

**FELLOWSHIP  
and  
ORGANISATION**

Or

IN SEARCH  
OF  
AN HONEST AND CONSISTENT PRACTICE  
OF  
CHURCH FELLOWSHIP

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# IN SEARCH OF AN HONEST AND CONSISTENT PRACTICE OF CHURCH FELLOWSHIP

## INTRODUCTION

Some years ago when the present writer was a pastor in the Lutheran Church of Australia (LCA), he sought diligently to follow that church's practice of church fellowship. He was among those who protested most vigorously against any slackening or loosening of the fellowship practice of the church, especially communing together with members of other churches which were not in declared fellowship with the LCA, or declaring fellowship with other church bodies not fully in doctrinal agreement with the LCA, or which practiced fellowship with churches not in fellowship with the LCA. This was seen as blatantly inconsistent and dishonest. Since the practice of church fellowship was meant to be a witness to unity of doctrine and practice among us it was obviously dishonest to practice fellowship with members of churches which were not in full doctrinal agreement with the LCA. The present writer was therefore deeply concerned and protested against the practice of pulpit and altar fellowship with anyone not in declared fellowship with the LCA.

At that time the present writer believed that the LCA had and confessed the pure truth of God's Word, and was therefore the true visible church of God. While he was not happy with certain obvious trends within the LCA, particularly with what he saw as a weakening of the church's confession on the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture, yet he was assured that such errors were not at all dominant and were certainly contrary to the church's confession as set out in the Theses of Agreement etc. And so it was seen as consistent and honest to practice fellowship only with members of the LCA and such as were in declared fellowship with the LCA.

However, as doctrinal debates intensified, and church leaders within the LCA, including seminary lecturers, openly challenged the church's traditional position on the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture, the creation in six days, the immortality of the soul, etc, and when such teachers were not only tolerated but vigorously defended against our protests, then it became very obvious that the supposed unity of faith in the LCA was a farce, and to practice fellowship on the basis of this supposed unity was to live out a lie. We would debate with pastors and leaders in the LCA who not only denied the verbal inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture, which we regarded as a fundamental doctrine of the church, and then, in the same conference, attend the Lord's Supper together with those who were opposed to our beliefs. If the practice of fellowship was really a recognition of the unity of faith and belief, then this was blatantly dishonest and inconsistent.

Still worse, over the course of time, two of our most conservative and confessional colleagues were called away to become seminary lecturers in other Lutheran churches overseas, in the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, and the Evangelical Lutheran church in England. Both of these men were truly one with us in faith and belief, and were instrumental in forming and then defending the confessional position of the LCA. And both of these men were very much opposed to any denial of the plenary inspiration and inerrancy of the Scriptures. But since they had joined other confessional Lutheran churches which were not in declared fellowship with the LCA we were not to practice fellowship with them. When returning to Australia they were not to preach from our pulpits or commune at our altars.

While we held that the practice of fellowship was a public recognition of the unity of faith or oneness of belief, yet, in practice, we were expected to have altar and pulpit fellowship with those who openly disagreed with our beliefs on fundamental articles of the faith, communing at the same altar with them right after our debates, and at the same time refuse to commune with others who had demonstrated that they were truly one in faith with us. In other words we practiced fellowship with many whom we knew to be opposed to our beliefs and refused fellowship with some whom we knew to be one in faith with us. This was quite obviously dishonest and inconsistent – quite unworthy of the kingdom of God. Our practice of fellowship at that time was simply dependent upon membership in a church organisation and its official pronouncements of fellowship, which were more akin to most-favoured-nation status of a country. This blatant dishonesty and inconsistency in the practice of church fellowship concerned the present writer greatly. It could hardly be in accordance with the will of God.

Logically the problem had to lie in either one of two areas: either in a false understanding of what church fellowship is, or in the practice of this fellowship being regulated by membership in some church organisation.

## WHAT IS CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP?

The Bible tells us that all true believers in Christ, wherever they might be and whenever they might live, are one in Jesus Christ and members of the true Church of God, the body of Christ. Christ himself is the head of the Church and the Church is his body. As members of the body of Christ all true Christians are also members of each other. They are related to each other as members of the same body are members of each other and belong together. They also work

together to do the will of Christ their head. It is this relationship between the true believers in Christ which is called "Christian fellowship".

However, there is one basic difficulty. Since it is faith in Christ that makes one a true Christian or member of the Church of God, and since we can not look into another person's heart to see if he has true faith, we can not see for sure who is a member of the Church and who is not. This Church of God is not visible to us. How then can the members of the Church recognise each other so that they might practice their fellowship?

Jesus said to his disciples, "*By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another.*" (John 13:35). It would seem that Jesus is here telling us that a self-sacrificing love for all Christians, as Christ loved us, is an indication of true Christian faith and membership in the Church of God. If this is the case then such Christian love would be the test-stone of true discipleship. But this may not be easy to determine in practice. How can one tell for sure who loves the brethren as Christ loved us? Love is an emotion or attitude and is not visible either. Although it indeed manifests itself in actions it would be easy to be deceived. And so the church throughout the ages has sought to recognise who is a true believer and who is not on the basis of their confession of faith. Since it is the truth of the Gospel which engenders faith in Christ, all those who confess the truth of the Gospel are recognised as being true believers, and since error destroys or undermines true faith in Christ, all those who hold to false teaching and error are regarded as not being in fellowship. But this too is not an infallible guide or rule, because people are not consistent. While they may hold to some error or false teaching intellectually, yet they may not draw the conclusions of that error, and so continue to have true faith in Christ so that they are truly members of the body of Christ nevertheless. So also some may confess the true Christian faith outwardly but do not really have true faith. Even though it is not an infallible guide the church has recognised those to be members of the body of Christ, who confess the truth of Scripture, while those who hold to false teachings are not regarded as members. This confession of faith has therefore become a guide for the practice of fellowship. All those who hold to the same faith and belief, which they recognise as God's truth, are considered to be in fellowship with each other and should practice this fellowship, whereas those who believe differently are not considered to be in fellowship with each other, and ought not to practice fellowship. For the purpose of this paper, then, Christian fellowship will be seen as joint membership in the true Church of God, the body of Christ, and this fellowship is best recognised by a common confession of faith or oneness in Christian belief.

But even this guide for the practice of fellowship is not always easy to apply. To be able to know with whom to practice fellowship one would first have to ascertain a person's confession of faith or his theological beliefs. This may be quite time-consuming and cumbersome, and could well be fraught with misunderstanding and even possible abuse.

## **EARLY PRACTICE OF FELLOWSHIP**

In the early church we see that the apostles often gave specific directions to Christians either to practice fellowship with certain brethren or to refuse fellowship with others. (cf. Romans 16) In general those who came to faith through the preaching of the apostles, who taught them to observe all things which Christ had commanded them, were considered to be in fellowship with each other and practiced this fellowship. But when false teachers arose in the church it was necessary to reject their errors and warn against them. St. Paul's letters to the various churches served this function for a time. After the death of the apostles the church drew up creeds or statements of faith by which the true Christian faith could be distinguished from a false confession and true brethren distinguished from false. The Apostles' Creed served this function for years. As new errors arose it became necessary to add to this confession and to draw up new confessional statements which more clearly set forth the truth and more specifically rejected these errors, (eg. Nicene and Athenasian creeds). In this way the church distinguished true brethren from false and practiced fellowship only with those who confessed the truth. This method of practicing fellowship served the church well for hundreds of years.

Unfortunately the development of a hierarchy within the church and the centralisation of power and control within that hierarchy, together with an increasing spiritual ignorance of the laity who did not have access to the Scriptures in their own language, and were later even forbidden to read the Scriptures, undermined the confessional integrity of the church and allowed for numerous errors to creep in, usually through the very leaders of the church who should have been defending the flock from false teachers. While the hierarchy of the church were considered to be ecclesiastical and theological leaders, they were in reality often more secular than ecclesiastical. Many bishops were utterly lacking in even a fundamental knowledge of Scripture. Some had never even seen a copy of the Bible. They were little more than temporal rulers of supposedly ecclesiastical estates. Soon, instead of warning the church against false teachers, the leaders of the church began to warn against and persecute those who dared to confess the truth of Scripture in opposition to their errors. The obvious, anti-Christian behaviour and teachings of the hierarchy of the church, together with their abuse of power called for a complete reformation of the church. But as long as the power remained in the hands of the corrupt hierarchy all efforts at reformation were resisted.

## **FELLOWSHIP PRACTICE IN THE REFORMATION**

The Lutheran Reformation was an attempt to reform the church by rejecting the numerous errors which had crept into the church and restoring it to the truths of Scripture. Luther hoped that the hierarchy would welcome such a

reformation and support it wholeheartedly. But because such a return to the truth was a threat to their power it was resisted vigorously and Luther himself was placed under the ban. Luther would no doubt have been murdered or burnt as a heretic and the whole reform movement squashed had it not been for the support, under God, of powerful state rulers who supported the reformation. In this way the early church of the Reformation took on the form of State churches, in which the leader of the state, the duke or elector of a province, determined the religious beliefs of his territory, no doubt in conjunction with theological advisers whom he chose to consult. A state or territory was considered to be Lutheran largely because it had a Lutheran ruler, and another state was considered to be Catholic because it had a Catholic head of state. All the people within that state were expected to follow the religious convictions of their ruler, and might be persecuted for a lack of conformity.

But, at least in the reform movement, the “faith” of the church was not simply a matter of loyalty to their leaders but of loyalty to God’s truth. Statements of faith were therefore drawn up clearly setting forth the truth of Scripture in distinction from the errors of the times. First the Augsburg Confession, setting forth the historic faith of the church, was drawn up and presented to the emperor as the faith of the true church of all time. Then, when this was rejected by the papists, the Apology to the Augsburg Confession was prepared, and these statements became the confessional standard of the church of the Reformation. Those who accepted these confessions were considered to be Lutheran and those who did not were not considered to be Lutheran and therefore not in fellowship with true Lutherans. The dukes or electors who claimed to be Lutheran also accepted these confessions as the theological standard of their provinces. Thus a state church also had a theological confession to which it required adherence.

As time went on all sorts of variations and compromises were devised so that even among Lutherans there was considerable diversity of belief. To take care of these errors and to distinguish the true Lutheran teaching from its distortions and compromises more statements of faith were drawn up, namely the Formula of Concord and its brief statement the Epitome. These statements clearly set forth the historic faith of the Church, as confessed in the Augsburg Confession, and rejected contrary errors which were opposed to these truths. In this way the true Christian faith was clearly distinguished from the errors of the time, and fellowship was determined on the basis of these confessions. And yet in the state churches of Europe the secular power ultimately controlled the practice of fellowship. While a Lutheran head of state ruled a province, it was considered to be a Lutheran state, but if a Catholic or Reformed leader took over the leadership of the province it became Catholic or Reformed accordingly. With such a change of secular rulers those who were formerly considered leaders in the church, might suddenly be regarded as heretics and suffer persecution and even death. The secular power which generally paid the pipers – paying the clergy and providing churches and cathedrals for worship – also called the tune so that everything was done according to the will of the secular power. The church was really at the mercy of the state.

## FELLOWSHIP IN THE NEW WORLD CHURCHES

In the new world, however, church and state were separated, so that the church was not supported financially by the state, and the state could not control the function of the church. The churches and other buildings were not provided by or funded by the state but were owned by the church itself. But in order to own property legally it was necessary for churches to establish some form of secular organisation or corporation with a constitution and duly appointed office bearers etc. This secular organisation of the church was not the church itself, in a theological sense, but simply a legal requirement of the church in order to own property and function in the secular world.

This was so on both the congregational level and the synodical level. In order to conduct its earthly affairs it was considered an advantage to set up some kind of organisation and to appoint office bearers with specific responsibilities. And in order to acquire and own property it was necessary to be recognised as a legal entity or corporate body, which required a constitution and other formal organisation. Though congregations functioned for years and some exist still today without such formal organisation, using property that is held in trust by some of its members as trustees, yet many considered it better for the congregation itself to be incorporated and recognised as a legal entity able to own property directly. Everyone knew at first that such organisation was neither required by God nor necessary for the life of the congregation. It was not **church** as such, in the sense of the New Testament, but only a secular manifestation of the church for secular purposes. While the congregation itself (as the worshiping body of true believers in Christ) is church and indeed a divine institution, yet the external organisation of the congregation, with constitution and office bearers is not a divine institution commanded by God, and dare not be identified as church in the New Testament sense.

The same is true with respect to synodical organisations. The Scriptures contain no commands nor do they imply that local churches or congregations should organise themselves into synodical bodies much less corporations with legal recognition able to own property. The church lived and flourished for hundreds of years without any such organisation. The early church of the New Testament apparently owned no property, in the sense of real estate, but would worship in private houses, and so such organisation was not necessary. Later, under the hierarchical system, when the bishops of the church were really secular rulers governing vast territories with the power of the sword, such organisation was not necessary either. So also in the state-church system at the time of the Reformation, with the state owning the property and financing the church such organisation was not necessary. But where the church was separated from the state and the church wanted to own property such organisation become necessary.

But with this came also the danger of identifying the legal or secular church organisation with the church itself. Soon many, even within the churches, could no longer distinguish between the true church of God, the body of believers, instituted by Christ, and the secular organisation of a congregation or synod nowhere required in God's Word, and completely unknown in the New Testament. This became the source of serious confusion and false practices in the church.

But synodical organisations were formed for other reasons than simply owning property. Perhaps the most significant of these, for our present purpose, is the need to define and practice fellowship between the congregations. Where the church and state were separated, as in the new world, and church bodies were established to own property, it was obvious that such church organisations would provide churches and schools etc. only for those who were considered to be of the same faith and not for those in opposition to their belief. And so it was natural that these church organisations, though they were essentially secular in nature, should include a statement of faith or doctrinal clause in their constitutions. This was so both with respect to the organisation of the congregation and with respect to the organisation of larger synodical bodies. The doctrinal clause of a congregation was intended to specify with whom the members of the congregation might recognise and practice fellowship and to whom such fellowship should be denied. This was a very simple and straight-forward way of determining their fellowship practice. It eliminated the need to ask searching questions. All those who were members of a congregation, accepting its doctrinal position, were assumed to be in fellowship with each other, while those who were members of another congregation with an opposing confessional position were not recognised as being in fellowship.

This practice was even further simplified by the organisation of synodical bodies. All those congregations in a certain country or area holding the same faith were invited to join the synodical organisation, while those of a different belief were not accepted into the synodical organisation. In order to join such a synodical organisation a congregation had to satisfy that body that it did indeed believe and practice according to the confessional belief of that organisation. Any congregation found to be violating the confessional clause could be excluded from the organisation. In this way the expression of fellowship between congregations was very much simplified. It could generally be assumed that all congregations within a certain synodical body held to the same faith and confession, and so all member congregations could recognise each other as being one in faith and express their unity by practicing pulpit and altar fellowship.

If it was found by careful investigation that other church bodies, perhaps in different parts of the world, also confessed the same faith and practiced according to it, then those churches would declare themselves to be in church fellowship so that all the member congregations of each body might practice fellowship with each other. Logically this also extended to third and fourth generations. If two church bodies, A and B, both had the same faith and confession so that they were in fellowship with each other, then if a third church body, C, found itself to be one in faith with one of those church bodies (A), it would of course be one in faith with the other, (B). Things which are equal to the same thing are equal to each other. This is what was known as the A,B,C relationship and is simply common sense.

Because of this synodical church relationship, it should be obvious that all those who are members of one church body may legitimately practice fellowship with all the other members of that church organisation, as well as with those who are members of another church organisation declared to be in fellowship with their own church body. On the other hand they may not practice fellowship with those who are not members of their own church body or some other body not declared to be in fellowship with them. This is the logical implication of church fellowship. If fellowship means what we have said it means – a recognition of oneness of faith and belief, and church organisations are what they profess to be – organisations of congregations which hold and practice the same faith – then there should be no problem at all with the practice of church fellowship. It is simple and straight forward. This function of synodical organisations has undoubtedly served the church very well for many years.

## **CHANGE AND DECAY**

History shows that God alone is changeless. Even his church, at least its human or secular organisation, changes with the passing of time. Many church organisations, also professing Lutheran church bodies, which were formed by faithful Christians desiring to remain faithful to God's eternal Word, have long since become unfaithful and today embrace heresies which their founding fathers would have abhorred. Though they were formed to promote and maintain the truth of God's Word among their members they have embraced many modern errors. In fact it can be shown that it was generally the organisation of these churches, with its church-political powers, its teachers and officials that was instrumental in allowing errors to be infiltrated into the church and then giving them a haven there. Instead of the synodical organisation being an expression of unity of belief among its members, it has often become a haven of divergent and contradictory beliefs and practices. This is the case even if the confessional clause of its constitution has not been altered in any way, simply because the church officials, entrusted though they were with the doctrinal discipline of the body, have either promoted modern errors themselves so as to retain what they considered to be academic respectability in our modern world, or they have not had the courage to practice church discipline, for fear of causing division in the church, and so failed to retain the confessional integrity of the organisation. Others, under the illusion that true power lies in greatness or superior numbers, have simply compromised the truths of Scripture to bring about mergers of church organisations widely separated theologically to form larger and bigger church bodies with less and less doctrinal unity.

The LCA itself, as well as many other hitherto conservative church bodies, despite its doctrinal statements, and the constant boast of its officials of doctrinal unity, had become an organisation embracing and indeed harbouring a large range of contradictory doctrinal positions: the creation in six days as well as evolutionary theories, the absolute inerrancy of the Scriptures, as well as the claim that the Bible contained numerous errors and contradictions, the plenary and verbal inspiration of the Bible as well as the claim that only the authors were inspired by God and their writings included many false human theories according to the world view of their times, the immortality of the soul together with the denial that man even has a soul that can separate from the body, the theory of Gospel reductionism – that only what touches the Gospel itself can be regarded as authoritative for the church, as well as the assertion that every word of Scripture is binding for our faith, the belief that God has reserved the role of leadership in the church for males, and the opposite belief that such leadership is legitimately exercised also by women, as well as contradictory views on worship and fellowship, to mention the most obvious. While the church organisation claimed to have a doctrinal position, in real life it embraced a very wide variety of different beliefs on very important doctrinal matters, so that nobody could tell what any member of the church really believed on many very important matters simply by his membership. Just because someone claimed to be a member of the LCA did not give any clue as to whether he was a liberal or a conservative, whether he held all of Scripture to be the inspired Word of God or not, or whether he even believed he had a soul that could live on after death. In other words the confession of the church organisation had lost all of its practical meaning and was no longer any guide as to the religious beliefs of its members. For all practical purposes failure to practice doctrinal discipline had rendered the confession of the church to be meaningless. With the passing of time the church had become a secular/ecclesiastical organisation whose constitution and confessional clause told you more about its origin or pedigree than about its actual beliefs. Whatever the words themselves might say was so often contradicted by its members or the interpretation of its teachers.

### **THE THEOLOGICAL CONSEQUENCES**

What are the consequences of such changes for the practice of fellowship? If the doctrine of fellowship and its practice remains unchanged, as the recognition of oneness of faith and belief, it should be obvious to everyone that to practice fellowship simply on the basis of such church membership is blatantly hypocritical. To know that numerous people and leaders within the church body hold different, in fact contradictory beliefs on vital doctrines of Scripture, and yet to practice fellowship with them, as though they were one in faith, is either to live out a lie knowingly and willingly, or it is a rejection of and denial of the nature of true fellowship.

But just because the nature of the church body has changed does not relieve it of a responsible practice of fellowship. Since membership in such a church body itself no longer indicates the actual beliefs of a pastor or people, it is surely obvious that the practice of fellowship with them will have to be based on some other criteria than mere membership in the church organisation to which they belong. Somehow it will have to be based again on their personal confession of faith discovered either by experience or by some sort of investigation. However untidy this might appear to some, especially the legalist who always wants to be guided by rule of thumb laws, true fellowship may have to be practiced with some within a certain church organisation but not with others. That is simply being honest and consistent.

When it is known and understood that it is by no means only the LCA which is in this state of affairs, but the vast majority of church bodies in the world, including hitherto conservative bodies, like the Missouri Synod and Wisconsin, then it should be obvious that to practice fellowship on the basis of membership in such a church organisation today should be the exception rather than the rule. Only after very careful investigation of the actual doctrinal state of a given church body, and the pleasant discovery that it is still radically different from the vast majority of church organisations in that it consistently adheres to a sound confessional basis, could a blanket practice of fellowship with all its members be consistently entertained. Even then, as history shows so clearly, this would have to be almost constantly under review, because experience tells us that sooner or later that church too will become unfaithful, as Luther already warned. He estimated that a church body would not remain faithful for more than four or five generations.

### **THE SOLUTION**

What is the solution to this problem? The obvious solution is that the churches should repent of their doctrinal indifference and return to their confessional base, practicing strict doctrinal discipline so that everyone in their midst will believe and teach according to their clearly stated doctrinal clause and other statements. Then it will be easy to know with whom one can practice fellowship and with whom not. But this is a naive solution which everybody knows will never happen. It is simply contrary to the whole spirit and direction of our times. Even if such a solution were attempted, at least in some areas, yet it would undoubtedly be a long process and would require a different practice in the mean time.

Some would say that faithful Christians must leave their church bodies and form new, soundly confessional church organisations which do practice church discipline. Then they can at least practice fellowship consistently with other members of their church organisation. They are doing their part to solving the problem. While there may be many

valid and important reasons why faithful Christians should separate from the church organisation in which they were reared, when that organisation becomes lax in doctrinal discipline, (it may be necessary in order to retain the truth of God for their children) yet that is not the whole solution to the problem. Experience shows that conservative Christians leave at different times, and triggered by different events. Some may leave very quickly, as soon as they notice some official malpractice in fellowship or lack of an official reprimand to an errorist etc., while others may leave after what they see as blasphemy in the contemporary worship of the church or after some major doctrinal disruption like the ordination of women or the acceptance of homosexual clergy. Many years may elapse between when the first conservative leaves and when the last separates from his changing church body. How should these conservative Christians, who may all have the same faith, regard each other in the mean time? To deal with each other and practice fellowship purely on the basis of church membership is to fall into the same error and inconsistency as was current in the LCA before we left that church body. It is finally a perversion both of the doctrine of the church, in that it strives to make the invisible Church visible or identifies the true church of God with some earthly organisation, its secular manifestation in the world, and of the doctrine of fellowship itself, in that it bases the recognition of fellowship not upon oneness of faith and belief, but upon membership in some earthly organisation not even commanded by God.

Christians should know that it is no less unfaithful to deny fellowship with those whom we know to be one in faith with us, than it is to practice fellowship with those we know to be of a different faith. The former is schismatism and the latter is unionism. It is not a case of choosing the lesser of two evils. They are both hypocrisy. One says we won't recognise you as brethren even though we know you are, and the other says we will treat you as brethren even though we know you are not. Both are lying and deceiving in the name of God. Faithful and consistent Christians will surely want to reject fellowship with those whom they know to be not one in faith with them, and to recognise and practice fellowship with those whom they know to be of the same faith as themselves. This surely implies that it is the business of Christians to ascertain the faith of other professing Christians either by experience or by investigation so that they can know with whom to practice fellowship and to whom this should be denied.

### **THE NATURE OF A FALSE CHURCH**

But hasn't a "church" body which fails to practice doctrinal discipline, so that it allows error within it, really become a false church so that all faithful Christians would be in duty bound to leave it or else they too would be responsible for the error it espouses and become errorists themselves? This was certainly the view of the present writer for years but it is open to serious question. Experience has shown that conservative Christians who remain in such a church body, certainly do not accept responsibility for the errors of their church but are usually actively opposed to such errors and working to have them eliminated, if only by trying to elect strong confessional leaders who will restore their church to its proper doctrinal position. To condemn these people and refuse to recognise them as Christian brethren because they have not yet left their erring church body is an unfair insult. They sincerely believe they are doing what God expects of them, and often they seem to have very little choice.

It seems that there are really four classes of church bodies or organisations: (1) churches which have a soundly Scriptural confession and practice doctrinal discipline to keep it so; (2) churches which have a false confession committing themselves to errors contrary to God's Word, and which practice doctrinal discipline to keep it so; (3) churches which have a soundly Scriptural confession but do not practice doctrinal discipline so that they allow errorists within, and (4) churches which have a false confession and do not practice doctrinal discipline so that they allow a faithful confession of the truth within their midst. Of these four classes it seems obvious that the first class would be a true church organisation, even though it is not the church itself, in the true, scriptural sense, and is not instituted by God, yet faithful Christians may belong to it, if they choose, with a good conscience, and it may serve them with great blessing. But we should never claim that salvation is limited to the members of such a church body.

The second class (2) is a false church organisation and in as much as it deliberately stands for error no Christian ought to belong to it. It is equivalent to the false prophets of old and should be avoided. That is not to say that the Lord does not still have many faithful Christians within it. In as much as the Gospel is still proclaimed in its midst people will come to faith and believe despite its errors. We should never imply that all members of false churches are not Christian and can not be saved.

The third class (3) may have started out as true church bodies but, by failing to practice doctrinal discipline, and espousing errorists, have simply nullified their confession or rendered it meaningless, and therefore, for all practical purposes, they should be treated as if they have no confession at all. They believe they know not what<sup>1</sup> and nobody else does either. They have simply surrendered so much of their churchly function and nature that the question needs to be asked whether they can be regarded as churches at all. Would it not be more appropriate to regard them simply as secular/political institutions to attend to the administration of property and other earthly organisational interests of their varied Christian adherents. Such an institution is more akin to the state which provides for and supports the church in the state churches of Europe. It is not a church itself but a secular/political institution dedicated to the support of the church's temporal needs.

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<sup>1</sup> cf. John 4:22



The same is true of class (4). While they started out as false church bodies espousing errors yet their lack of doctrinal discipline has rendered their confession to be completely meaningless and so they too should be treated simply as secular/political institutions. They are not really churches at all in the scriptural sense, and have little more churchly function than a shire council that provides facilities for the worship of its citizens of whatever faith. This is fast becoming the situation with the vast majority of so-called “churches” in the world today. They have no clear doctrinal position but deliberately intended to be latitudinarian in order to include all who care to belong. They are more interested in size than in truth, in political power than submission to God’s Word, in the social welfare of man than his spiritual welfare. To call such organisations churches is surely an abuse of the term and an insult to the holy Bride of Christ – the true Church of God.

## **WHERE FROM HERE**

What then should be the attitude of faithful Christian people to such degenerate political/ecclesiastical institutions? Clearly no Christian will be happy with this situation. It is the result of unfaithfulness and lack of concern for the truth, especially among the leaders of the church, as well as a striving after temporal power. It is essentially a mixture of church and state, ecclesiastical and political power or a failure to distinguish between the true church of God and its earthly organisations, or to try to model the church after the fashion of the world. Unfortunately numerous faithful Christians have simply been caught up in the development of this secularisation of the churches, and are now little more than prisoners of a system which they can not change. Whether they should leave the organisation and seek to establish something else is a very difficult question for many who have been accustomed to enjoy the blessings of organised church life – regular worship services with communion, Sunday school and confirmation instruction for the young etc. For many the answer to this question centres around how they can cope with the situation in which they find themselves. If their present pastor still preaches the Word of God faithfully and is opposed to evil trends in the church at large they may find that they can still live with this situation for the present, as the 7000 in Israel who did not bow the knee to Baal,<sup>2</sup> even though they are not happy with the direction their church is going. These circumstances will vary from case to case, and it would be presumptuous for us to expect everyone to do exactly the same at the same time. But whatever the case, it seems that they can not simply act the hypocrite. If they choose to remain in their “church” body for the time being, and continue their witness against evil practices within it, they can not pretend that they are of one faith with errorists who are deliberately fostering false doctrine. They must surely deny fellowship to such even though this may arouse the hatred and opposition of others.

## **SELECTIVE FELLOWSHIP**

Of course it may be objected that this is a “messy” and difficult thing, but it is the changing nature of the “church” that has made it necessary. If an organisation is latitudinarian in principle so that it embraces numerous different religious beliefs, then the practice of true fellowship must be selective. There is no other honest possibility. Fellowship can be practiced not simply on the basis of membership in the organisation, but on the basis of a recognition of unity of faith. This implies that there must be some other criterion or mechanism by which unity of faith can be recognised other than common membership in an organisation. In many cases this will simply be experience. People who have grown up together and been confirmed together, and worshipped together for years, even discussed church matters together and jointly protested against evils in the church, will, of course, continue to recognise each other as brethren unless or until they notice some evidence to the contrary. That is simply being charitable. Just because they are trapped in some organisation which has lost its churchly character and degenerated into a secular/political institution does not in itself say that they have changed their own religious beliefs and agree with the false teachers who now share membership in this organisation. In the case of others, not formerly known to them and who have not made their beliefs public, it will be necessary to inquire into their religious beliefs before fellowship can be practiced. A statement of faith setting out the essential teaching of the Scriptures would be an ideal document for this purpose. Those who accept these teachings and agree to them without reservation, would surely be able to recognise each other as being one in faith and therefore practice fellowship with each other, whether they happen to be in the same church organisation or not. This is simply taking the doctrine of fellowship seriously and applying it consistently in the confused church/political world and circumstances of our time.

Such a practice of selective fellowship was frowned upon as dangerous and confusing by our fathers years ago. But that was at a time when churches had a clear confession of faith and adhered to it faithfully. At that time the boundaries of a confessional position were set and made public by the confessional clause and other statements of the church body and they were adhered to rigidly. But today the majority of “churches” no longer have such a confessional position or have rendered it meaningless by ignoring it. How then can the same rules apply to the practice of fellowship today in these circumstances as applied earlier in quite different circumstances? If we are to be responsible and consistent in our practice, we must not simply do unthinkingly what our fathers did long ago in totally different circumstances, but we must do what their faith and belief would have us do in the changed circumstances in which we

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<sup>2</sup> cf. 1 Kings 19:18

find ourselves today. And if it should be said that we have changed our practice of fellowship from that of church organisational fellowship to that of selective fellowship where necessary, then the reason is not because we have changed our doctrine of fellowship, but rather because the nature of the churches has changed in the meantime, and our practice needs to take this into account.

If this change of practice should be offensive to some they will do well to remember that the practice of fellowship on the basis of church organisational membership was unknown throughout the long history of the church except for the last couple hundred years since the Reformation. There simply were no such organisations in the Church and they were not considered essential as Jesus too pointed out to Pilate, *“My kingdom is not of this world: if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight, that I should not be delivered to the Jews: but now is my kingdom not from hence.”* (John 18:36) And so for the vast majority of its history fellowship was not practiced on church organisational grounds. Even though the church had often been corrupted by unfaithful leaders so that God’s true prophets had to contend against great evils and were often persecuted and even killed for their witness, yet the Lord still had his faithful remnant within that corrupt group and when his faithful prophets were ready to give up their witness he sent them back to work with his still small voice. (I Kings 19:12-18).

Christ himself, though he was the true prophet of God with the pure teaching of God’s Word, spent most of his life worshipping within the false and corrupt church of the scribes and Pharisees. The church of his time was utterly corrupt and given to the false teaching of work-righteousness, the very opposite of the Gospel. He was surely well aware of this, yet he not only worshipped in the synagogues of the Jews but also in the temple where he proclaimed the truth of God. Even though he was hated and despised by the Pharisees and Sadducees with their chief priests and elders he did not separate himself from them and start another true church organisation, calling on the people to separate themselves from the false church and to follow him. In fact he took a leading part in their worship, expounding the Word of God in their worship and calling them to repentance and faith.

Surely none of us would dare to claim that his failure to come out from the false church of his time and establish a pure church was in fact a compromise of the truth and an act of sinful unionism. We must rather learn from his practice that it is not always sinful to remain within a false church for some time to protest against its errors and bear witness to the truth. Clearly there are times and circumstances when this even necessary. The ancient prophets too had to work within the hostile environment of a false church given to idolatry and work righteousness. Many of them were not only hated for their witness but even killed for their testimony. Instead of leaving the false church they were thrust out of it. The same was true of the early church after Pentecost. The disciples did not set to work to organise a new church in opposition to the established church, but they even attended the worship in the synagogues until they were eventually thrust out. Even on his missionary journeys Saint Paul would go into the synagogues to worship and proclaim the Gospel of salvation not through the works of the law but by the grace of God. For this he was accused of rejecting the Law of Moses. We don’t know how long this practice continued, but it is clear that it was not a sudden or even a deliberate change and was probably made necessary because of the hatred of the Jews and the persecutions that they instituted against the Christians. Surely this implies that it is not always wrong for Christians to remain for some time within an erring church organisation, and that it is possible to do so without compromising the truth or being responsible for all the errors of that church body. If that was not sinful unionism when our Lord did so or when the apostles did so, it would be hard to maintain that anyone who does not separate himself or herself at once from a church which has espoused certain errors is therefore denying his or her own true confession and making himself responsible for all the errors of that church.

It may well be argued that the Jews at the time of Christ and his apostles had a definite liturgical structure for their worship, so that while the individual priest or elder may have espoused the errors of the Pharisees or Sadducees, yet the liturgy of their worship still retained the original truths, and that is why Jesus could say to that woman at the well, *Ye worship ye know not what: we know what we worship: for salvation is of the Jews* (John 4:22) That may be a good argument for retaining old liturgical forms in worship and genuine worshipful hymns, but it does not imply that Christians must leave immediately if these are not retained or are altered in some way.

Wisdom would seem to suggest that for a responsible practice of fellowship today faithful congregations need to commit themselves more to a clear statement of faith than to any church organisation. Their relationship with each other should be regulated by their commitment to the same truths of God’s Word not by membership in any human organisation. All those who believe and confess the same should be seen and recognised as being in fellowship with each other, and those who do not hold to the same truths should be seen as not being in fellowship regardless of their membership in an organisation or lack of it. And if members of another “church” body – a merely secular/political organisation should make it clear that they too accept the same statement of faith and belief, then what consistent Christian could deny them fellowship?

Perhaps it might be argued that just as there are degrees of doctrinal purity among church bodies, so there ought to be degrees of fellowship among Christians. With those whom we have full unity of faith and belief we can practice full fellowship in Word and Sacraments, but those with whom we do not have full agreement we should practice only limited fellowship. But this too is a misunderstanding or perversion of fellowship. To practice fellowship

means to recognise someone as a fellow member of the invisible Church, the body of Christ, on the basis of the best criteria that we have, namely the expression of his faith. While we know that there are, of course, others who are truly members of the body of Christ, even though they do not confess the truth of Christ faithfully, because of a happy inconsistency, yet we have no means of seeing into their hearts to see if they have faith or not. And so while we would not judge them to be outside the kingdom of God, we can not recognise them as true brethren because of their false beliefs. By not practicing fellowship with them we are not saying that they are not Christians, only that we can not recognise them to be such on the basis of their stated beliefs, some of which are contrary to the clear truth of God. But to practice limited fellowship with them would be to declare that there are degrees of membership in the body of Christ. Some are more members than others. That is clearly ridiculous. There are no degrees of fellowship. Either we recognise someone as being a fellow member of the body of Christ (fellowship) because of his profession of faith or we do not recognise this.

#### THE FUTURE

It is difficult to predict future events and situations accurately, but if the present trends in the ecumenical movement and the slide toward international control and globalism are any indication of the future it would seem that what we call denominations today may very well be swallowed up and finally disappear in some globally administered church/political organisation or system of control in which such titles as Catholic, Lutheran, Reformed, Baptist, Church of Christ etc., if they are still able to be retained, will be little more than descriptions of pedigree rather than labels of confessional belief or doctrinal positions. The controlling “Ministry for Religion and Superstitious Affairs” will effectively control and silence all factions and disagreements in the world body. As this time approaches and church bodies become more and more latitudinarian in preparation for their control by the global “Pantheon”, faithful Christians will more and more have to face the dilemma of having to choose with whom they can practice fellowship, and to whom they will have to deny this even though it costs them the wrath of the Global Master and possibly their own life. One thing will then be crystal clear: fellowship, as we have defined it, will not be able to be determined on the basis of church organisational membership.

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