

Towards Re-Articulation of the Confessional Lutheran Doctrine of Church Fellowship with Application for the Contemporary Post-Denominational Ecclesial Milieu

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the confessional Lutheran doctrine of church fellowship (inter-denominational and inter-Christian relations), focusing on the “unit concept” articulation of church fellowship employed by the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS). One aspect of this investigation is a study of the North American post-denominational ecclesial milieu, particularly attitudes and assumptions regarding denominational membership and doctrinal confession. I identify four trends from the literature which make application of the “unit concept” problematic in the contemporary context. Prevailing WELS praxis assumes that the way to witness to the truth of Scripture in a pluralistic doctrinal

environment is by strict separation. Instead, I offer evidence to suggest that a biblical confession of the truth is best presented by wise and appropriate participation in the common life of the church. Key to this study is an exegetical analysis of Scripture passages used to support the “unit concept.” WELS theologians have sometimes incautiously conflated passages directed towards erring (or differently-believing) fellow Christians with passages directed at pseudo-Christian heretical teachers. This has led to a practice of church fellowship which treats (erring) fellow Christian believers in a way that is biblically appropriate only for antichristian heretical teachers—that is, strict avoidance of any religious contact. My study shows that often-cited passages such as Romans 16:17–18 are best understood as a warning to stay completely away from antichristian heretical teachers, and not (as they are currently applied by the “unit concept”) as a command to avoid all religious contact with any fellow Christian who differs in any matter of doctrine. This thesis moves in conclusion towards a re-articulation of the doctrine of church fellowship which affirms ways for confessional Lutherans to lovingly and appropriately interact with individual Christians of other denominations, while at the same time publicly and corporately expressing a full and clear confession of all of the truths of God’s Word without compromise.

Keywords

church fellowship, Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, post-denominational

1. Introduction

“Be careful to act according to the entire Law which my servant Moses commanded for you. Do not turn from it to the right or to the left, so that you may succeed wherever you go” (Joshua 1:7, EHV). In his book *The Narrow Lutheran Middle* (2011), Prof. Daniel Deutschlander uses the metaphor of carefully navigating a narrow path of biblical truth between two false “ditches” on either side of the road. This picture of a narrow middle road between two sinful extremes helps Christians understand and apply some seemingly-contradictory teachings of Scripture in their lives. One example of teachings between which it is important to maintain a balance are God’s grace and God’s justice. An exclusive focus on God’s grace, writes Deutschlander, can end up in a denial of the existence of hell and the misleading error that everyone will eventually end up in heaven. On the other hand, an over-emphasis on God’s justice can lead to limits on God’s ability or willingness to forgive, resulting in despair for the troubled sinner, or else the all-too-common suspicion that good works and willing cooperation somehow add to Christ’s work as the cause of salvation.

This thesis, too, can be seen as exploring a section of the “narrow Lutheran middle road.” I am discussing the doctrine of church fellowship, which is, most basically, the question of inter-Christian and inter-confessional relationships: how do believers relate to Christians of other denominations with different doctrinal beliefs than their own? In the case of church fellowship, the two sinful extremes to be avoided by careful navigation of the “narrow middle road” are: (1) open ecumenism, also known as unionism, which ignores or minimizes doctrine and doctrinal differences for the sake of (external) “unity” at all costs, and (2) schismatic and sectarian separatism, which ignores or minimizes agreement in the

common core of Christian faith for the sake of (doctrinal/denominational) “purity” at all costs.

The basic observation of this thesis is that, in the admirable desire of confessional Lutherans to avoid the first problem,¹ it is possible for us to get perilously close (and sometimes slip into) the second ditch on the other side of the road. Too much emphasis on differences and “error” can lead to pre-emptive and unnecessary separation and ostracism from fellow Christians of different denominations. This separation ends up costing us opportunities for genuine interaction and mutual edification, which can in turn lead to suspicion, hostility, and a prideful and condescending “we’re right and you’re wrong” attitude, with the result that the very Christianity of these other groups is called into question.² I offer this thesis as a potential corrective to that sectarian tendency, while still remaining biblically “on the road” and not falling prey to unbiblical ecumenism on the other side.

2. Denominational Setting

This thesis looks at the current articulation and application of the doctrine of church fellowship in one small slice of confessional American Lutheranism, the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS). The WELS was formed in Milwaukee, Wisconsin in 1850 and continues to maintain its synodical headquarters in the Milwaukee area. As of 2018, it had a baptized membership of 353,753 in 1,276 congregations. The WELS also does gospel outreach in 40 countries around the world. It is the third largest

1 In this thesis, the term “confessional Lutheran” refers to church bodies which subscribe unreservedly to all of the Lutheran Confessional writings contained in the *Book of Concord of 1580* (See Dau and Bente (2006) or *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Lutheran Church* (2009)).

2 Matheson (2010) refers to this as the “We believe the Bible and you do not” mentality.

Lutheran denomination in the United States. The WELS school system is the fourth largest private school system in the United States. The WELS is in fellowship with the Evangelical Lutheran Synod and is a member of the Confessional Evangelical Lutheran Conference, a worldwide organization of Lutheran church bodies of the same beliefs. The WELS operates a publishing house, two ministerial-education preparatory schools, a college of ministry, and the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, which educates almost all synod clergy (WELS Ministry of Christian Giving 2018).³

3. Historical Roots

The WELS emphasis on the proper practice of church fellowship is deeply rooted in its own synodical history and the shared history of confessional Lutheranism. At first, the Wisconsin Synod was unionistic rather than strictly confessional, and practiced church fellowship only loosely. The three founding pastors of the WELS had been educated at a union seminary in Germany that minimized the differences between Lutheran and Calvinistic Reformed teaching. However, under the influence of the first president of the Missouri Synod, CFW Walther, and other confessionally-minded leaders, WELS quickly broke with its sponsoring German mission societies,

3 Full disclosure: The author is a lifelong WELS member, a graduate of the WELS worker-training college and a former rostered called worker in various WELS schools. However, he also received his Master's degree, including exegesis and Biblical theology classes, from a non-Lutheran university, and is currently employed by an independent Lutheran (non-WELS) Bible translation agency. He worked on an ecumenical Bible translation project in Zambia for five years, cooperating with members of over a dozen different church bodies. He has neither blind loyalty towards nor a grudge against his denomination, but embarks on this study in a spirit of love and concern, in order to better understand, articulate, and apply this important biblical teaching in WELS circles.

rejected its former unionistic leanings, and pledged itself to confessional Lutheranism. This meant, first and foremost, a strong stand to reject pulpit, altar, and other forms of church fellowship with non-confessional church bodies. Kiessling (1990) and JA Braun (2000) relate the history of the WELS in great detail, while Schroeder (2011, 24–25) and ME Braun (2003, 13–64) provide additional background on early unionistic tendencies and the subsequent process of WELS becoming a truly confessional Lutheran church body.

Noland (2007) traces the continuing Lutheran concern for agreement on sound doctrine from the early church fathers to the time of the Reformation. He demonstrates that throughout this time, Christians (particularly Lutherans) were not afraid to separate from groups whom they considered to be teaching and confessing false doctrine. Bode (2014) highlights the historical Lutheran concern, beginning in the post-Reformation era, regarding efforts to minimize historical and doctrinal differences between denominations and form politically-united but doctrinally-heterogenous churches—a practice known as “unionism.” Bode identifies unionizing movements in Europe, particularly the Prussian Union of 1817, as key factors in the formation of Lutheran denominational identity. Schuetze (2000) tells the story of the “Old Lutherans” who emigrated to the United States in order to flee the doctrinally-damaging effects of such unionizing movements on the continent. These immigrants understandably resisted similar efforts to unite Lutheran and Reformed groups in America and sought unity solely on the basis of shared doctrine and practice. In 1872, these like-minded Old Lutherans assembled at a convention to formally constitute the Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference of North America. In short, synodical conference policy was that Lutherans should work and worship together only with fellow

Lutherans who taught and practiced the same things in the same way. To do anything else—to fraternize or affiliate with differently-teaching (heterodox) Christians, even if they bore the name “Lutheran”—was to violate scriptural prohibitions against false teachers and endanger the pure doctrine of Scripture as confessed by the Lutheran church (Tietjen 1966, Schuetze 2000, Teigen 2003). This joining together with like-teaching groups and strict avoidance of those who teach otherwise is at the heart of the confessional Lutheran understanding of the doctrine of church fellowship.

4. Contemporary Application

In general, the WELS position on church fellowship can be classified as conservative, exclusive, and restrictive. As defined by the WELS Theses on Church Fellowship (1970), “Church fellowship is every joint expression, manifestation, and demonstration of the common faith in which Christians on the basis of their confession find themselves to be united with one another.” In practice, this means that WELS Christians will not join with other Christians for any “joint expression” of faith, which is very broadly defined as virtually any faith-based activity; see Brug (1996, 45–50), unless there is complete uniformity of public confession in every matter of doctrine, principally manifested by denominational membership. (Further details of the WELS position on church fellowship, known as the “unit concept” application, are found in section 8.1.) This restrictive stance sometimes causes questions and concerns for WELS members trying to live out their faith in an honest and authentic way in a pluralistic society where contact with other Christians is almost inevitable (see the many questions on the topic on the WELS Q&A website and in Brug (2013)).

5. Ecclesial Milieu

Today's North American religious context is typified by the fluidity and imprecision of what Penwell (2014) and others call a "post-denominational" mindset (Trueblood 1967, Toulouse 1994, Miller 1998, et al.). As is thoroughly discussed in chapter three of the thesis, the post-denominational situation in North America is characterized by a (sharp) decline in the membership, income, and cultural influence of the mainline denominations, as well as a decrease in denominational loyalty and affinity among members. Christians today are more likely to switch denominations than their parents were and are less likely to hold theological beliefs identical to that of their denomination of membership. In distinction to the mid-twentieth century heyday of denominationalism in which the WELS doctrine of church fellowship was developed, the contemporary post-denominational age has seen the lines within and between denominations becoming blurred, and the identification of a person's theological or doctrinal beliefs on the basis of their denominational affiliation becoming increasingly difficult, if not impossible. (Further details of the contemporary post-denominational ecclesial milieu, and the effect that it has on the practice of church fellowship in a WELS context, are discussed in section 8.2.)

6. Problem Statement

In this thesis, I consider ways to re-articulate and re-apply the doctrine of church fellowship within the WELS context in biblically sound ways for a post-denominational age. The changed and changing ecclesial context makes contemporary articulation and application of the doctrine of church fellowship problematic. Assumptions that may have been true in the middle of the last century regarding shared beliefs, church membership,

denominational loyalty, awareness of denominational history and doctrinal positions, and exactly what (if anything) is confessed when two people work, worship, or pray together are simply no longer valid assumptions to make in North American churches today.

This thesis contends that, however valid and appropriate previous WELS articulations of the doctrine of church fellowship were for other generations in the context of inter-synodical controversy, the present post-denominational context demands a contemporary re-articulation that applies to today's ecclesial milieu in a meaningful way. This is the heart of biblical practical theology. Re-visiting doctrinal resolutions of the past to ensure that they are still relevant and appropriate in today's setting, to the children and grandchildren of the original theologians, is vital for passing on the Christian faith to those generations. Scriptural truths do not change, but if the context has changed, then the ways those truths are articulated and applied to the context can (and often should) change as well. It does no good to continue fighting the battles of a previous era; each generation must confront the issues at hand and contend for the faith anew.

7. Research Design

The primary research question which controls this thesis (see Smith 2008, 127) is formulated as follows:

- How might a fresh re-articulation of the confessional Lutheran doctrine of church fellowship be applied in today's post-denominational ecclesial milieu?

From this primary research question flow five related, subsidiary research questions. Each subsidiary question controls a step in the research methodology, explained below:

- What have (WELS) Lutheran theologians taught about the doctrine of church fellowship? (Theological tradition)
- What are the key characteristics of today's post-denominational ecclesial milieu that impact the doctrine and practice of church fellowship? (Situation analysis)
- What does the Bible teach about relationships between believers who differ on matters of doctrine (which Lutherans call "church fellowship")? (Scriptural examination)
- How might the research findings suggest a re-articulation of the doctrine of church fellowship by confessional Lutherans today? (Critical correlation)
- How might a fresh re-articulation of the doctrine of church fellowship be applied to some critical issues facing the confessional Lutherans today? (New construction)

The overarching design of this thesis follows the contours of the Zerfass Method for Practical Theology (van Wyk 1995, 97–98). The Zerfass method begins by considering the theological tradition under discussion (step 1) and a situation analysis which may indicate a less-than-ideal praxis (step 2). It then proceeds to offer a critical correlation of the two (step 4), with the goal of generating a new construction (step 5) that offers improved praxis. For this thesis, I introduced a modification to the standard Zerfass model by including a scriptural examination of the biblical basis for the doctrine of church fellowship, including an exegesis of standard proof texts and other relevant passages, as an intermediary step three. This grounds the investigation more thoroughly in Scripture according to Protestant evangelical standards for theological inquiry (Smith 2008, 183–201, de Wet 2006, 57–58).

8. Chapter Outline and Summary

8.1 Chapter two: *Theological tradition*

The thesis proper begins with an overview of the theological tradition (Zerfass step 1), which examines the current WELS praxis of church fellowship and its historical and biblical roots. I use Brug (1996), a popular book on this doctrine, as a frame to organize the chapter and review a wide selection of WELS literature as it pertains to church fellowship.

Of particular interest is the distinctively-WELS articulation of the *unit concept* of church fellowship. The term *unit concept* first appeared in 1959 during discussions which led to a break in fellowship with the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and has been refined and propagated as the WELS position ever since. Brug’s working definition lends itself well to articulating the unit concept: “Church fellowship is every expression of faith in which Christians join together because they are united by their acceptance and confession of all of the teachings of Scripture” (1996, 20). The unit concept is twofold: In practicing church fellowship, (a) *every* joint expression of faith requires complete agreement, acceptance, and confession of (b) *all* of the teachings of Scripture exactly as articulated by the WELS.

The WELS position regarding (a) is that all of the various ways in which Christians express church fellowship are equally joint expressions of shared faith. The activity of church fellowship is an indivisible bloc—one is either jointly expressing the faith, or one is not. In the WELS view, altar, pulpit, worship, prayer, service, and other types of fellowship are not expressing essentially different kinds or levels or degrees of shared faith, but *any* joint expression of faith *is* church fellowship (WELS *Theses* 1970, 21–29). Regarding (b), all doctrines of Scripture are given by God. They are

therefore equally authoritative, though not necessarily equally crucial for our salvation. Believers are not free to pick and choose from an arbitrary number of so-called “important” or “fundamental” doctrines and predicate church fellowship on agreement with only this limited list, but must instead base *any* expression of church fellowship on confessed agreement on *every* doctrine of Scripture (WELS *Theses* 1970, 31–32). The unit concept is strongly affirmed by virtually every WELS writer on the topic since the 1950s.

This chapter concludes by identifying two assumptions that underlie the WELS position on the doctrine of church fellowship. These assumptions directly influence the application of church fellowship principles in a wide range of settings. The two assumptions are: (1) practicing any type of church fellowship with people who believe differently about any point of doctrine gives the appearance or impression that one agrees with, supports, or tolerates their error,⁴ and (2) membership in a church body equals complete agreement with all that that church body teaches.⁵ These assumptions come under scrutiny in subsequent chapters.

8.2 Chapter three: Situation analysis

Step two in the Zerfass methodology is the situation analysis, a close look at the contemporary ecclesial setting. This chapter engages with sociology-of-religion literature to highlight key landmarks in the North American

4 For examples of the first assumption, see Gawrisch (1980, 245), Vogt (1991, 55, 70, 90), WELS Conference of Presidents (1996, 391–392), Braun (2003, 143), Otto (2007, 7–8, 14), E Schroeder (2009, 6), M Schroeder (2011, 39), Brug (1996, 101; 2013, 172), Paustian (2000, 1), and Deutschlander (2015, 461).

5 For examples of the second assumption, see Gawrisch (1980, 241–242), Vogt (1991, 54), Kunde (1994, 15), Schuetze (1996, 337), Brug (1996, 20), and Schaller (1996).

ecclesial landscape today. The following four attitudes are drawn from an extensive review of the literature of post-denominationalism;⁶ unfortunately, space in this brief summary does not permit a thorough and detailed accounting of the findings of each individual study. Let the following general comments suffice.

The first of landmark attitude of the post-denominational age is the declining significance of denominational membership or affiliation. In contrast to the state of affairs during the high tide of American denominationalism in the 1950s, the contemporary milieu is characterized by a large and growing pool of believers who do not place much importance on denominational affiliation, either their own or that of their local congregation. This group is also more likely to switch denominations than previous generations, usually for reasons other than doctrine. The rise of so-called “non-denominational” and “community” churches is closely tied to this phenomenon. These post-denominational Christians, as a group, are neither well-acquainted with nor particularly concerned about the exact doctrinal stance of their own denomination. Members of this group are also less likely to assume that they know what other Christians believe simply on the basis of their denominational membership. WELS practice assumes that a person’s doctrinal beliefs align with those of their denomination of membership, but this post-denominational attitude of the declining significance of denominational affiliation significantly undercuts the validity of this assumption.

6 Studies referenced in this chapter include Trueblood (1967), Toulouse (1994), Handspicker (1993), Miller (1998), and Penwell (2014), along with Lindbeck (1984), Newbigen (1989), Carroll and Roof (1993), Hadaway and Marler (1996), Ammerman (2001), Richey (2001), Pearcey (2004), Peay (2005), McLaren (2006), Moorehead (2006), Murphy and Asprey (2008), McNamara (2010), Leeman (2012), Barna (2014), Rice (2014), Burge and Djupe (2015), and Wax (2020).

The second feature generally characteristic of the post-denominational milieu is latitudinarian attitudes towards doctrine and truth. Contemporary Christians, influenced by secular post-modern skepticism towards universal truth claims, tend to be more flexible and open regarding doctrinal and theological belief statements. Many of today's believers, in contrast to those of a generation ago, can be classified as doctrinal minimalists, with a higher tolerance for doubt, debate, and diversity within the Christian church. Personal experience and the experience of others is often given higher importance than received dogma or historical tradition when wrestling with a problem or issue in the church. The prevailing latitudinarian attitude creates a situation where it is easy for Christians, perhaps of widely different doctrinal beliefs, to join together in expressions of faith, in prayer, or to worship and work together constructively in congregations or church bodies without the perception of scriptural contradiction or compromise. This same attitude makes it highly unlikely that a typical WELS fear—that joint participation in an expression of faith or church fellowship creates the expectation or assumption of identical doctrinal beliefs—will be borne out in actual practice.

The third attitude of the contemporary ecclesial era is the high value placed on authentic community. Contemporary Christians tend to prioritize individuals and relationships over doctrinal and confessional uniformity and will tend to cast a wider net than previous generations in their desire to build authentic community. Within such communities, diversity of background and perspective (within norms that still qualify as “orthodox” Christianity) are viewed as valuable fresh voices in the conversation, rather than as potentially-misleading sources of false doctrine or dangerous heterodoxy. This attitude will undoubtedly find itself at odds with the WELS perspective, which values complete doctrinal conformity as the *sine qua non* for Christian community and the practice of church fellowship.

The fourth landmark attitude characteristic of contemporary post-denominational Christians is a rejection of exclusivist claims and the ‘different is wrong and wrong is sinful’ trope of earlier dogmatic articulations. The contemporary generation seems predisposed to a strong skepticism towards any person or group (including their own denomination) which claims to be doctrinally pure and uncontrovertibly correct on every point, and which in turn labels disagreement and differences of belief as sinful error. The exclusivist and perfectionistic claims of many denominations and theologies tend to be perceived as unlikely, unprovable, and—worst of all—arrogant. Contemporary Christians are likely to hold truth claims more lightly and remain open (at least in theory) to correction and refinement of their position based on future evidence, experience, or interaction with others. This attitude views denominational rivalries as a source of embarrassment or discomfort, rather than as a unifying reason for pride in having taken and held to a principled stand. The WELS insistence on resolution of longstanding doctrinal differences⁷ before church fellowship relations can begin will certainly run afoul of this contemporary anti-exclusionist predisposition.

This thesis re-examines these assumptions in light of what is (or more likely, is not) assumed about the harmony of a person’s confession and beliefs with their denominational membership and inter-personal interactions in today’s post-denominational world. The findings suggest that wise and appropriate participation in the common life of the church is a better means of expressing concern and effecting change than the tacit condemnation of silence and separatism.

⁷ For an example of this insistence that those who disagree with the WELS position must modify their stance before formal dialogue can begin, see Mueller (1996, 469–470)

8.3 Chapter four: Scriptural examination

In chapter four, the thesis turns to the scriptural examination and a study of the biblical passages upon which the doctrine of church fellowship rests. I examine two groups of passages in this chapter.

Passages of the first group are all concerned with gentle admonition aimed at restoration of an erring fellow Christian. Galatians 6:1, Matthew 18:15–17, Titus 3:9–11, and 2 Thessalonians 3:6–15 are all studied as prototypical examples of the “admonish erring brothers” paradigm. Additionally, this section takes a careful look at the fellowship principle that can be derived from 1 Corinthians 3:10–15 and Paul’s application of that principle throughout the Corinthian correspondence. The basic pattern is clear: when a fellow believer is caught in a sin (moral or doctrinal) fellow Christians are to restore that person by gently showing them their sin and offering correction. Sometimes, the “error” is only apparent; rarely do we know the full story, and rarely are errors so clearly cut-and-dried as to be evident from cursory observation. In such cases, gentle admonition, interaction, and conversation (rather than immediate and confrontational accusation) are called for, so that all the facts come to light and Scripture can be appropriately brought to bear on all sides of the situation. In all cases, patience and humility are the order of the day, lest the would-be admonisher wind up falling pridefully into uninformed and unnecessary divisiveness based on incomplete information.

The second group of passages considered in this chapter contain warnings to take careful note of pseudo-Christian heretical teachers and avoid them completely. Romans 16:17–18 and 2 John 7–11 are studied as prototypical examples of the “mark and avoid” paradigm, along with Mark 13:5–6, Acts 20:29–31, 2 Corinthians 6:14–17, Galatians 1:6–8, 2 Timothy 2:24–3:5, and 2 Peter 2:1–3. As the primary *sedes doctrinae* for the doctrine

of church fellowship, Romans 16:17–18 receives close scrutiny.⁸ Again, the basic pattern is clear: Christians are to vigilantly watch out for those antichristian heretical teachers who corrupt the gospel message with doctrines that overthrow the foundation of saving faith in Jesus Christ, and completely avoid such false teachers and their wicked doctrines.

It is a major assertion of this thesis that these two groups of passages, dealing as they do with different groups of people, should be applied only to the situations and persons for which they were originally intended. Conflating these two groups of passages, as almost all WELS treatments of the doctrine of church fellowship do, results in a situation where the separation which is appropriate with antichristian heretical teachers ends up being over-applied to include complete avoidance of non-WELS fellow Christians. Thus, a well-intentioned and faithful fellow Christian of a different denominational background with a different doctrinal confession is treated as though he were an abominable heretic or apostate heresiarch with whom any kind of religious fraternization is a mortal danger to soul and salvation.⁹ This, I argue, is a significant flaw in the contemporary WELS application of church fellowship which itself requires a Scripture-based correction. Therefore, this chapter seeks to properly divide passages dealing with differently-believing fellow Christians on the one hand from those dealing with anti-Christian heretical teachers on the other, in order to clear the way for a re-articulation of WELS's relationship with Christians of other denominations in the rest of the thesis.

8 My analysis of Romans 16:17–18 largely follows that of Brux (1935), with expansion and the addition of corroborating analysis from modern scholarly research.

9 In a similar way, the term “false teacher” is often applied in an unhelpfully-broad way, and used to identify anyone who diverges from WELS teaching in any way from the pseudo-Christian apostate to close Lutheran kin separated only by the finest historico-theological shade of understanding.

8.4 Chapter five: *Critical correlation*

Step four of my modified Zerfass method is the critical correlation of the prior elements of the research. This chapter, the culmination of the thesis research, ties together the findings from previous chapters into a list of considerations for a contemporary re-articulation of the doctrine of church fellowship.

Following the lead of E. H. Wendland (1961, 7–8), a WELS pastor, missionary, and seminary professor who was himself an early critic of the unit concept, the chapter concludes with a tentative proposal intended to encapsulate the various concerns raised in this thesis and to initiate discussion of a contemporary re-articulation of the doctrine of church fellowship. This proposal is not intended to be a finely-crafted doctrinal statement, confession, or fully worked-out theological treatise. It should be taken as the first move towards re-articulation, and not as a proposed final product. It is intended to start a conversation, not end a discussion; to renew a careful study of the salient Scripture passages regarding church fellowship; and to overcome assumptions that such an examination would be pointless.

My own working proposal for re-articulation of the confessional Lutheran doctrine of church fellowship emphasizes: (1) the inward spiritual unity of all believers as members of the body of Christ, through faith effected by the Holy Spirit through the means of grace;¹⁰ (2) that historical and doctrinal divisions have dis-united the holy Christian church into

¹⁰ The “means of grace” in confessional Lutheran parlance are the gospel in word and sacraments (see Deutschlander 2015, 409–444). The gospel message, whether preached, read or heard in the words of Scripture, or delivered tangibly and publicly in the sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion, is the means by which God provides and sustains our spiritual life.

many different denominations; (3) that we express God-pleasing universal Christian fellowship individually through joint acts of love and service with all members of the one holy Christian and apostolic church; (4) that we express denominational church fellowship corporately through joint use of the means of grace only with those members of the visible church who share our full confession of the word of God in doctrine and practice; and (5) that we pray that the time soon comes when the whole Church is fully united by the Holy Spirit in a common confession of all of God's word, while simultaneously working towards an even fuller expression of the true unity of the church in word and deed by meaningfully confessing the truth of the gospel to all. (The complete text of the proposed re-articulation is found in Appendix A.)

8.5 Chapter six: New construction

The final step in the Zerfass method is the proposal of a new construction. This chapter begins to apply the principles of church fellowship, as re-articulated in the previous section, to contemporary Lutheran life in the post-denominational age. I propose two questions designed to clarify the issues involved with participation (or non-participation) in a given interaction with fellow Christians of different denominations. The two questions are:

- Does abstaining from this activity cause offense by showing that I fail to recognize the other person as a fellow member of the body of Christ, when he may in fact be the very type of “weaker brother” that Scripture calls me to watch out and care for (Rom 14, 1 Cor 8)?
- Does participating in this activity compromise my clear Lutheran confession by implying approval or acceptance of a varying doctrinal

position, when Scripture tells me to hold to and proclaim the “whole counsel of God” (Ac 20:27; cf. John 8:31, Mt 20:28)?

These questions aid in the search for the “narrow middle road,” as Christians seek to avoid both offense against and denial of the *una sancta* on the one hand, and a misleading and confusing compromise of biblical confession on the other. The questions provide a basis for discussing fellowship situations in ways that are, if not substantially different, at least more informed and contextually-sensitive than those of the previous generation. Several specific difficult questions are considered as test cases for the application of a re-articulated doctrine of church fellowship.

9. Goal of the Research

An articulation of the doctrine of church fellowship, which is appropriate to the contemporary ecclesial milieu, will not only benefit WELS Lutherans, but also the church at large. Perhaps some readers have not seriously considered what the Scriptures have to teach about “church fellowship,” or how it applies to their formal and informal relationships with other Christians, particularly those with different doctrinal beliefs. A properly biblical theology of inter-church and inter-Christian relationships will help all believers navigate the “narrow middle road” between sectarian separatism and open ecumenism, conscious of both our membership in the universal body of Christ and our role as stewards of our respective denominational and theological traditions. Such an understanding of church fellowship will allow Christians to navigate potentially problematic inter-Christian relationships in order to engage wisely and appropriately in the common life of Christ’s universal church in the challenging and exciting post-denominational age.

10. Conclusion

Nafzger (2009, 362), writing about ways to “charitably and confessionally” relate to Christians of other denominations, encourages Lutherans to reexamine our praxis from time to time “to see if such agreed-upon ways of proceeding with respect to applying the scriptural principles of fellowship are still the best and most effective ways of relating to other Christians and Christian churches in the present context.” Particularly in light of his encouragement to consider the “present context,” this thesis has examined the WELS articulation and application of the doctrine of church fellowship in the contemporary post-denominational milieu.

This thesis has argued that the WELS articulation of the doctrine of church fellowship as a “unit concept” is based on an overly-broad understanding of Romans 16:17–18 (and several related passages), and that current WELS application of the doctrine is based on two faulty assumptions about church membership which are no longer likely to be the case among rank-and-file Christians in today’s post-denominational ecclesial climate. Based on these and other factors mentioned, a re-evaluation of the articulation and application of the doctrine is indicated.

I answer this need by offering this thesis, along with my working proposal, as a move towards beginning the discussion to re-articulate and apply the doctrine of church fellowship in a way which recognizes contemporary assumptions and attitudes and still remains faithful to the revelation of Scripture. A fresh articulation of this important doctrine allows more opportunities for Christians to confess the truth of Scripture to (and with) members of other churches and reinforces the biblical reality of the holy Christian church, all while retaining a salutary emphasis on doctrinal precision and faithfulness to God’s word.

Appendix A: Working Proposal for the Re-articulation of the Lutheran Doctrine of Church Fellowship

1. Church fellowship is the outward expression of the inward spiritual unity of the church, the body of Christ, which has been effected by the Holy Spirit through the word of God.
2. Although the church is spiritually united by faith in Jesus Christ, the church's head, because of historical developments and doctrinal differences the members of the church are dispersed among many different denominations.
 - a. Insofar as Christians share common faith in Christ as Savior, they all enjoy universal Christian fellowship with all other believers.
 - b. Insofar as Christians belong to various churches and church bodies, and vary in their confession and understanding of the truths of God's word, they practice denominational church fellowship only with believers who share their doctrinal confession and convictions, seeking to authentically express their Christian faith without compromise.
3. Confessional Lutherans express our universal Christian fellowship individually through joint acts of love and service with all members of the one holy Christian and apostolic church—all who confess saving faith in Jesus Christ.
 - a. The practice of such expressions of universal Christian fellowship with individual fellow believers, including shared prayer, does not imply full agreement in every matter of doctrine, interpretation, and application of God's word—only shared saving faith in Christ Jesus.

- b. We seek wise and loving interaction with fellow Christians of different denominations, recognizing that their different historical, cultural, and denominational background may help them to see a truth or aspect of God's word that we have missed or misunderstood, and we humbly look to them for encouragement and opportunities to grow.
 - c. We seek wise and loving interaction with fellow Christians of different denominations also recognizing that their background may prevent them from fully understanding a truth of God's word that the Holy Spirit has helped us to see particularly clearly, and we rejoice in the chance to humbly share our unique God-given perspective.
4. Confessional Lutherans express denominational church fellowship corporately through joint use of the means of grace with those members of the visible church who share our full confession of the word of God in doctrine and practice.
- a. The withholding of denominational church fellowship at the corporate level does not imply that individual members of churches not "in fellowship" with us are not Christian or that they subscribe to a deficient version of the Christian faith.
 - b. The practice of denominational church fellowship is our way of preserving and enriching our theological and historical heritage, because we have by God's grace come to highly value it as the most adequate way of accounting for all that we find in the word of God and experience in the world around us.
 - c. We seek to avoid an overly-broad use of terms such as "false doctrine" and "false teacher," which are both presumptive and potentially misleading. We will carefully distinguish between Christians of other denominations and antichristian heretical teachers who

are clearly not Christian, recognizing that Scripture offers clearly different instructions to govern our dealings with each.

- d. As far as possible without compromising the means of grace, we seek wise and appropriate participation in the common life of the church, rather than separatism, as a way to share our treasured doctrinal inheritance with as many as possible.
5. We pray that the time soon comes when the whole church is fully united in a common confession of all of God's word. In the meantime, we work towards an even fuller expression of the true unity of the church in word and deed by seeking opportunities to confess the truth of the gospel to people of all nations (Matt 28:19–20).

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