by the 1977 convention of the Synod to prepare a “comprehensive study and report on the nature and implications of the concept of fellowship” (1977 Res. 3-02A). As it works on this assignment, the commission has found the “Formula for Concord” conferences helpful in delineating the many practical problems with which the members of the Synod must deal on the parish level. This study is now being offered to the Synod in the hope that it may provide the opportunity for further input to the commission as it completes the work on its final report. But more, it is hoped that a widespread study of the Scriptures on this subject will lead to greater concord in the Synod and to practices of church fellowship that remain consistent with the principles God has given us in His Word.

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THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY - 2

TEACHERS MATERIAL

The complexity of the present denominational scene and the high degree of mobility in our world are among the many factors which have made it increasingly difficult for people to make responsible decisions regarding fellowship matters. Problems in this area of church life range all the way from situations in which joint worship services are held with a congregation of another church body to the participation of an individual in a community Bible class, an ecumenical organization, or an evangelistic crusade. Christians often experience tension as they seek to manifest the unity they have with other Christians, while at the same time remaining faithful to what the Scriptures teach about preserving the truth of God's Word. As long as we live in a fallen world, this tension will not be completely resolved. However, the church lives in the confidence that through His Word the Holy Spirit continues to set forth the clear principles which serve as a guide for making decisions that will edify His church and give His glorious Gospel free course throughout the world.

The purpose of this series of lessons is to assist you in studying the Scriptures on the question of fellowship. Taking into account the input received from those using this study, the commission will give attention to some of the specific problems that face us in formulating and applying Scriptural principles as it completes its final report on fellowship.

The Scriptural texts cited in these lessons are in no way intended to be exhaustive. The commission hopes that the references given will lead you into other portions of Holy Scripture. Please note these texts and share your insights with the commission as you complete the report form attached to the study.

THE RATIONALE OF THE STUDY - 3

TEACHERS MATERIAL

In his study of *Eucharist and Church Fellowship in the First Four Centuries* Werner Elert quotes Friedrich Schleiermacher, a 19th-century theologian, as saying that “the church at all events is a fellowship created by the voluntary actions of men, and only through these does it continue to exist.” Convinced that Schleiermacher’s views have had considerable influence on what goes on in present-day church affairs, Dr. Elert wrote in criticism of Schleiermacher’s understanding of fellowship: “The concept of fellowship which is here said to characterize the Church does not derive from the nature of the Church, but the nature of the Church is derived from the concept of fellowship.” The consequence of Schleiermacher’s view, Elert goes on to say, is that fellowship is commonly understood today as “a matter about which men are free to make their own arrangements,” depending “on the good or ill will of those concerned.” Elert is here rejecting the idea that the fellowship Christians have with each other comes about as a result of their own decision to gather together.

“Luther proceeded differently,” Elert continues. In opposition to what Schleiermacher meant by fellowship, Luther opposed the notion that fellowship should be understood as meaning “to have something to do with a person.” Rather, he insisted, fellowship means “using, enjoying, or having part in a common thing.” The celebration of the Lord’s Supper is a case in point. If one follows Luther’s view, Elert observes, “What links those who partake of the Lord’s Supper is not that they have something to do with one another, their human relationship with each other, but that which they share together.” (Cf. Werner Elert, *Eucharist and Church Fellowship in the First Four Centuries*, pp. 2- 4.)

The above references are cited in order to introduce one of the major emphases of the present Bible study on fellowship. The commission is convinced, on the basis of its study of the Scriptures, that Luther correctly understood the real meaning of the Biblical concept of fellowship. Fellowship is not a matter of human arrangement, nor do people have fellowship with each other simply because they have decided to “get together.” The Scriptures clearly teach that fellowship is given to us by God and comes into existence solely as a result of His initiative and activity. There is no such thing as “fellowship” until God calls people into union with Jesus Christ, and consequently with each other in the church, through the means of grace, namely, the Gospel and the sacraments. Through these means God continues to preserve and extend His church throughout the world. The Gospel and the sacraments not only create fellowship; they also hold Christian people together.

To assist the leader of this study, the content of each lesson is briefly summarized below. The leader is encouraged to engage in his own study of the Biblical material, using commentaries, Bible dictionaries, concordances, and other resource materials available.

Fellowship— A Living Reality-1

The term “fellowship” has a twofold meaning. On the one hand, it can refer to the unity which persons *have* with Jesus Christ by faith in Him. The word also suggests that people in whom the Holy Spirit has worked faith in Christ will desire to *express* this unity with other people who confess the Christian faith.

The Greek word *koinonia* (translated “communion” or “fellowship” in most English versions) helps us to see that fellowship is always fellowship *in* something. Fellowship cannot simply be equated with friendship or a feeling of togetherness. Christians are partners who share in the Gospel (1 Cor. 9:23), in faith (Philemon 6), in sufferings (Phil. 3:10) and comfort (2 Cor. 1:7), in trouble and endurance (Rev. 1:9), in the Holy Spirit (2 Cor. 13:13; Phil. 2:1), and in eternal glory (1 Peter 5:1).

Understanding the meaning of fellowship, however, involves more than a definition of the word *koinonia*. The Epistle to the Ephesians makes it clear that the unity of people with the triune God and the consequent unity they have with all those who believe in Him is the overarching theme of the entire Christian message. God revealed to His holy apostles and prophets “how the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the Gospel” (Eph. 3:6).

By way of conclusion to this lesson, the leader may wish to call the class’s careful attention to 1 John 1:1-4. It contains the format for this entire study. Through the “Word of Life,” the Gospel, God unites people together in fellowship with each other. This fellowship is first of all fellowship with God the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ. Thus, fellowship has both a vertical and a horizontal aspect: fellowship with Christ and fellowship with the saints. A study of 1 John would help the reader see that when fellowship among Christians is threatened, a return to the Gospel restores and strengthens fellowship; for without faith in the Gospel, whose content is Christ, no fellowship exists.

Fellowship With Christ-2

This lesson focuses on the vertical aspect of fellowship, namely, that people become members of the church by being united with Jesus Christ. Fellowship is a divine creation. The lesson is structured chiefly according to the outline given to us in Ephesians 1. Before the foundation of the world, God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ planned our redemption and chose us to be His sons and daughters. In the fullness of time He sent His Son Jesus Christ to do what was necessary to establish peace between Himself and the human race, which was separated from Him by sin. Through Christ all people, whether Jew or Gentile, have access to God's forgiveness. Through Baptism God unites people with Christ (Titus 3:48). They receive the Holy Spirit, who enables them to call God "Father." God's Spirit is "the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it" (Eph. 1:14). The Holy Spirit works through the Gospel and the sacraments to preserve His children in union with their Savior. Apart from union with Jesus Christ through faith there is no church, and thus no true fellowship with others.

Fellowship with the Saints-3

Lesson 3 concentrates on the *horizontal* aspect of fellowship, that is, fellowship with "all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours" (1 Cor. 1:2). Fellowship with Jesus Christ immediately places a person into fellowship with all other believers, those who have died as well as those still living on earth.

The fellowship God's saints enjoy consists in what they have in common. "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one Baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all" (Eph. 4:4-6). Thus, we can be certain that the one church of Christ exists wherever the Gospel is preached and the sacraments are administered.

In designating the church as the body of Christ, the Scriptures are describing not only what the church is but how God wants His church to function. Since believers belong to the one church of Jesus Christ and derive their life from Him, they do not live in isolation from each other but gather around the Word and sacraments. Alluding to Jesus' picture of the church, the branches of the true Vine (John 15:1-6), L. S. Thornton illustrated this point well by saying "For we are 'in Christ' not as a pebble in a box, but as a branch on a tree."

Even while the membership roster of a congregation may contain the names of unbelievers (only the Lord knows those who are truly His—2 Tim. 2:19), the one church of Jesus Christ manifests itself where Christ's Gospel is purely preached and the Sacraments rightly administered. It is not limited to a local congregation. There is also a sense in which wider groupings of Christian congregations who have been joined together in confessing the same Gospel and administering the same sacraments may bear the name "church" (Acts 9:31).

Fellowship— In the Bond Of Peace-4

This lesson points to the responsibility of Christians to *manifest* the unity which has already been given them through the power of the Holy Spirit. As branches united to a vine bear fruit, so also those who are united with Christ spontaneously show love toward each other (John 15:12-17). Love stands at the top of the fruits of God’s Holy Spirit because one who loves as Christ loved us, seeks to build up his fellow believers. When love controls the conduct of Christians, their chief concern is to help each other remain faithful to Jesus Christ and thus remain members of His church. Genuine love “rejoices with those who rejoice, weeps with those who weep,” strengthens the weak, encourages the strong, admonishes those who are in error. In a word, love builds up. In their relationship to each other, believers will heed the words of the apostle: “Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (Eph. 5:1-2).

The emphasis of this lesson is summarized in the words of the apostle, “[Be] eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit *in the bond of peace*” (Eph. 4:3). God wills that His church express the peace it *already has* by striving to be at peace with others in the church.

Fellowship— A Gift to Preserve-5

This lesson centers on the Lord’s will that the church not only preserve the truth of the Gospel but also share it with others that they too may be one with us. Christians cherish the Gospel of salvation revealed in the Scriptures, for it is the voice of the Good Shepherd who calls people into His flock. Christians are concerned that the Gospel is preached purely and the sacraments rightly administered, not only to exhibit but to preserve the unity of the Lord’s church. Error threatens fellowship with Christ and with the saints. Thus Christians listen to the Scriptures’ mandate to teach sound doctrine, as it is given to us in the teaching of the prophets and apostles, and to defend God’s Word against all error. “Doctrine belongs to God, not to us,” Luther said, “Therefore we cannot give up or change even one dot of it” (Matt. 5:18; *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 27, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, pp. 35-39). Genuine love requires that our brother and sister in Christ be served by truth, for error leads away from Christ, not to Him.

The Word which Christians cherish, they also proclaim. The church’s mission to proclaim the Word is part of God’s overall plan to unite all things in Christ. Believers are ambassadors for Christ, that is, they represent their Lord and speak with authority. Through the Word the church preaches people actually receive forgiveness for their sins and become fellow citizens with the saints and members of God’s household.

GUIDELINES FOR THE LEADER - 4

TEACHERS MATERIAL

The topic of church fellowship touches the life of every Christian. You can be certain that most of the members of your study group have had to confront the difficult decisions that arise when Christians of differing confessional backgrounds seek to express their unity in Christ. These decisions are made sometimes with joy and at other times with sadness. As a leader you should be aware of people's sensitivities and assist them in whatever way possible to make your class a place for mutual upbuilding and care for each other. Remember, your own group has the task of expressing the peace you have together in Christ!

May our gracious Lord use you effectively in His plan to cause His people to grow in their love for Him as well as for each other. As you begin, consider the following helps:

1. A detailed manual has not been included with this study. That is part of its design. The study is structured so that your group may do its own thorough study of the Scriptures and share its insights with the commission.
2. A lesson may require two sessions, especially if your group feels a matter needs further exploration.
3. Before reading the lesson summaries, help the group to state in its own words the main points which surface from the material you have studied. Be sure you are familiar with the questions raised in the questionnaire at the end of the study.
4. As you work through the introduction, stress the purpose of each lesson. Add questions or examples of your own to pinpoint the main emphasis.
5. As you prepare for each lesson, be sure to read the pertinent summary paragraphs in Part III of this introduction. You may want to use them in your class sessions.
6. The lessons deal with what the Scriptures say about the unity of the church, love toward fellow believers, and the truth of the Gospel. Be alert to the interrelationship among these three Biblical themes.
7. Follow the procedure which makes any group study more successful. Listen carefully and patiently. Study the Scriptures, using the lesson as a guide. If necessary, agree to help each other do research on a problem or issue. Have a commentary, Bible dictionary, concordance, and other helps handy.

Note the shades of meaning various translations give to a particular text. In general, strive to make the setting and atmosphere of your work together free of every hindrance to a fruitful study of God's Word, the heart of which is the good news of our salvation. Above all, begin each session with prayer, especially for the Lord's church.

Response Questionnaire

At the end of these lessons you will find a response questionnaire for use by your study group. The questions are intended to assist you in summarizing the results of your study of the Scriptures on the matter of fellowship. The group may wish to become familiar with these questions at the beginning of the study and refer to them from time to time. Have someone in your group take notes as you move along.

If your group desires to share the results of its study with the Commission on Theology and Church Relations, complete the questionnaire and mail it to the commission's office at 500 North Broadway in St. Louis. May the Lord bless you with His grace and peace.

Suggested Resource Helps for Leader

Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, Vol. I. See article on "Communion," pp. 664-666.

F. E. Mayer, "The New Testament Concept of Fellowship," *Concordia Theological Monthly*, XXIII (Sept., 1952), pp. 632-644.

The Encyclopedia of the Lutheran Church, Vol. II, (Augsburg, 1965). See article on "Fellowship (Intercommunion)" by Anders Nygren, pp. 846-849.

The New Bible Commentary—Revised Edition, edited by D. Guthrie, J. Motyer, A. Stibbs, and D. Wiseman, (Grand Rapids: Erdmans, 1970).

Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, edited by Gerhard Kittel. See such articles as "church," "fellowship," "love," "one," "peace," and "truth."

FELLOWSHIP—A LIVING REALITY - 1

STUDENT WORKSHEET

“Fellowship” is much more than a concept. It has to do with people who are eager to express the relationship they have been given together as fellow members of the body of Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. Fellowship is as real as brothers giving to brothers the “right hand of fellowship” (Gal. 2:9).

“I long to see you,” Paul wrote to the church at Rome. Although he had not yet been in that great city when he wrote these words, Paul’s relationship with this congregation was *personal*. Read Romans 16:1-16. How does Paul express his “fellowship” with the “beloved of God” in Rome? Why does he long to see them (Rom. 1:11-12; 15:32)?

“Fellowship” is even more than person-to-person communication. To the church at Corinth “*all the brethren* send greetings” (1 Cor. 16:20). Who else sent hearty greetings in the Lord (v. 19; cf. Phil. 4:22)? Is it God’s will that your congregation communicate with neighboring congregations?

The churches of Macedonia were pleased to give concrete expression to their love for the saints in Jerusalem. Why did this *group of congregations* beg “earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints” in Jerusalem (2 Cor. 8:1-5, 9; Rom. 15:26-27; cf. Phil. 4:15)? Why do you suppose this offering was designated by the same word used in Greek for “fellowship” (Rom. 15:26)?

“Koinonia”

Is “fellowship” anything different from the normal kinds of interaction between persons and groups engaged in some purpose or activity? It might not look that way on the surface. Take James and John, for instance. They were “partners with Simon” in a little fishing fleet (Luke 5:10). Handling fishing nets in a common operation made them business associates. But their association as fishermen soon was replaced by a new partnership! What happened (Matt. 4:18-22)?

One of the words the New Testament uses for Christian fellowship is “*koinonia*.” Basically, it means to be a partner or a shareholder with someone else in something. But the *koinonia* Christians have rises above ordinary human relationships. Christians are more than friends. What makes the difference (1 Cor. 1:9)? In what sense are we, too, “partners with Simon” (Matt. 16:6-18)? Partners with each other? (Phil. 1:7; 2:1; 3:10; 1 Cor. 9:23, Philemon 6; 2 Cor. 1:7; 8:13; 1 Peter 5:1)

Members of God's Household

In the Epistle to the Ephesians the Lord gives us a sublime description of the partnership of Christians. (The Greek word *koinonia* doesn't occur, but the whole epistle talks about the meaning of fellowship.) What high understanding of fellowship does God reveal to us in:

2:13-14

2:19-22

3:6

2:5-7

What do you say to leaders in a congregation who are discouraged because "so many people won't do their 'fair share'"? How does Paul's view of the church help us to get a better grasp of a problem like this?

"We are the temple of the living God," Paul wrote in the same lofty fashion to the Corinthians (2 Cor. 6:16). In fulfillment of Nathan's promise to David (2 Sam. 7:11-14) (that the Lord would make *David* His house), God has declared that He will be our Father and we His sons and daughters. What implications for your understanding of fellowship does this picture of God's church have? (See 2 Cor. 6:14-16).

Our Fellowship

A congregation decided to build a larger narthex "to promote greater fellowship." Read 1 John 1:1-4. How does John indicate that fellowship is a reality which we have rather than a "sense of community" or a feeling of "togetherness" which we foster? What twofold "fellowship" do believers possess? What is the means through which Christian fellowship comes about? How does John insist it should become apparent (1 John 1:6; 2:10)?

Partakers in One Body

The fact that believers are one with their Lord and each other can be known for certain. When believers hear the Gospel preached, see a person baptized or the members of their congregation participating in the Lord's Supper, they may truly know that the church really exists among them. Why can they have this confidence (Rom. 1:16-17; 1 Cor. 12:12-13; 10:16-17)? "Healthy, joyous congregational life must be the spontaneous fruit of Christian fellowship." When are Christian people most "healthy and joyous"?

Summary

In this lesson we have seen how fellowship is not merely a concept, but involves people like us who believe in Jesus Christ. Fellowship is not the same as a friendly relationship between people. Christian fellowship comes about when God calls people into union with Christ Jesus through the Gospel. Our fellowship with Christ, given to us through faith in Him, immediately places us into God's family of believers, the church in heaven as well as the church on earth. When brothers and sisters in the Lord gather around the Word and the sacraments they bear witness to this unity. Such a high view of our fellowship in Christ's body moves us to worship and serve the Lord with gladness.

FELLOWSHIP WITH CHRIST - 2

STUDENT WORKSHEET

“And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47). The apostles preached Christ. Families believed and were baptized. By the power of the Holy Spirit men and women were “added to the Lord.” This is how God’s plan to unite people in fellowship with Jesus Christ actually works. Luke tells about it in the Book of Acts.

The church is nowhere described as a group of volunteers who “join up” with the church on the basis of their own decision. Rather, it is the company of believers whom God calls into fellowship with Jesus Christ through the Gospel. What ideas of church membership prevalent today does this rule out? What really matters when it comes to membership in the Lord’s church (Romans 14:17)?

The Scriptures call the church the body of Christ. This lesson will help you focus on the words “of Christ.” May the Holy Spirit guide your study of what it means to be a member of Christ!

A Plan for the Fullness of Time

Even before God created the world, God conceived a plan to redeem it and make fellowship between Himself and people a reality. Read Ephesians 1:3-14. How does Paul indicate that union with Christ is God’s intent, not only for people, but for everything He has made?

The English word “fellowship” is derived from “fellow” (comrade or partner) and “ship” (a condition of state). In the truest sense of the term, the human race following Adam’s fall is “out of fellowship” with God. How do the Scriptures describe this condition (Romans 5:12; Eph. 2:3, 12-14, 19)? Why is fellowship with God an impossibility as a result of a person’s own initiative (1 Cor. 2:14; Eph. 2:1; Rom. 8:7-8)? What moved God to set in motion His plan to restore fellowship between Himself and us (Deut. 7:8; Eph. 1:6)?

In faithfulness to His promise to Abraham that through Abraham’s Seed all the world should be blessed, when the time had fully come God sent forth His Son. What did Christ accomplish for us (Rom. 5:10)? What does it mean to have peace with God (Rom. 5:1-2)?

Children of the Father

The Scriptures speak of those who have fellowship with Jesus Christ as “children of God.” By the power of the Holy Spirit working through Word and sacrament sinners become sons and daughters of God and fellow heirs with Christ. From beginning to end, fellowship with Christ is a gracious work of God. By what means does God call us (2 Thess. 2:13-14, Rom. 10:17)? What does God do in Baptism (Rom. 6:4; Gal. 2:27)? What kind of response does God work in those who are baptized (Gal. 4:6)? In discussions of how people are “born again” why is it important to bear witness to the power and effects of Baptism?

Sealed by the Holy Spirit

Fellowship with Jesus Christ is not a fragile friendship. God’s promise stands sure. Only unbelief negates the benefits of God’s promise to each sinner. What promise does God give to those who are baptized and believe in Jesus Christ (1 Peter 1:4-5; cf. Rom. 8:9)?

Those who have heard the Word of truth, the Gospel of salvation, and have believed in Christ Jesus, are “sealed with the promised Holy Spirit.” The Scriptures call the gift of God’s Spirit the “guarantee of our inheritance.” What special work does the Holy Spirit accomplish for those who belong to Christ (Eph. 1:14; 4:30)? Who really belongs to the church (Rom. 8:9, 14)? How does the Holy Spirit help us (Rom. 8:9-11, 16-17, 26-27)? What kind of encouragement can be given to each other (Rom. 8:28-30)?

Members of Christ

In this lesson we have seen that God alone creates fellowship. Through the Gospel God calls us into fellowship with Jesus Christ and gives us forgiveness for our sins. Our Baptism enables us to call God “Father.” We have access to His grace. He gives His Holy Spirit to His children in order to preserve them in union with Christ Jesus. All the treasures of forgiveness, life, and salvation are theirs now as they await His coming.

FELLOWSHIP WITH THE SAINTS - 3

STUDENT WORKSHEET

Fellowship with Christ immediately places a person into fellowship with all believers. God has bridged the gap between Himself and us caused by sin. “In Christ God was reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them” (2 Cor. 5:19). God also brings people into fellowship with each other. “The Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the Gospel” (Eph. 3:6).

The split between Jews and Gentiles was a fellowship problem in many early Christian congregations. In Galatia, for instance, the Gospel itself was at stake. How did God create fellowship between Jews and Gentiles (Eph. 2:11-17)?

The fellowship which believers have with each other in the church is a precious gift from God. This lesson is structured to help us see how God’s plan to create the church, Christ’s body, becomes the pattern for relationships between Christian people.

Fellowship in Christ’s Body

Christ’s people are privileged to have fellowship with all true believers. Jesus prayed to His Father, “I do not pray for these only [the disciples] but also for those who believe in Me through their word, that they may all be one” (John 17:20-21). God answered the prayer of our Lord in the days of the apostles and continues to answer it today. Through the Word which the apostles preached believers become one with Him and each other!

Read 1 Corinthians 1:2, substituting the name of your congregation for the church at Corinth. How does this verse show that Christ has one community of people which reaches beyond your congregation? How do people get the impression that the church is merely a group of “religious” people? What really is a saint? (1 Cor. 6:11; cf. Tit. 2:14; Ex. 19:6; 1 Peter 2:9; Eph. 5:27)

The New Testament uses many pictures of the church which portray the unity of God’s chosen people (building, 1 Peter 2; bride, 2 Cor. 11:2; vine, John 15; flock, John 10). A familiar image is that of the body of Christ. Who belongs to Christ’s body (Gal. 3:26-28)? Why is it important to note that the body of Christ cannot simply be equated with a congregation’s membership roster? (see Luke 17:20-21). Although an external body of Christians may have divisions, why is the one body of Christ—His one church—“without sect or schism,” as Luther said?

Christ’s holy people are partners. What do they possess in common (Eph. 4:4-6)? Discuss the statement, “We become related to Christ singly, but we cannot live in Christ solitarily.” What does this say to the person who believes membership in Christ’s church is a private affair? To the person who feels unimportant in a large congregation? To a small rural congregation in a community with declining population?

Blueprint for Fellowship

“Be eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace,” St. Paul urged the Ephesians. This is the apostle’s way of saying “be what you already are!” How does Paul’s discussion of marriage illustrate this point (Eph. 5:21-33)?

The way Christ’s body is described becomes the blueprint for what God wants His church to show itself to be. Since people are united with Christ and each other through the Gospel, what kind of activity preserves this unity (Eph. 4:11-16)? Baptism makes us members of Christ and His body, the church. What implications does this event in our lives have for our life together (1 Cor. 12:12-26; see Col. 3:12-17)? In the Lord’s Supper we partake of the Lord’s body and blood together. Why are we concerned about the way this holy meal is used (1 Cor. 10:16-17; 11:17-33)?

One Church

The Bible reveals that there is only one church. However, this church manifests itself in many congregations gathered around God’s Word. Therefore, a local congregation is not an isolated unit. How can you be certain that the one true church of Jesus Christ is present where the Word is preached and the sacraments are administered (Is. 55:10)? Why are such things as the moral behavior or the external organization of a group of people not the *distinguishing* features of the Lord’s church? Why is it necessary that the Gospel of Christ be preached purely? Why is it important that the churches establish relationships with each other on the basis of public confession, and not merely on the basis of personal belief (see Rom. 10:9-10)?

The one church was present also in groups of churches, St. Luke reports (Acts 9:31), although they were not organized like our “synods” today. Is there a sense in which a “synod” can be called “the church of God”? How can a “synod” maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace?

Summary

Fellowship with Jesus Christ immediately results in fellowship among His people. All believers in Christ are members of His one body, possessing “one spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one Baptism, one God and Father.” God unites believers with Himself and each other by means of the Gospel and sacraments.

What the church *is* by God’s design is what God wants the church to show itself to *be*. The use of the Word and sacraments is central to their activity and marks them as Christ’s holy people, whether in a local congregation or in a larger grouping of congregations like our Synod.

FELLOWSHIP—IN THE BOND OF PEACE - 4

STUDENT WORKSHEET

Belonging to the Lord's church is being a member of a family. God is our Father; we are His sons and daughters. Fellow Christians are sisters and brothers, members of God's household of faith.

Families have ways of expressing the unity they have. That's true of God's family too. Baptized in the name of Jesus Christ, the first assembly of believers made it known they were bound together as one. With glad and generous hearts they busily engaged themselves in unanimous expressions of their unity in Christ. Why are the activities mentioned in Acts 2:42 central to a congregation's "family life"? How can we help those who for various reasons withdraw themselves from the worship services of the congregation?

Using the language of Baptism, Paul told the Colossians, "And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body" (Col. 3:14-15). These words summarize well the direction of this lesson. It is devoted to the question, "How do God's saints give a loving witness to the unity they have in Christ?"

Love One Another

The natural outcome of our union with Christ Jesus is love, especially for the other members of His family. By Baptism God makes us new. He gives us His Holy Spirit so that we may have the power to love one another "earnestly from the heart" (1 Peter 1:22). "Love for the brethren" is evidence that we are "born of God" and have "passed out of death into life" (1 John 3:14).

True love has its source in Jesus Christ (John 15:12). It is a fruit of faith in Him. His love should not be mistaken for an on-again-off-again sentiment. What lies at the heart of Christ's love (Eph. 5:1-2; 1 John 4:7-12; Matt. 5:43-48)? What gives His kind of love a cohesive quality (1 Cor. 13:4-7; Col. 3:12-13; Rom. 12:9-10)? Things fall apart when people stop loving each other as Christ loved them. Why does love head the list of the fruits of the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5:22)? Imagine what could happen among Christians where love holds sway! Using Baptism language again ("Therefore, putting away...") St. Paul sets the pattern in Ephesians 4:25—5:2. Apply these words to your own life. What strikes you as especially important? In love believers use the gifts given to them by the Holy Spirit for the common good of the members of Christ's body (1 Cor. 12:7). Why is it important to remember not only that there are varieties of gifts but that *God* distributes them, even the ones which appear unspectacular? What responsibility do we have toward a person not using his gift(s)?

Love Builds Up

Love surpasses all other gifts of God's Spirit. One who loves as Christ loved is constantly seeking to build up the church. The church of the Thessalonians was a first-rate example of how love edifies. Read 1 Thessalonians 5:11. What were these people doing to lift each other up in the faith (compare 4:18)? (For an example of the opposite of upbuilding see 2 Tim. 2:18.) Why can't edification of the church simply be equated with whipping up a "team spirit"?

"Love builds up" the weak (1 Cor. 8:1). Tension increases in the church when the conscience of a weaker brother or sister is disregarded. Who is the "weak man" in 1 Corinthians 8? What principle must guide us in helping one who is easily offended (Rom. 15:1-3)? List ways you can help the weak.

Love seeks to care for a member of God's family who is overtaken in some sin. In what spirit does our heavenly Father want us to restore one who is overcome by some sin (Gal. 6:1-5; Matt. 18:14)? Why is the failure to discipline a symptom of lovelessness?

Love aims to help fellow believers remain faithful to Christ and His Word. The apostles of our Lord often admonished and corrected those who departed from the truth which is in Christ. Why did St. Paul write his "wayward child" at Corinth "with many tears" (2 Cor. 2:4)? When did he rejoice (7:9; Luke 15:10)?

In the Bond of Peace

Christ's church is one. Therefore He wants His people to live at peace with each other. Harmony between brothers is a good and pleasant sight (Psalm 133:1)!

Those who know the mind of Christ have the key to harmony and peace in the church. What frame of mind is necessary if believers are to manifest their unity in Christ (Phil. 2:1-11)? Who had some work to do on this score (4:2)? With Christ's example of humble obedience in the forefront, the members of His church must also *live* in peace (2 Cor. 13:11). What steps can we take to be at peace with one another in Christ's household (1 Cor. 1:10; Acts 15:6)? What prayer should always be on our lips (Rom. 15:5)?

Summary

In this lesson we have learned that God wills that the members of His church express the unity which has been given to them in Christ. Following the example of Christ's humble obedience to the death on the cross, believers are to live in peace with each other. As they seek to live at peace with each, believers are to love one another. Love, a fruit of God's Holy Spirit, determines how believers live and act toward each other. A person who loves as Christ loved will want to build up others in their faith and help them remain faithful to Him and His Word. Even admonition and discipline are a part of such loving concern.

FELLOWSHIP—A GIFT TO PRESERVE - 5

STUDENT WORKSHEET

The church is “holy believers and sheep who hear the voice of their Shepherd,” Luther wrote simply.

Jesus is indeed the Good Shepherd who laid down His life for us. He called us to Himself and made us members of His flock on earth. “We are His people, and the sheep of His pasture” (Psalm 100:3). What does a shepherd do for his sheep? How does the church still carry out the work of Jesus, the “great Shepherd of the sheep”?

The Gospel revealed in the Holy Scriptures is the voice of our Good Shepherd. He calls, gathers, and keeps us in the church through the Gospel.

Christians are concerned about the truth of Christ’s Word not only because it is the means by which the unity of the church is given but also because it is the means by which it is preserved. The purpose of this lesson is twofold: to assist you in examining the Scriptures’ injunction (1) to preserve and (2) to proclaim the truth that has been entrusted to the church.

Fellowship Threatened

The fellowship that Christians have with their Lord and each other is constantly threatened by the evil forces, which are opposed to Christ and His church. The armor of God is the *church’s* armor (Eph. 6)! As Jesus predicted (Matt. 24:24) and St. Paul warned (Acts 20:28-30), men will arise who will if possible lead astray God’s elect and draw away the Lord’s disciples. Read Gal. 5:9. What was the “little leaven” which threatened to leaven the whole lump (Gal. 5:1-12, 1:6-9)? Why is error often difficult to recognize (Matt. 7:15 ff.)? Why does false teaching often look harmless, as if it were little more than another version of the truth (1 Tim. 1:3-11)? Luther said, “In theology a tiny error overthrows the whole teaching.” (*Luther’s Works*, Vol. 27, p. 37)

Many of the New Testament epistles were written to strengthen the church when its one Gospel and one faith were being threatened. Why is the preservation of the truth of the Gospel of grave concern to Christians (Gal. 2:5; 3:21; 5:4)? In what way is false teaching a direct threat to the unity of the church? What can happen to the bond between believers (1 Tim. 6:3-5)? Christ’s church is not a club or a political party which is strengthened merely by a little “give and take.” When members of Christ’s flock are threatened by error, what responsibility do they have (Titus 1:9; Cf. 1 John 4:1-6)?

Speaking the Truth in Love

“Speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into Him who is the head, . . . Christ” (Eph. 4:15). In their love for the truth, believers may fail to show love for the saints. In their love for the saints believers may fail to contend for the truth. How is it possible to “speak the truth in love” and avoid these two extremes?

From the pastoral epistles we learn much about the way the apostles cared for the churches of God to preserve their unity in Christ Jesus. These epistles were written to stress the responsibilities of leaders in the churches. Read 2 Tim. 1:13-14. Why is it necessary that pastors be able to teach sound doctrine? What is *sound* doctrine? What, for example, was unsound about the teaching of some (1 Tim. 4:1-7)? Love requires that Christians admonish those who contradict sound doctrine. What is the aim of such discipline (Titus 1:13)?

The Scriptures teach that under certain conditions Christians are to withhold certain outward expressions of fellowship. When must separation take place (Rom. 16:17-18; Titus 3:9-11; 2 John 2:7-11; Gal. 1:6-9)? Believers can become content with, and even proud of, the external divisions in Christendom and become guilty of separatism. What continual responsibility rests on all Christians (2 Cor. 12:11; Acts 15:6)?

The Unsearchable Riches of Christ

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is to be cherished as a valuable treasure. But those who cherish it cannot help but proclaim it freely to people everywhere. It is the voice of God by which He calls them into fellowship with His Son and with all the saints.

The commission of our Lord to make disciples of all nations is not a postscript to the Word of truth, as if the work of proclaiming the Gospel can be relegated to a subcommittee of the congregation or church body. The task of preaching and teaching the Christian message is part of God’s eternal plan to make fellowship a living reality. Each individual Christian is part of the plan! Read Ephesians 3:7-11. What is God now doing through the church? As Christ’s ambassadors, what appeal is God making through us (2 Cor. 5:20-21)?

Summary

The Gospel contained in the Scriptures is the voice of Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd who laid down His life for His sheep. Since the Gospel is the means by which Christ calls, gathers, and keeps His flock, the church must be concerned that the truth of this Gospel be preserved. Error threatens the fellowship people have with Christ and therefore their fellowship with each other. Genuine love requires that Christians admonish those who are in error and that they adhere to sound teaching. They are to “speak the truth in love.” The Gospel which the church cherishes must also be proclaimed. In this way God extends fellowship to others and calls them into His family.

RESPONSE QUESTIONNAIRE

1. As you analyze your congregation's practice of church fellowship, what specific problems do you think need to be studied in more detail?

2. What Biblical references not mentioned in this study do you think need to be considered for an understanding of what fellowship means?

3. What aspects of membership in the church need to be accented in your congregation? In our Synod? In the organized church as a whole?

4. What points in the study do you consider most helpful in clarifying what the Scriptures say about fellowship? What facets of the issue do you think were missing?

5. How can church members express the unity they have with other Christians without forfeiting their witness against error and compromising doctrinal purity and integrity?

An order blank is provided on the last page. Congregations are also free to duplicate the study to meet their special needs. If they wish to make use of the response questionnaire printed above, the Commission urges that these responses be sent to the Commission on Theology and Church Relations, 500 N. Broadway, St. Louis, Mo. 63102, no later than March 15, 1980.

This Bible study on fellowship prepared by the Commission on Theology and Church Relations is being sent to all congregations of the Synod and pastors not serving congregations. The Commission encourages pastors to use the study in Bible classes and in the preparation of sermons on the subject of fellowship. Additional copies of the study are available from Concordia Publishing House at a cost of \$2.00 per 10 copies. Order No. 9-2381.

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